

EUGENE KELLNER  
RG-50.154.0014. (Rec, in 1986 in Sarasota)

Eugene was born in 1917 in a town south of Pilsen, Czechoslovakia, then in the Sudetenland part of the country. He had 2 brothers and a sister; his father ran a big farm and they were comfortable. The family was liberal and Eugene went to public school. When he graduated from high school, Eugene moved to Prague and worked in a bank. He knew how to speak 7 languages. He worked in the bank until 1938. He said antisemitism was always around, but that their president at the time, Masaryk was against any hatred.

The first changes were when the Germans took over the Sudetenland and the family had to give up the farm. His mother came to live in Prague. The Germans then took over the rest of the country- Slovakia. Eugene was called into the army and lost his position at the bank, but the Czechs were overtaken by the Germans and Eugene went to Bohemia and worked for the Jewish council until the transports came. The whole family lived together. In 1941 he got married, but because there was a law against moving, he and his wife had to live separately.

Eugene describes all the laws that made the Jews give up their radios, not be allowed to travel or go into the parks and to wear the Star of David. Each man's middle name became Israel and the women's Sarah on their ID cards so it was difficult to go anywhere. In late 1942 the whole family was sent to Theresienstadt. Eugene worked in the garden of the Kleinefestung or SS prison area. He was beaten regularly. When his son was born he got a job in the kitchen. He spent about 13 months in Theresienstadt and then was sent on a transport to Auschwitz/Birkenau.

There were 1500 people in the cattle car transport; 965 went straight to the gas chambers, he was later told. He hid a family photo in the sole of his shoe, but this was discovered and he was beaten and his glasses broken. This turned out to be a good thing, because people with glasses went to the gas. Eugene tells the all-too-familiar story of the selection process, shaving, disinfecting, poor clothing. He worked carrying stones all day and stood in the appels for hours. He saw his brother taken on a transport to Germany and he died in Dachau.

Eugene was taken to work in the quarry. It was very difficult to climb in wooden shoes, and most people didn't live longer than 2 weeks. He got very sick and reported to the "hospital". On December 12 1944 he was put on a truck to go to the gas chamber, but he was taken off because they decided to experiment on his frostbitten fingers and infected leg. They kept treating one part and infecting another. On January 19 the inmates were sent out to march. Eugene couldn't walk so he stayed behind with about 110 others guarded by 6 SS. They were supposed to be killed, but there was heavy bombardment by the Allies and the SS his. Two days later 105 of them were loaded on a cattle wagon and went 10 days without food or drink. Eugene describes acts of murder and cannibalism in the wagons, but this had not been officially corroborated.

He was sent from camp to camp until he came to Brienseneset in Czechoslovakia. There he was lucky to be taken into a factory owned by Oskar Schindler, where Schindler saved about 1500 Jewish lives. Schindler once sent back a train that was supposed to take some of them to the gas chambers. On the 8th of May, Schindler called all the Jews into the factory and

told them the Germans had surrendered. On May 14, Czech soldiers came, and Eugene was able to go with them back to Prague with his 2 friends.

Eugene found out that his mother had survived in Theresienstadt, but that his brother, wife and baby were all killed. Of his 56 relatives, only his mother and a cousin in the US survived. He went back to his family farm, which was in total disrepair, and he gradually fixed it. At first the Russians who had taken over the country were nice, but then they became very bad and had orgies with the German girls, so Eugene moved back to Prague and got a job again with the bank he worked for before the war. He met and married a girl who also worked at the bank. They eventually had 3 children. In 1968 he and his family defected to the United States. HIAS found work for him at a bank in Toledo, Ohio, where he worked until he retired in 1982.