

We're recording. OK. It is the 11th of April, 1983, the American Gathering of Jewish Holocaust Survivors in Washington, DC. This is Dr. Rudnick, interviewing Dr. Arnold Kerr, 903 Overbrook Road, Wilmington, Delaware 19807, telephone 302-652-6440. Now, to begin the interview, could you please state and spell your full name?

The present name?

In-- from Poland.

Oh, from Poland. The last name was K-E-R-- K-I-E-R-S-Z-K-O-W-S-K-I. And the first name was A-R-O-N.

OK. And where was your home?

My home was in Suwalki, Poland. It's S-U-W-A-L-K-I. This is in northern Poland, not far from there what used to be the East Prussian and the Lithuanian border.

And the nearest large town was?

The nearest large Polish town was Grodno-- G-R-O-D-N-O-- G-R-O-D-N-O.

OK. And how long were you in Suwalki?

I was born there in 1928-- I was born. I was there until the summer of 1939, about a month before the war broke out.

OK. Now, you lived at home with your parents?

Yeah, and three brothers.

And three brothers.

Yeah. The name of the brothers was David.

David.

And Max.

And Max.

And Isaac.

And Isaac And how old was David?

He was born in '26.

'26. And Max?

Was born in 1930. His Hebrew name was Mordechai.

Mordechai. And Isaac?

And Isaac was born, I guess, in 1938.

1938.

So he was born after a certain period.

OK. And your mother's first and maiden name?

It was Riva-- R-I-V-A-- was the first name. The last name before she was married was Kremer. K-R-E-M-E-R. And she was born in Sokółka-- S-O-K-O with an asterisk L-K-A. It was near Bialystok.

In Poland?

That's right.

And your father's first name?

Oszer.

Spelled?

This is in Polish. We spelled O-S-Z-E-R. Here, would be O-S-H-E-R. This is a-- the C-Z is kind of a shh sound.

Oszer. And that's also Poland?

Yeah, he is also-- he was born in Suwalki, as far as I know.

And your mother's date of birth?

I wouldn't know that. I know that she was born, I guess, about 1905.

1905.

And my father was born-- my father was about 12 years older than she. So he must have been born 19-- what 19 or--

18?

1893 or something like that?

1893-1894.

About 12 years, I think.

And when and where were they married?

They were married in 1925 in Suwalki.

In Suwalki.

Yeah. So she essentially transferred from her family from Sokółka into Suwalki. And she had a big family in Sokółka, a number of brothers and sisters.

Approximately how many?

And now, there was a uncle, Moses, who had a family with two kids. There was a Devorah, a sister, which we refer to as Dveryl.

Dveryl.

And she was married shortly before the war. And there was a brother Kusiel.

Can you spell that?

We used to say K-U-S-I-E-L.

Kusiel.

Something like that. And I guess this may have been-- yeah, because she had two brothers and a sister in Brazil. And she had two sisters in Israel. But they were away.

This is Riva, your mother?

My mother.

OK, now, on your father's side of the family, his family was from--

All in work.

--from Suwalki?

That's right.

And how many brothers and sisters did your father have?

There were originally two brothers. And there were one aunt, a second aunt. I think about two aunts that I can think of.

In other words, two sisters?

Two sisters, yeah.

Yeah, so yours-- and you-- the names of the two brothers and the two sisters?

I don't recall the name of the oldest brother, but the younger brother was-- we refer to him as Shaia-- S-H-A-I-A. This is Isaiah, like the prophet-- Isaiah.

So Shaia is a nickname, but--

Is Isaiah, is Isaiah, yeah.

--Isaiah is the full--

This would be the full Hebrew name.

And then the two sisters.

I guess one was Feigel, and the other one was Gitel or something like-- or Gita.

Feigel and Gitel or Gita.

Gita, yeah.

OK. Now, what was the domestic occupation or profession of your mother's family in--

In Sokółka?

--in Sokółka?

Yeah, they had a mill. And they had a factory of these woolen shoes. In Polish, they call it wojłoki.

Wojloki.

OK, W-O-I-L-O-K-I or Y. Essentially, it's like woold-- thick, woolen compressed-- compressed wool shoes of sorts. This was standard in Poland and in Russia.

And the family operated a mill that--

And they had a mill in the same time, yeah. My grandfather and my uncle Kfir used to run the mill.

Your grandfather, his name was?

I guess his name there was Shraga. They referred to him as Faiwel. That's right. I didn't think about it for years.

But Shraga was--

Faiwel, we referred to him as Faiwel.

Faiwel?

Yeah. Be about F-I-E?

Fai-- F-A-I--

F-A-I.

--W-E-L, or something like that, it's a V-L.

That was a nickname?

This is was they called him.

Faiwel, I think that's wolf.

Because I know that some people told me that he was referred to as Faiwel the Hasid.

Faiwel the Hasid.

The Hasid, OK. I mean, he was a bearded man.

Right, that's a very common--

With a white beard.

--that's a very common thing.

See, because we are not coming from-- on my father's side, we are not Hasidim.

Right, right, Faiwel the Hasid. And that was the family's work.

On my mother's side, yeah.

On your mother's side.

On my-- one of the uncles had a-- was peeling-- was producing soda bottle-- how do you call-- it's like they were bottling sodas. There was a kind of a small factory.

This was another?

One of the uncles, yeah, also in Sokółka.

OK. Now, on your father's side.

On my father's side, my father and my uncle, this Isaiah, they had a export and importing fur. And this was a rather lucrative business, at least the way they were running it. We owned a number of major buildings in town.

In Suwalki?

In Suwalki, yeah.

We had, as a matter of fact, our apartment-- this is where they also-- we owned the whole building. This was the first-- he installed flowing water, my dad. And this was the first house, as far as I know, that had flowing water in town.

In Suwalki?

Yeah. I recall when he installed this major water tank on the roof, onto the roof of our house.

Now, you said that the family owned several buildings. What was the function of, let's say, the largest of the buildings?

Well, the largest of the building contained the headquarters of the Polish Army in the area. Was our own apartment that is 11 rooms with flowing water, and there was another apartment like it underneath that we rented out to a person that had the monopoly for liquor.

Hence wealthy.

Yes, which was very-- it was a Pole, a Christian Pole. And we had-- I mean, there were garages of the Polish Army. And in the back, there were a number of other buildings what people used to also rent.

In other words, the Polish Army rented space--

That's right.

--from your father's space.

Well, the headquarters, yeah, what used to be a big hotel.

And they kept the trucks, that ordinance, and--

No, no, no, no. They didn't get-- this was the headquarters. The only-- the things that they kept in the garages was the personal cars, the limousines of the military officers.

Now, the other buildings that the family owned and operated--

Just rent, rental properties.

OK. Now, specifically with regards to the fur business, how did the family manage the fur business? How did they trade in furs?

Well, my father used to go to Europe-- to England, and France, and even Germany twice a year or so. As a matter-- he dealt with Germany until the war broke out.

And how did you gather the fur?

They didn't gather. He brought them all over the world.

So he traveled--

Oh, yes.

--to buy them.

He used to buy them in Leipzig. He has representatives in Leipzig. And then he had a representative in London and in Paris. Commission-- as a matter of fact, I met after the war here people that used to work for him.

You mean, in America?

In America, yeah, because originally, the people that used to be in Leipzig, they went to England. And from England, they came to America after the war. They were German Jews. We met them, I remember.

Your remembrances of your childhood, you went to school in Suwalki?

Yeah. Yeah, we had a-- the setup in the family was that my dad was traveling a lot. And my mother was partially going to-- my mother was as a graduate of gymnasium. So this was like a college graduate. And she preferred to go once in a while to the store, to the firm. And we had a maid, a full-time maid, and we had a full-time governess.

And they wanted to get a German governess for us in the early '30s. But since Hitler came to power, they decided they were going to get a Jewish governess. So they got a girl that finished gymnasium in Bialystok. And she was full-time at home.

And she was supervising the three, the older three. The youngest that was born in '38 had a full-time nanny. And she stayed also at home at our place. And she took care full-time with my youngest brother, who was at that time a baby.

OK, now what kind of school did you attend as a youngster?

I attended the Hebrew school. Yeah, there was a-- as a matter of fact, there was a school called Talmud Torah. And this was considered one-- at least, my brother went there for the first five years before he switched to the regular gymnasium. And it was planned that I'll do the same. But the war broke out, so I didn't have the time to switch.

Right. So you didn't do exactly what David did?

No. I would have done the same. I mean, we were going through the first part. The first several years, my father wanted we should go to the Hebrew school.

And what was the nature of the curriculum at Hebrew school?

Yeah, it was a Polish government-recognized school. So we had to have all the subjects the same as a Polish school. But we also had to cover the Torah, the Chumash. We even had studied Talmud and Hebrew.

But as far as I remember, the mathematics and the other things were taught in Polish. Because I remember that when I switched to Vilna later, they had the mathematics in gymnasium Ivrit-- they had mathematics in Hebrew. So this made on me an impression. That why in Suwalki, we didn't have-- we probably had it in Polish.

Right, because it was a smaller town. And you didn't have the textbooks and so on.

I don't-- but I-- at home, among the governess and my brothers, I think we spoke Polish.

OK. Now, when your brother finished Hebrew school--

He didn't finish it. After the fifth grade, I guess, he switched over to the Gymnasium Efron.

Which is?

Which was-- this was essentially a regular gymnasium, but it was Jewish-owned. There was a Jewish director. So this was a private gymnasium. It was not the state gymnasium.

In Suwalki, how many gymnasia--

There was only this one this one Hebrew gymnasium, as far as I know.

No others in town?

And there was a Polish state gymnasium.

Approximately how many students went to each gymnasium?

I don't recall that. I was too young. This was-- see, when the war broke, out I was 11.

Did the schools engage in the usual extracurricular sport activities? Did they play soccer together?

I don't think they played soccer with each other. As a matter of fact, usually, there was a big-- the Jewish students or the students from the Jewish schools and the students from the Polish schools didn't-- there was a lot of antisemitism in Poland. And also, our rabbis and so on didn't encourage to have friends on the other side. I think this may have been a major problem for us during the war, that they kept us isolated.

Previous to that. Now, in your Hebrew school, can you remember how many children were in the same room with you when you studied?

Yeah, it must probably been 30, 25.

And was that the entire school?

Oh, no, no, no, no. Those were regular classes.

That was your age?

The Talmud Torah went until seven grades. OK. And each grade must have had probably 20, 25 people.

OK. And the Christian Polish children went to a school?

Just to regular Polish, was a state school.

A state school. And would you guesstimate--

Probably the same.

Same size. In this town, can you estimate the total population in Suwalki in the '30s?

About 30,000.

30,000. And what was the major occupation of the town? What was the town known for, its industry, its commerce?

You see, Suwalki is a border town. It was always at the border. It was either between Germany and Russia or between Poland and Germany and Lithuania. Now, it is a border town between Poland and Russia. So somehow, this town always winds up to be a border town. So were people that were-- we were the fur business. Then there was another very wealthy Jewish family who was called Mintz. And they had textiles.

Do you remember the first names of any of the family members?

No. No. I know that the young Mintz used to be a friend of mine. We used to go to school together. Then there was the Kaufman. It was another family that I used to be friendly with. And they lived behind the German church, I recall, the beautiful park. But they were businesspeople. They were trade-- tradesmen-- tailors and shoemakers.

And they just covered all kind of discipline, except-- so anyway, we even had a Jewish-- we had a lot of military in town. It was a military center. I just met somebody who told me that he served in Suwalki. His brother served in Suwalki. We had all the militaries-- artillery and the foot soldiers, had all. So there were two miles along the road of what we called Koszary. It's barracks with military units.

Koszary?

Yeah. And there was a colonel, I remember. He was married to a German woman. And she was, as a matter of fact, friendly with my mother. And his name was Rosenthal. He was a colonel of the Polish Army.

Also Jewish?

No, thank you. No, he was Jewish. And she was-- he was not. The town was very Orthodox. You see, he was a very liberated person. I would assume he didn't-- he was more like the Jews are-- many Jews are today in America. He didn't follow the holidays and Saturday meant nothing. He just traveled. And his wife used to come-- always rode horses. She used to come up when we were on the-- what's referred to as a dacha, in a summer place out of town.

Yeah, your family had a dacha.

Yeah, we used to rent from a Polish peasant.

And where was the dacha?

About six kilometers from town.

And what was the name of the--

Pod Dubówka.

Pod Dubówka was--

Yeah, P-O-D-- Pod-- and then D-U-B-U-W-K-A or something like that.

And how often did the family spend time there?

Oh, there was always the governess, and the maid, and my brothers. And me, we used to go there every summer.

Every summer.

Except for the last one. In the last summer, the governess, and me, and my younger brother, and a cousin,



we went to a resort place on the Neman, near Grodno.

Near Grodno.

Yeah. And this is the last time. Essentially, I didn't return home because the war broke out. And they had to run away. And we joined elsewhere.

OK. That was--

This was--

--summer of--

--in August, September of 1939.

OK. Now, your family's Jewish background-- how much time did your personal family spend observing holidays and keeping Shabbos?

Yeah, you see, my mother was really-- when I look back, she really was not religious. I mean, she was religious, but she was not Orthodox by a long shot. I mean, if she could, she would not go Saturday to the services. And she was more-- she comes from a family that were more Zionists, I mean, more nationalists than religious people.

My father was more religious person. OK. And so-- but therefore, we kept a kosher home, obviously. And he was supporting all kind of religious causes. As a matter of fact, there is a rabbi here, the last rabbi of Suwalki, he's a professor at the Yeshiva University, Rabbi Lifshitz. And he told me that my dad would-- if they needed money or something for all kind of what I would refer almost like wild projects from today's attitudes, and he would support them, supposedly.

Now, this Rabbi Lifshitz is in--

Lifshitz, he's--

--Yeshiva University.

Yeah, yeah, he's one of their main Orthodox rabbis.

In New York City?

Yeah.

Right. OK. Just want to document that.

And this will lasted until about '39. In '39, as I mentioned before, my younger brother, me, the governess, and a cousin, we went to this resort place. And my father, as a matter of fact, went, I guess, to England during the summer for a few weeks. And he returned home two weeks before the war broke out or so. It's a pity. He should have stayed where he was or the war should have broken out earlier.

And then when war broke out, he went to Warsaw with three truckloads of fur because he thought that this was a safe place. This was the first mistake. And my mother, and my older brother, and my youngest brother joined us in Sokółka because the resort place was not far from Sokółka. So the governess and my two younger-- my younger brother and me, we went to Sokółka.

And we joined-- they joined us there. And this is where we experienced the occupation by the Germans. But the Germans moved away after a week or two. And the Russians came. And then my uncle, Isaiah, Oszer, who was in Warsaw with my father, he smuggled himself out across the border and came to Sokółka. And we all moved to Vilna unofficially.

And the furs that they brought with us, the mother, my older brother, he was a rather heroic fellow. With the age of 15 or 14, he was like-- to me, he was a giant. He was very strong.

David?

David, yeah. And the whole family helped. In fact, they essentially smuggled out the fur to Vilna. Because Vilna was given by the Russians to Lithuania. They gave part of Poland to Lithuania that was independent at the time. And we stayed in Lithuania for a year. And the Russians occupied it a year later, in 1940, altogether.

We tried to get my father from Warsaw to Lithuania because then we could get away. But my mother wouldn't move without my dad. But I don't know for what reason he couldn't quite come. And then the German-Russian war broke out in June of '41. And then it was too late. Because then this is when the massacres started.

In--

In the whole territory. The Sonderkommandos and the whole thing really started intensively in 1941 at the start of the war.

And at that point, by the middle of '41, you were in Vilna?

I was in Vilna, that's right. I had bar mitzvah just in March.

You were bar mitzvahed in Vilna.

And the-- as far as I recall, I was bar mitzvahed in the Vilna Gaon. There is a-- there was a synagogue of the Vilna Gaon we used to refer to as the Gaon's Kloyz.

The Gaon's Kloyz. And I think this is where I had my bar mitzvah. I remember pretty well. Then I worked in this area for the-- during the next year. They made elevator, grain elevators out of the big synagogue and all the other synagogues. They knocked out the benches. I guess the Poles must have taken it apart for firewood.

And we loaded grain, three feet thick. And what we had to do is shovel it from one space to the other, systematically, so it doesn't heat up. That's what a grain elevator does. So essentially-- and there is a Vilna book that we have. They show a picture of the Vilna shul where we used to pray once in a while. And they showed it loaded with grain. I was there. I worked there.

How many and which family members attended your bar mitzvah?

Yeah, my uncle was there. There may have been these two workers that came with us that used to work for us in Suwalki. I mean, two of-- there were quite a number, but two of them came to Vilna with us. And they probably attended my-- I assume my mother, my brothers. I was so preoccupied with reading the Torah, I didn't care who came.

By the middle of 1941, you began to understand that things were changing. You knew that your father wasn't going to join you.

No, we hoped he will. The only point was once the Russians-- you see, when you're 11 years old, 12 years old, even 13, starting on the 14, it's not so obvious what's going to happen. Because in war, you never know what's happening. People used to go-- some of our friends were getting Japanese visas or transit visas.

There was some kind of-- I read recently about it. This was a Fugu plan. Supposedly, there is a book on it. And some Japanese consul in Kovno used to give out visas. And a number of our friends left just like that. For some reason, the KGB gave them transit-- I mean, the Russians gave them transit visas to go to Japan.

In other words, they could travel across all of Siberia--

Across Russia, that's right. This was a risk at that time. We thought, maybe they will end up in Siberia because they passed it almost. But a number of them, including the rabbi from Suwalki-- he, and his wife, and I guess his child or whatever, I don't know how many children he had-- they went. One child, I guess, was killed during the border crossing. But they went through Japan-- through Russia to Japan.

So there was some sort of a gimmick, some Dutch consul was giving some transit visas to a colony. They had colonies in Asia. And then the Japanese consul was giving transit visas.

And he was a humane person. He realized the problems. He was a young man. And he was stamping visas. And then the Russians somehow were giving transit visas, which was surprising enough. And there were 1,000 people or so are saved that way.

But we could have gone, but we wouldn't because then we had the money. But my father was in Warsaw. And at that time, it probably didn't look right, we should just go away. We should wait. So this was another mistake. When things go wrong, they just pile up-- but again, during the war. So it was just piling up one after the other, mistakes.

Now, that was Vilna in '41. You decided not to travel with some friends with transit visas. What did you do in '42 and '43?

No, we just stayed. The Germans occupied us, put us in the ghetto-- first in the smaller ghetto. And then they started what we called the Actions, [NON-ENGLISH], I mean, the kind of cleaning actions.

In Sokólka?

No, no, no, no, no.

In Vilna?

We were in Vilna.

Oh, you were already in Vilna.

And you see, I was in Vilna under the Lithuanians for a year. This is when I went to the gymnasium, the school, the Hebrew school which was a very known school on Zavalna Street. And my brother went to another, to Epstein Gymnasium. And then the Russians came. They closed the Hebrew gymnasiums. And we had to learn Yiddish.

See, we understood Yiddish. But I don't think we really spoke it. I definitely didn't write Yiddish. So we had to switch from learning Hebrew to learning Yiddish. So my Yiddish really comes from the Vilna period because during the war, I spoke Yiddish with the people from Vilna. I mean, in the ghetto, I'm sure we spoke Yiddish.

Now, then the Germans came in, you started to learn Yiddish.

No, no, when the Germans came, I mean, they were starting to essentially-- there were Actions. They started to look for men. And they were-- they caught these two fellows that worked for us, that came with us. And they were shot in Ponary, we found out later. There were Actions where they would catch people. This was-- the Lithuanian police was doing it. They all participated in this, very gladly, anyway.

And then we somehow were able to-- I mean, we didn't have grown-up man, let's put it that way, except my uncles, least also. My uncle was sent to Siberia, incidentally. Isaiah was sent to Siberia two weeks before the war started. And if they would have postponed this war for another few weeks, we would have been sent to Siberia, probably, too.

What was the cause?

Oh, because we were what's referred to as a bourgeois. We were wealthy people from way back. And therefore, wealthy people are undesirables in the Soviet Union. And so they sent them usually to Siberia-- and since we were also from German-occupied territories. So they sent off many people to Siberia. They saved many. I mean, my aunt, and uncle, and two daughters were sent to Siberia. And say-- and the uncle passed away. But they survived. They came to America after the war.

But-- so at that time, to go to Siberia was a disaster. But imagine how bad it got that to go to Siberia was salvation-- just to give you an indication of how bad it can get. I remember, when they were sending them to Siberia, this was like the end of the world for them. Four or five months later, they were the lucky ones. Imagine how bad it got here, where I was.

The Germans came. Then they formed-- a few months later, they formed a small ghetto and a big ghetto. And we were landed up in the small ghetto. So Actions-- on Yom Kippur was the first one. That's right. And the Yom Kippur of 1941-- they always liked to do this on Jewish holidays.

And then we were hiding behind a major-- we call it a [NON-ENGLISH]. It's a kind of a closet that was not built in. That was a kind of piece of-- gigantic piece of furniture, standing in front-- and it was covering a door. And we were hiding there with a number of other neighbors. Because in Vilna, we were essentially two families to a room. OK. So in one apartment, there were five-six families.

In the ghetto?

In the ghetto. And we were hiding behind-- we took one room. And we covered it up with this big piece of furniture. And they didn't discover us. So when they liquidated the small ghetto a few months later, after the last Action, we ran to the big ghetto. That means, the people that survived, they let them go over to the other side.

This is side 2 of an interview at the American Jewish Gathering of Holocaust survivors in Washington, DC, 11 April, 1983, with Dr. Arnold D. Kerr, 903 Overbrook Road, Wilmington, Delaware 19807, area code 302-652-6440. We're talking about his deportation from Vilna to Estonia in the middle of 1943 and how he was separated from his brother. His brother was selected for a work gang. It turned out that the work gang's function was to dig graves. And then the German or Lithuanians--

This was a German SS, mostly. They killed the weak people, and the younger, and the older. They had to-- they had three ships, I guess. And they wanted to take the Jews with them to Germany. And now, when you look back-- there is a movie, Odessa File. I don't know if you heard it. This is very much like the story that happened there.

See, the SS did not want-- they could have killed everybody and then joined-- but then they would have to join the army and fight for the Russians. But they were really cowards. OK. So what they did is as long as they held on to a certain number of Jews, they had a job. And they could bring them back to Germany.

I mean, from a economic point of view, I don't know why, but it was our luck that they were the cowards, really. And what they did is they confiscated three ships from the German Army. And instead to let the German Army escape-- you see, because they were cut off-- as the Baltic state were already cut off, so from Estonia to go through the Baltic into Germany, they took away the ships from them, and they shipped themselves and the Jews away from the Russians.

And that's how you left Estonia?

So this is-- so they had to kill off a certain number of people because they didn't-- they had more people than they had spaces. This is-- in retrospect, this is a-- it's an obvious scenario. And they shipped us to-- essentially, to Stutthof, near Danzig.

Stutthof.

This was a concentration camp in northern Germany. And I stayed there for a few months. And then I almost went with a children's transport to Auschwitz. They collected kids. And I thought-- I was by myself, so I said, OK. I'll go and look for my mother and my younger brothers.

And then there were about 516 kids. And they needed only 500 because I guess they used to load them 100 kids per car. And they had only, I guess, I don't know, five cars or whatever. I mean, the Germans are very systematic. And so they had to pull out 16. And I stood in the back. There were rows.

And the chief kapo used to pick up here and there somebody. He had to pick up 16. And I guess he picked 15, probably, or so. And I was in the very back. And everybody stood on their heels to appear tall, ready to work. And I really wanted to go to Auschwitz for some-- I just felt I should go and maybe find out if the mother is OK.

But he called me out. I was a few rows behind, as a matter of fact. And everybody jumped. And I stood there. And he said, no, you get out. So I got out and I joined the 16 or so. And the other 500 went to Auschwitz and were killed a few days later.

This was 1940?

This was 1944.

Already '44.

Oh, yeah, you see, I was a year in Estonia. And this was between '43 and '44-- at least a year. And in the fall of '44, we came to Stutthof.

Now, after the transport left, who was left in Stutthof?

Oh, no, no, in Stutthof, there were many people. I mean, Stutthof had many, many people that were coming from all over. They were bringing the Jews mostly from Estonia, and from Latvia, from Kaiserwald, and from various other areas. And once in a while, they would come and pick a transport to ship them to work someplace.

And after a while, they picked also me, my group. I was in a block together with Danish prisoners. As a matter of fact, there were a few-- there were about 25 or 30 Danes they rounded up because they were fighting in the Legion in Spain against Franco.

So when the German occupied Denmark, they collected them. They were communists, probably. And they got them into-- very nice people. And they were trying to help us. They were-- the Germans were treating them with quite-- with respect, although they were communists. Because the Danes was a real northerner-- the Danes, and Swedes, and Norwegians. So the Germans somehow looked at them differently. And they were getting food, as a matter of fact, from outside, from Denmark.

And then I was chosen. I was chosen. I was picked to join a group. And we were sent to Danzig, to the Werfts, which is essentially to working on shipbuilding. And I was put to-- I essentially was working on submarines.

And after a while, one mechanic realized that I know how to build equipment. So he put me to build some special type of equipment that he could sell on the black market, I guess. So I had rather good this few months because he would give me bread and so on. And I would build a special type of keys. I don't know. I just learned this on the job. And then-- and we were essentially in a camp called Burggraben.

Spell it.

B-U-R-G-R-A-B-E-N. It was-- this was a camp where we used to be every day shuttled for a shift to the

shipbuilding factory and back.

This was in Danzig?

Yeah. Burggraben was a town near Danzig. And then in about-- the Russians were getting close. I guess in end of January, they put us on the march. It was miserable weather, snowing and cold. And we landed up, after about a week, in kind of a camp that had typhus. So we were put on quarantine. And they wouldn't let us out. And we stayed there. In six week, out of the 600, maybe 200 survived. It was absolute starvation and typhus-- typhus, we used to refer to it.

No food?

Oh, hardly any. Hardly any.

Were there any other prisoners besides Jews?

There was another block. There was-- there were Poles. This is the first time, except for Stutthof, I met a few Poles. But otherwise, this was mostly criminals, or smugglers, or I don't know-- maybe some political activists or whatever. But the few people that I did met, they were usually smugglers that were caught and sent. And they usually got a certain number of years.

I remember, in Stutthof, I met a young Polish fellow who was a few years older than I. I was at that time 17, 16 and a half. He must have been 19-20. And we got friendly or so. So one day, they called him in. And usually, when you call in a Jew to the SS, this could have been the end of it.

But he came back. And he said that they are releasing him from concentration camp. Until today, I cannot-- I couldn't figure out what it means to be released from a concentration camp. It's like you are in hell, and they tell you, now, you can go to paradise. You are the one, go ahead. In any case, until today, when I think about this moment, I'm really puzzled.

And I guess, he asked me, what would you like? So I say, nothing. I don't know what's going on outside. I mean, when you spend three years like this in isolation, in concentration camps, ghettos, the whole thing outside becomes rather question-- you don't know. Because I was very young, you see. I was-- I started with the age of 14. And I was at that time approaching 17. So my teenage years, essentially, a big part of it, I spent in concentration camps.

Do you remember how heavy you were, how much you weighed, and how healthy you'd been?

Well, all that-- we were all very skinny. I must have been healthy because if I wouldn't be able to take these marches, and have cold, and the-- and drinking dirty water-- there was a toilet nearby. And I wouldn't be surprised if it was all mixed up in the snow. People used to go out and urinate in the field.

And then we used to go out and get bucket of snow and drink it. So after a while, you were probably-- your immunity had to be strong. Otherwise, you would have been gone. I was lucky that I had an appendix attack in the ghetto. And this was cut out in the ghetto still without anesthesia, only by local cooling.

Who helped you?

As a matter of fact, there was a hospital-- there was a surgeon. His name is Peisachovich. He was a known surgeon, a young surgeon from Vilna. And he cut it out.

He was a member of the concentration camp?

No, no, no, no. This was in Vilna ghetto still. Oh, in concentration camp, if you would have had appendix, it would have been over. So this is why it was very lucky for me that I had this attack of the appendix, appendicitis-- the appendix affair was really still in the ghetto, where there was a hospital.

So you couldn't afford to get real sick. Because otherwise, you wouldn't be here. OK, you wouldn't survive. And so we were all undernourished and everything. But whoever survived usually, at least during this period, was able to take the whole mess.

When you woke up in the morning and there was-- occasionally someone was dead--

Occasionally? We used to pile up dead along the wall. There were even rumors that some people were eating dead people. And I wouldn't be surprised. I guess, if you're extremely hungry and it's either die-- and if somebody is dead, I don't know. You look at animals, and you look at human beings, they're all like animals in any case. So I wouldn't be surprised if this did happen. I did not eat any dead people.

And so after a while, they used to-- there was a special team that used to take in a wheelbarrow. They used to put the dead. They were all skeletons, essentially, and skins. And they used to dump them in a hole.

And after a while, it was-- the rate of dying was so high that the team that was working couldn't do it. So I remember, when liberation came, the Russian Army liberated us, we used to have, on one wall, this one wall near the door, I don't know if they were-- almost up to the ceiling piled up, dead people.

And that was something that you did? You use to--

I mean, if there was a dead person, you pushed away.

And then you put them on the wall?

Yeah.

And when did the Russians arrive?

It was March 10. It was the day after my 17th birthday, as a matter of fact. There was a what they refer to as a Razvedka. Razvedka means it's a forward group, three-four people that are--

Scouts.

--scouts. That's it, scouts. And I guess it was a woman or two and two men. And they came into the camp. And everybody was yelling, the Russians are here. And they came to our barracks. We couldn't believe that. The whole thing was really out of this world. And they told us that the Russian Army is just a mile away. And in a moment, we'll-- they'll be here.

And then there were some people that knew how to handle. Because we were a group of young kids. And they told us, we can-- and we raided immediately the food things of the SS. You see, two days before that, the commandant-- the Kommandant, I guess his name was Meisel-- just a week before that, he looked.

There was an Appell, people lined up, and he looked at us. And we were about 200 standing instead of the 600 we came. And he asked the question, are there so many Jews still around? He asked us a question like that. And a few days later, that means two days or so before liberation, he came, and he said, OK, whoever can march, come with me. We have to run away because the Russians are coming.

So I and a few of my friends, we said, we're just staying straight here. But a number of Jews lined up. And he rode on a horse, and the Jews marched behind him. And later, I found out that the Russians caught up with them. And the Jews told them who is he. So they hung him from a tree straight there. This was good justice and quick. See, the Americans were much slower those things. They put them in a camp and fed them. The Russians did it much more elegant.

And then this-- his helper, another young SS man, he shot just one of our fellows a few days before. We just went for-- he took us for a march to a bathhouse. And on the way back, he just took a shot one of the fellows in the back. And so when we were out of the camp already, and the Russian Army was marching, there were tanks and trucks all over, we were near a kind of a barn.

And he-- this fellow, in civilian clothes, came out and say, I'll give you money, help me get out. So we told him, wait. And we went over, picked a Russian officer, and he came. He took his documents and then took out a gun and shot him on the spot.

Knowing that he was a German--

SS, yeah.

--SS.

He was SS man. And we told them that he killed just one of our fellows a few days before. So I guess he followed the convention, Geneva Convention, by taking his document. But then he-- in case of getting involved in complicated justice procedures, he just fixed him on the spot.

But it's funny. We were so tired of dead people that we didn't even get close to him. I could have kicked his face. I should have, just out of satisfaction. And we just let him there, and didn't even look at him, and just walked away.

Now, how long after the Russians overran the SS did you move from the area of Danzig?

Oh, yeah, we moved in-- we moved in within-- we were not in-- we were away from Danzig. We were on the march. [? Reben, ?] the camp, the last camp where we got stuck-- that was on the quarantine, [? Reben ?] was about a march-- it was six days away.

We marched across a corridor into Western Pomerania. OK. And this is where we got stuck. And we left the same day. Oh, we didn't want that. I mean, there was no place to stay. And there were people-- dead people piled up all over. And there were no beds. We're all sleeping for six weeks on the floors.

So what-- to what extent did the Russians accommodate you?

Nothing. They just let us go.

And so--

That's all what we wanted was to get the hell out of there.

And so where did you head? You were in Western Pomerania.

No, we were heading for a big town. And the only thing we wanted is food. So we stopped some-- we got hold of some horses and wagons from the peasants. We just took it. They were so afraid of us. We would approach a convoy of refugees, and they would see us with the stripes, and they probably saw the way we looked, they would run for miles. And we took the stuff.

And we just traveled to the nearest town. I remember, we were traveling in a number of wagons and horses. And at some point, everybody stopped. You know why we stopped? Because there was a turned-over wagon and a piece of ham, a leg of a pig was sticking out, a roasted leg of pig.

So we had a lot of the stuff already collected because the only thing you collected is you collected food. So we stopped and picked up this piece too. And so was-- after you're hungry for three, four years, food was a paramount importance.

How large was your group traveling?

We were about probably eight, nine fellows.

Did you have any weapons?



No.

You just-- and you were headed for what city at that point?

I think there was a German town. We landed in a German town, and we stayed there for a number of weeks. Lauenburg-- that's right, Lauenburg. The Poles have another name for it. But we spent there for a few weeks.

And then we decided, we are going back to Poland-- I mean, to old Poland. See, this is a place that the Poles got from the Russians. This is part of Western Pomerania. And we went to-- we went back. As a matter of fact, there was some Russian general that was a Jew. And he came on a visit of town. And we approached him because we recognized the name, I guess.

What name?

I don't recall that. And he gave us a special permission to leave town. You couldn't travel. See, in this system, you cannot just decide, you are living. Under this communist system, you have to always register where you are. So he gave us a piece of paper with a stamp with his signature that we are being shipped home.

You're a group of eight or nine fellows?

Yes, or something. Some women joined us, also were liberated from other camps, Jewish women. And the whole group, we went-- essentially, we landed in Bialystok with all the Russians, arrested us, and there was a whole problem. But in any case, I just found out that nobody survived. So I decided, I'm getting out.

How did you find out?

Yeah, I found out from people that-- you find people from-- in Bialystok-- there were many people that came from all over. And usually, if people-- so this was now about September, August '45. So if somebody survived, you would have gone to the hometown, to Suwalki or would at least have gone to Bialystok, where there was a big Jewish community-- big. People were coming back from Russia.

People were coming from-- they all met in a few towns. Because the Poles were threatening the Jews too. You see, the right-wing Poles were killing Jews even after the war was over. They were risking their lives, so antisemitic is the country. You would think-- imagine what time we had in Poland under the Germans, with the Polish, most of the population was against us.

So I realized that there was nobody there. But during the war, when I was still in Estonia with my brother, I remember, I was sitting on my bunk. I worked in coal mines at that time with my brother. And this was a grand job, I must say.

And we came to-- I promised myself, if I ever get out of this mess, I'm going to leave Europe, finished. And I decided that as soon-- so I went to Germany. And there, I started to study. And I studied at the Technical University of Munich.

How did you choose Munich?

Because this is where a big community of the survivors was. And this is where I could take a special examination, since all documents were shot-- were lost. So I took special entrance examinations. And I passed. I studied with German teachers in the camp. I was in-- after the war in a DP camp.

What was the name of the camp?

Eschwege.

Eschwege?

Yeah. I was in Berlin for a while. And then they shipped-- the American Army shipped us to Eschwege.

When did you first meet the Americans?

In Berlin.

Berlin.

Yeah, as a matter of fact, I had to run away. I was in Stettin. And we smuggled the border. And we landed up-- when I landed up in the American zone, was like a second liberation. This is-- when people see the American flag, I mean, here in America-- well, in the late '60s, early '70s, they were trampling the stuff.

And I said, well, I says, these fools. They don't know how great this flag is. Because even already after liberation, just to get out from Poland, I remember, when I hit Berlin, was another fellow who was there before. He came back, I guess, to look for family, probably, and then came back with me. And he told me, now, here is the Western sector. It was a sigh of relief.

How long did you study in Munich?

Munich, I was-- I got my engineering diploma in '52.

'52.

Yeah. And then I was at the university. And I was an assistant at the Technical University. And then I came to the States in '54. I worked for a year in an engineering office. I came as a selected immigrant. I didn't have to wait for a visa because I was an engineer.

And I went back to school. I went to Northwestern. I got a master's in a year and a PhD in another two years. And then I came to New York University, and after a year, became an assistant professor as an associate professor in aeronautics. So then I went to Princeton for five years. And now, I'm in Delaware for five years.

And when did you start your own family?

Oh, we met in '66. And then we got married in the end of-- in August of '66. We met about January or February. I still have a piece of paper, as a matter of fact. This is where I originally wrote down her name, when people gave me the name. And then I-- we had a-- we have a daughter of 15. And we have a son of 12. The daughter's name is Regina, Regina-- R-E-G-I-N-A.

Her date of birth?

Her date of birth is 1968, April 12. And my son's birthday is '71, June 2.

OK. And at present, Regina is a student?

She's a high school-- junior high.

In Wilmington.

In Wilmington.

And my son is in sixth grade.

OK. And do they have any interest in participating in the events of--

Well, they are aware of that. Let's put it that way-- I don't try to make a-- to make them-- I mean, extremely aware. I don't want to create them psychological problems. They know my background. And they know my friends and things like that. But I think-- they go to Hebrew school, at least until-- my daughter went to Hebrew school until bat mitzvah. And my son is going-- is continuing until bar mitzvah.

After that, they drop out of that. I think, I didn't get more Jewish education than that, either. And beyond that, there's-- see, I don't believe a lot of things that the Jews are trying to push-- this liberal type of attitudes, and the Jews are here to save the world, and all those thing. I don't believe in that nonsense.

They're trying to make us as a Jewish religion out of Judaism some sort of a platform for a liberal party. And for me, this is, to me, extremely strange. I think this is nothing to do with the whole thing. And I don't want to have part of it. And therefore, I didn't encourage my daughter to continue in Hebrew school. Because this was what they wanted to teach her.

All right. Well, I think that concludes our interview.

Yeah.

This concludes the interview with Dr. Arnold D. Kerr, 903 Overbrook Road, Wilmington, Delaware 19807, area code 302-652-6440, conducted by Dr. Joseph Y. Rudnick. Dr. Kerr is especially anxious to receive promptly a copy of this tape. Thank you.