

National Council of Jewish Women
Sarasota-Manatee Section

HOLOCAUST ORAL HISTORY PROJECT

Eugene Kellner, Survivor

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Sarasota, Florida

EB: This is Elinor Borenstein, interviewing Mr. Eugene Kellner in his home in Manatee County on April 1, 1986.

Mr. Kellner, tell me a little bit about your background. Tell me about your family.

EK: Well, I was born in the end of the first World War, 1917, and I had two brothers and a sister. I was the third one. My oldest was a sister and then was my brother, who was a lawyer and was a banker, and my younger brother - he was a farmer. I was...We had a big farm and my father was a farmer.

EB: And, where was this, Mr. Kellner?

EK: That was in Czechoslovakia.

EB: Where in Czechoslovakia?

EK: When I was born it was close...it was in Neshitza, by Pleshnitza. It is in...

EB: Tell me about where.

EK: It is about twenty...thirty miles from...south of Pilsen.

EB: That gives me an idea. O.K.

EK: And after...then we were living in...we had a farm in Pleshnitza, and then we moved to so-called Sudetenland. It was...there was a big farm and my father bought it and we were living there, and we were all going to school.

EB: How many...did you all live on the farm?

EK: Originally, we lived all on the farm, but later we went to school. We were studying in Pisenya, and later we moved, when my brother was studying law, so I moved to Vil...to Prague with him, and then, after I graduated from the Commercial Academy, it was a special kind of high school, I was working for the bank in the international division, as I knew seven languages, and I was working there till 1938. Before, we, of course, knew...I was following the political events

in Europe. It was a very close to us. It was in Germany, what was happening there with the Jews, and we had a lot of people who were coming from Germany, and we were trying to help them.

EB: Mr. Kellner, when...during the time that you were growing up, did you have...feel any Anti-Semitism then?

EK: It was always there. It was...Anti-Semitism was there from the beginning, especially the Catholic priests. They were teaching the kids that the Jews were crucifying Jesus, and, therefore, we felt it all the time, and...but, only to a certain point, as it was legally not allowed. Anti-Semitism was punishable. We had a great President, President Mosige, who was against Anti-Semitism, who was very liberal, very...a great democrat. So, we had..., of course, there were Fascists, the Fascist Party and the right wing, the politicians, they were Anti-Semites, very much. Especially, I can...I have one example...My uncle, he was a film star, and he was fat. He was playing in a movie, and, there would be a movie made in a villa of a politician who was Fascist. He was a very rich man, and they didn't allow him to go there. Therefore, he couldn't work on the movie. That was just one example. But, a lot of people - a lot of my friends, they were not Anti-Semites. But...

EB: But, at least you knew that it was prevalent at the time.

EK: Yah.

EB: Was your father a farmer?

EK: He was a farmer.

EB: Fairly affluent, fairly well-to-do?

EK: Yah, he had a big farm and he employed about 30 employees.

EB: Was your family observant of religious customs?

EK: My mother was, but my father was not very religious.

EB: I see.

EK: He had a bad experience in World War I. Once, my mother was visiting him on the front, and he wanted to have a free day, and it was just a Jewish holiday, and the Rabbi asked my father whether he does it for religious purpose, or he just wants to have a free day, and my father told him sincerely that he wanted to have a free day so he didn't permit him. And, from that time, my father was not religious.

- EB: He really turned him off. But your mother continued to observe...
- EK: Yah, my mother was very religious and she kept up all the holidays and everything.
- EB: Did you have a religious education, you and your brothers and sister?
- EK: Of course we had Bar Mitzvahs, all three, and...but we were very, very liberal.
- EB: I see. When you went to school, did you go to a regular public school, or did you go to a Chader?
- EK: To a regular public school.
- EB: A regular public school. What was your first perception that there might be trouble coming?
- EK: We followed the political situation for years, and, as I told already, we knew what was happening in Europe, and we were afraid of it, and we tried to fight it, and, so we were supporting all the democratic actions. We were supporting the refugees. We were doing all what we could, and we believed that what is coming in Germany cannot happen in Czechoslovakia. You see, we were an independent state. But, everybody was...all the top politicians, including Daladier, and all these people - they didn't know what Hitler was. It was a tragedy. Everybody hoped that he can stop him any time he wants.
- EB: O.K. Now, what was the first thing that happened to change your life dramatically?
- EK: Well, first, it was the occupation of the part of Czechoslovakia on the border. As I told you, we had a farm in the Sudetenland and by the time my father was dead, my mother was on the farm alone, and, when it happened, there was some unrest in the place where we had the farm, and I heard about it in the radio, so I took the train and went to see her. In the meanwhile, there was upheaval and she escaped from the place where it happened...they injured the police there, and they made lot of things. So, I went in the middle of the upheaval and they imprisoned me in the school, and they threatened me they will send me to Germany, but after about seven or eight hours being in prison, the Czech army came and liberated us.
- EB: Were you imprisoned by people you knew?
- EK: Sure, that was the German part of Czechoslovakia.
- EB: I see. Uh, huh.

EK: The so-called Hemlein party. And, one day later, the Czechoslovakian Republic mobilized against Germany, and, then there was all the action that the...dealing with Hitler as Czechoslovakia guarantee by France, England and Russia, but it was a Munich dictate. The Czechoslovakia stayed completely alone. They dictate they should give up the territories where the Germans are living. So, then, there was evacuation of the whole territory, including our farm, and including everything what we had there.

EB: And, where did you go?

EK: I was, by that time, working for a bank in Prague, so I was...my mother came and I was supporting her, and, in the meanwhile, my brother, who was a lawyer in Pilsen, he, also, was supporting her, so...we lost everything practically, before the whole country was occupied. Then, I was called to military service on the 1st of March, 1938...1939. In 1939, and on the 15th of March, Hitler took the rest of Czechoslovakia. And, we were in Slovakia, and there was upheaval against the Czechs as there was again...it was the policy of the German "dividad imperi." It means "divide and rule," and the Slovaks were first against the Czechs and against the Jews, of course, and against their own...their own non-Catholic part of Slovakia. But, later, when the Germany army came to Slovakia, they found out that they make a mistake. It was too late.

EB: And, at that time, where were you?

EK: I was in Slovakia, and we were imprisoned in the barracks, waiting to go back to Czech...to Bohemia. So, then, we were sent back to Bohemia. I came back to the bank, but they said, "Due to the changed political condition, we cannot employ you anymore, if I was a Jew."

EB: I see. I see.

EK: And, therefore, I was unemployed. But, I knew languages. I was trying to give some lessons...English lessons and Russian lessons...whatever I could get, but it wasn't enough, so I started to help as a Jewish counsel. First of all [...] and then they paid me something. And, I stayed there till I was sent to the transports.

EB: And, where was your mother all this time?

EK: My mother was, all the time, in Prague with me.

EB: I see. And, then, when you were sent...how long was that, before you were sent to the transports?

EK: It was...it took three years. During the three years, my younger brother, who was a farmer, he was working as farm worker, with some farmer who completely

exploited him. He didn't have enough to eat and when he came home, he was eating too much, and he developed some digestion disease, and we couldn't see our other brother who was in Pilsen. It was not allowed to travel from one place to another.

EB: And your sister?

EK: My sister was in Prague.

EB: With you? With your...

EK: No, no...She was married. She was married and she has a girl, and her husband. He was also fired as he was a Jew. So, he tried to make some living selling different stuff, and, we were living together in an apartment. And then, by that time I am...was dating a girl whom our parents knew each other, and, in this bad time, you had nothing to do, so we fell in love and we married. And, it was in 1941 we got married, and we couldn't live together. It was not allowed. She was living with her parents, and I was living with my mother.

EB: You mean, this was the law?

EK: It was the law. You couldn't move. Besides, it was not enough space there. We were living three families in three bedrooms. Every family had one little room. So, and...and they were living with two other families, also in three bedrooms. So we just me occasionally, and, after 8 o'clock you had to be at home.

EB: A curfew.

EK: Curfew, yes. So, we had a hard time to get together.

EB: Yes, I guess so.

EK: And, when it happened that the Japanese attacked Pearl Harbor, we learned about it, and my father-in-law, who also was a bank manager, he said, "Now it is not long any more that the war will be over." But he was wrong. The same day, some friend of his came to visit him, and, when he went back, the housekeeper saw him, and the housekeeper was a confidante of the Gestapo. He was so excited about it that he took the steps fast, the staircase fast, and he died.

EB: Oh.

EK: Yah, he got a stroke. On the same day what Pearl Harbor was, my father-in-law died. By the time it was that some of the friends came and told us that we should not give up everything to the Germans, and that we should give it to them, and they will keep it for us when the time will be right again. So, we gave them everything we could and after they got what they wanted, you never saw

them again. And, but not everyone...some of the friends were really good friends. They brought us, once in a while, something what was not available for us as we were not allowed to have some fruit or vegetables and we were not allowed a lot of things to have. And, we had to give up everything, starting from the radios and the skis and warm clothes, and I cannot remember everything. We had always something to give up and we were not allowed to go to the parks and we were not allowed to travel any place. We were allowed to travel in the street car only in the last car.

EB: Did you have to wear insignia?

EK: Yah, we had to wear the David star, and we are not allowed to go to some stores. Only some stores were available. The food stamps were a lot less than was a regular person had. Everybody got in his personal identification card a J, and everybody...every man was Israel and every woman was a Sarah as a second...middle name, and so it was very difficult to go any place and when the anti-Semites wanted, they could report you. And, you couldn't defend. You were sent to the Gestapo right away, and sometimes you never came back. And, I was working for the Jewish organization and it was pretty tough to communicate it. The Germans and even some of the Czech police were very nasty. We got... in '41 we got a message that the...all Jewish people from Pilsen will be evacuated, and, of course, my brother, my older brother, who was going to Theresienstadt. He was a very bright person. He knew...He was a musician and he was mentally very good, but physically, he was not too strong. So, we were worried about him. But, he was again working there, in the Juden Altesta. Then it happened, that there was a [...]. That was the guy, the super S.S. who tried to kill everybody who was not a Nazi, and when it happened, it was a hunt about everybody. They came in every apartment. They were checking on you. Everybody who should be in place was there, whether there was nobody hiding who didn't belong there, whether there were no weapons and they were looking for people and, luckily, once in a while I went to sleep with my wife in the apartment where she was living. Just that day, I was not there. Otherwise, I would not be here. And, so, then they sent for punishment a lot of Jewish transports directly to Poland. Normally the transports went through Theresienstadt. That was a medieval town, like fortress, surrounded by the police, Czech police and by the S.S., so that nobody escapes. And, from that was just a first collect...camp where they collected...

EB: A collection point.

EK: A collection...for collection them for transporting them further to Poland. So, we stayed till Xmas, '42, and then we had to go all at once. And we were allowed to take 50 kilos of stuff with us. But, before...before...when we were concentrated in the camp, it was a fairground. We were concentrated there. When it happened, I was called to the S.S. to [...] that was the head of the Eichmann

group. And, they investigated me and investigated me. I was standing there from the morning till the evening. They want...as I made some translation for the Czech group. I was making translations for the Czech group.

EB: Uh, huh.

EK: They must have found something that I did it, so they investigated me, who was sitting at the desk. Maybe they found there something and I was so confused that I said I was there sitting a year ago, and that helped me as...probably the paper what they found...it was a year later.

EB: Uh, huh.

EK: Well, they returned me to the transport. We went to Theresienstadt.

EB: Now, you talk about we. Who was there with you?

EK: With me was my wife, my mother, my brother, my mother-in-law, and that was it.

EB: I see. I see.

EK: Five people.

EB: Uh, huh.

EK: And, one more person, we didn't know about it, was my wife was pregnant.

EB: Oh.

EK: We didn't know it, just when we came to Theresienstadt we found out. And, my brother helped me to get a job in so-called Kleinefestung, it was called. The translation is small fortress. That was the S.S. prison, where the political prisoners were punished very badly, and I was working there in the garden as a farm worker. This group was protected against being sent back to Poland. But they were beating us so badly, but I felt that I have so survive it in order to save my family from being killed...

EB: Of course, of course.

EK: So, I was working there 13 months and after 13 months, they transferred to me to...when my son was born, they transferred me to the kitchen, and I was working in the kitchen. There, around September '43, everybody was...September '44, was it '44, when everybody was sent to Auschwitz.

EB: To Auschwitz.

- EK: To Birkenau, actually. They said to us that we are going to build a new camp, where we can live together with our families. That was how they tricked you by the Nazis. They were very tricky and very sneaky, and that our wives will come after us. It was in '44, we knew what was happening in Europe, so it was just run for...for the time...and so, I went to Auschwitz, to Birkenau, alone. The transport of 1500 persons in a cattle wagon. We took some stuff with us. And we didn't know that we were going there. We didn't know anything.
- EB: Where you were going.
- EK: Yah. Right after we passed the river Elbe, so we saw that we are moving to the right, to the East, instead of the the left, we knew that we are going to Poland. After two days of traveling, we arrived in the morning in a place which...where we would smell the chloroform and [...] and there were some people with striped pajamas running around and calling to us. "You are gesunt...you are gesunt." You are rescued. We didn't know what it means. They chased us out of the wagon, and said, "Leave everything in the wagon. It will be sent to you later." But, we had such a small what do you call it...baggage."
- EB: Oh, yes.
- EK: But they cut it off, and they said, "You are not allowed to take it." We were waiting in lines and lines until we came to a place where on the top was staying a man, S.S. officer, and we had to take off our hat and say either, "gesunt" or "krank." Of course I was healthy, so I said, "Gesunt." And, they sent me to the left and that was...
- EB: That was good.
- EK: That was good. Otherwise, I would be sent to the gas chamber.
- EB: Uh, huh.
- EK: From the 1500, 965 went directly to the gas.
- EB: Did you know about it at the time?
- EK: No. We didn't know anything. Even when we...later....heard that there are gas chambers, we couldn't believe that people can be so inhuman that they would be worse than beasts, that they would kill each other because the beasts kill just to satisfy their hunger. So, we went....and then we waited and waited and waited until it was night and they chased us again on a place, where we had to give up all money, so we shouldn't have any money left, but, they were looking for money. We had golden jewelry, but we allowed just to have a ring when you are married. Give up the ring and, strange thing, all canned food, we had to give up. And then, we are waiting again and we had to state everything, and you could

just keep your glasses, your belt and your shoes. And, we went in front of...it was already cold...it was September night...and, in Poland, it was cold. So, we were going and the S.S. were looking after us, and, I hide a photograph of my family in the left shoe, under the...

EB: Under the sole.

EK: Under the sole. He must have immediately recognized it, as he came to me, took the left sole...took out the photograph, destroyed it, and then he beat me so badly that he destroyed my glasses.

EB: Oh.

EK: But, it was my good luck. So, selection continued. They were looking after the people who wore glasses. They went...they came back to the gas chamber. Saved...

EB: One more time.

EK: One more time. I was...It was a miracle. So we went to...they were checking first your mouth, whether you don't hide anything there...your back, and you were lucky when they first looked at your back, otherwise you get the finger from the mouth. So, then they shaved us with dull razors, and we were full of blood and then they chased us under the hot showers - it was very hot - they burned our skin and it was...and they put some disinfectant on us and it was burning terrible. Then, we went to a guy who was throwing us pieces of...pieces of suit, like...like trousers...

EB: Oh, clothing.

EK: Clothing. Clothing. So, they didn't check whether you were small or tall, or whether you are...

EB: You took whatever you could catch.

EK: No, they gave you. When you don't like it, you exchange it with somebody else. See. And, by that time I still had my shoes, and I had my belt. And, so, then we put it on and we exchanged something, what was possible. They sent us in the barracks and we were in gypsy camp. It was called "gypsy camp."

EB: Oh.

EK: They sent us on the concrete. We were laying there so that you couldn't move. When you moved, you would destroy the neighbor.

EB: Oh, uh, huh.

EK: We were mostly sitting...in sitting position, the whole night. Then came selections and selections. it was probably the second day, I was staying [...] and there was a little boy, about 14 or 15 years, and he showed on my shoes. He wanted to have my shoes. I didn't want to give it to him. And, so, he said, "Give them to me. Otherwise they will kill you." I didn't believe it, but I gave it to him, and I got the wooden shoes in exchange. The wooden shoes. The hard, wooden shoes. And, so, it was the last piece of my equipment...

EB: ...that you had. it was gone then.

EK: And, then, after five days staying there, we got only once a day soup, in the morning...just...it was not black coffee...it was something...it looked like coffee, but didn't smell like coffee, didn't taste like coffee...It was bitter, but it was hot. And, we got a piece of bread, which was like a slice of bread. In the evening a piece of margarine and often teaspoon of jello. That was all you got. The fifth day...

EB: What did you do all day? How did you keep yourself busy?

EK: They were chasing us from one place to another. We had to carry stones. In the morning, we carried it on the right hand side, and in the afternoon, we moved them back on the left hand side. Sometimes, we had to stay in appell. It was terrible. So you had to stay, and you couldn't move. When you moved, the kapo was after you, beating you. The kapos were mostly were mostly the so-called black [...], that's where the people we were real criminals. There were a lot of people who were homosexual, too. They were also bad. And all these people...everybody had more right than you had. And all these people...everybody had more right than you had. You couldn't do anything until they instructed you to do. You had to do. On the fifth day, arrived my younger brother, but I didn't ...couldn't see couldn't recognize him. I had not the glasses, but my friend who was with me, he told me that "There is your brother." But, we couldn't go to each other. He was in another transport, so, I just...so, I just called on him, and I knew that he was going to Germany somewhere. He was a strong man. He was 200 lbs. He was a boxer. He was representative of Czechoslovakia in boxing. Yah. And, the Hemlein guys in the village where we were...they were very afraid of him. They called him, "Tank." And one day, they called him, "Jew." And he just walked to them and he grabbed him - in each hand one -

EB: Knocked their heads together.

EK: Knocked their heads together. And throwed them away. And, they didn't...they were so afraid of him - he was very strong. And, but, also he was a strong

smoker, and that was what killed him. Later, I found out that he exchanged food for cigarettes.

EB: For cigarettes. They took him on another transport into Germany.

EK: They took him in a transport to Germany and he ended up in Gauferein, by Dachau. So, I knew that he was going to Germany, and, about three days later, they took us - they selected me - I was still in good shape - I was doing good - a lot of sports - I was in good shape. They took me to a quarry. It was called Gareschau. It was part of Auschwitz, too. We were there working in a quarry, making the stones for the factory, was producing the cement - for the cement factory. And, I learned that a lot of people, most of the people didn't survive more than three weeks in the quarry. The work was very hard. The food was very insufficient. You had just a striped pajama, and very light underwear, which was falling apart right away. We had just wooden...we had just wooden boots and when we came there, so we were working in the quarry from...they woke us at 2:30. At 3 o'clock you got your so-called coffee, and, then you wait in appell until they counted you, and we went out at 5 o'clock to the quarry. It was steep way to the mountain across the railroad and we had to run there fast. It was difficult to run in the shoes and then you had to pick out four...wagon of the...group of three...pick out three wagon of the stone and load it and when you were ready, you had to help the others who weren't so strong, who were not able to do so. During the time they were always shooting the stones, and they didn't give you any warning, so when you were not cautious enough you got hit by the stones. And, I was always...I didn't know what it means when hear the appell, like we called Steinbluch tzvau...it was zwei, two. It was our Commander. And, he said, 105, it was the men which went out of the camp, and he got announcer, for example, 82. We didn't know what it means 82. And, it meant you can bring alive only 82 people. The rest must be brought dead. We didn't know that. But we found out later. So, that was...and we were working hard and after we came to the quarry on the fifth of December...fifth of October, '44, and by the end of November, I was already worn out so badly and...the people...twice a week they sent...they sent a card to the camp and they send us some food and something, and they brought the people back which were killed, to be cremated in...or to be sent to the gas chambers.

EB: To the ovens.

EK: To the ovens. And, about...mostly 30 to 50 people were so [...] and were not able to work any more. When you were not able to work any more, you reported to the "Krankenbahn." It was like a group for the sick people and then sent you twice to gas chamber, to Auschwitz. When I was already...I knew that later, so I was hard working even when I felt very miserable. The last few days, our friend had to nearly to carry me to the quarry, and I was working there. I had frostbite. All my fingers were black. And, I infected my feet with phlegmona, and I couldn't...I couldn't keep my urine any more because it was

EB: You lost control.

EK: I lost all the underwear. It fell apart already. And, so I said, "It has no sense to make my friends weaker, as they had to carry me."

EB: Sure.

EK: So I reported to the Krankenbahn. It was on the 11th of December. They put me in the Krankenbahn. On the 12th, I should have come to Auschwitz for gas. I was already on the truck, when a car with four S.S. came, and they were checking on the people and everybody had to report what was wrong with him. And they picked up a Dutchman, who got crazy. He was not...he could mentally survive this kind of life, and they picked up me as I had phlegmona in both legs and I had frostbites on my fingers. They put me aside and they tried to test on me some medication. On the 12th of December, they cut one part of my leg with rusty scissors and cut off the tops of my fingers with the rusty scissors. That night I thought I was already dead...I was already in Heaven. I dreamed about I was no more alive. I had big fever. But, I survived. Can I rest now?

EB: Surely.

EK: But, I survived and next day, when I was waiting for other treatment, they took the Dutchman and they opened his skull with a scalpel, and the S.S. men, they tried some reflection how he...when they put the needle in his head, and he moved his legs and feet. He was crying terrible.

EB: You were...

EK: He told me it was...everything was smelling so bad...

EB: On your fingers?

EK: On my fingers, so the S.S. doctor - he was sick of it, and I didn't move...I didn't give a sound. And he said, "You were very brave. Will you have a cigarette?" I said, "Thank you, I don't smoke. I would prefer a piece of bread." He said, "You will get it." I never got it.

EB: Oh.

EK: So, it took months. They always took one...they took the left part and infected the right part.

EB: Where were you all this time?

EK: All the time I was on the Krankenbahn.

EB: Was it like a hospital?

EK: It was a special compartment for...for...

EB: I see. All right, I understand.

EK: In the factory. It was in the factory.

EB: I see.

EK: The S.S., I don't know his name...I forget a lot of things. But, he was originally a butcher, and he wanted to be a doctor and he always said after the war he will be a great surgeon. With him was a Czech dentist. He was a prisoner, Jewish. Avery nice man. He always tried to help us. And, when it was about...I think...the 18th of January, he said, "Boy, I cannot save you any more." He said. On the 19th, they tried everything on me. They don't need me any more. You know what it means. You will be sent to the gas chamber. What can I do? I was trying just to fight the time as I knew that the war was over.

EB: Were you...how did you know the war was over?

EK: I knew it.

EB: You just felt it.

EK: Not even felt it. I knew. We had some news there.

EB: Uh, huh. How did you feel when you knew the war was over and you were still going through this horror.

EK: The war was not over by this time. But, I knew that the war will be over. It was just a matter of time to survive the time. And then I found...Yah, we woke up on the 19th and everything was crazy. And they told the camp what we heard. Everybody has to get up and go by feet. I couldn't move. But they chased us out. It was a lot of snow and frost and by the time I was in the Krankenbahn, I loaned my great...so-called greatcoat to another friend...so-called friend. Now, when I came back, I told him I will now need the coat and he lost his somewhere. And, he didn't want to give it to me. And I couldn't fight him. So, I was staying there. They had never anything for replacement. No underwear, nothing. Now there were a lot of stuff - underwear everywhere, and there was a lot of chaos and everybody was running around. There was a lot of food all over and they chased us and we were so-called commando krankenbahn. When we were standing already in the lines, the kapo said to us, "Who doesn't want...who doesn't think he will survive, step out, otherwise he will be shot during the

march." I thought it is no sense to march any more so I stepped out, and there was a kapo. He was Polish and he hit me with, what was for the soup?

EB: With a ladle?

EK: With a ladle, yah, and it broke my skin and I was full of blood and then further...a lot more people were coming out of the [...] so he was hitting them, and at the moment I hide myself in the old clothes. But, that was not it. The people went and we stayed there - about 110 people, I don't know how many exactly, and they left 6 S.S. with us, which should have executed us when it was dark. It was in the Polish...The Polish were all over. The partisans weren't. That they shoot us and it was like we should have been executed at dark, but when the dark came, the airplane came and they were bombarding us terrible and the S.S., they were afraid. They went to the bunker. They...they...they locked us in the camp and they went to the bunker. And, so we survived the night there. And, they should shoot us in the morning. But they slept, so we were still alive and the next day, the same repeated exactly. When it was getting dark, the airplanes came, starting bombarding the Austria...was not far from the place where we were. They went again in the bunker, and the next morning, there was a train coming by and there was a cattle wagon, empty. So they loaded us in the cattle wagon, I don't know...one hundred and five people...and transported us ten days and nine nights without food, without beverage, without anything. In the cold winters of '45. And the people started dying. Some of the people. There is a sad story. The survival was so strong that they started killing each other. Eating the flesh (Editor's Note: We have no means of verifying this data.) And, I was there with two of my friends and when I...as I knew several languages...they were mostly Hungarian. When I heard that I am on the menu, the next day, then I convinced the guy, that this is nonsense that we kill each other...that our families are waiting for us and so on. So, he let us go with the other Hungarians. They left to kill somebody else that night. And, the next day, in the morning, as the dead bodies were [...] in one corner of the wagon, we hide ourselves behind the dead bodies, so we survived.

EB: Three of you.

EK: Three of us. Of course, the people...thirty people survived beside us. And, we...they sent us from one camp to another. Nobody wanted to accept us. Till we came to Brienyeneset - it was also in Sudetenland, in Czechoslovakia. It is Czechoslovakia again, and there was this guy who saved our lives. He was a German Polish director of a factory which was producing some kind of war material, and he took us. And, he was unloading the dead bodies, he found us, too. And, he was very nice to us. He saved 1500 Jewish prisoners from Austria.

EB: Hum.

EK: He moved a factory from Poland to Czechoslovakia. His name was Shindler. After the war...I have a book here somewhere...maybe I can find it...he...after the war he was...he was sent to Israel and...

EB: He was not a Jew.

EK: He was not a Jew. He was...officially he was a Nazi, too.

EB: Uh, huh.

EK: But, he...he made a wonderful job saving a lot of people.

EB: And, so, now you were back in Czechoslovakia.

EK: I was back on...we were in Sudetenland. it was still a part of Germany.

EB: Yes.

EK: And we were there, and the S.S. were there, of course, and we were allowed to recuperate a little before we could work, as we were unable to work. So, on April, finally they found out that I am a farm worker. They had a garden there, so they let me work in the garden.

EB: Oh, what a feeling that must have been!

EK: Yah, but I was so...you know, when I went to the camp I had 150 lbs. When I came back I had only 70. I was just bones and skin. So, it was...I was not strong enough, so I was doing what I could do and we had S.S. there. Some of them were very nasty. And, when the front came close to Brumel. It was close to Brumel. This is the capital of Moravia - a part of Czechoslovakia. We heard that Himmler sent so-called gas train. We should have been loaded on the gas train. They should have gassed us, and somehow destroyed our bones and the ashes.

EB: Uh, huh.

EK: We saw the train standing there for about two days. Shindler sent the train back, and he sent also the bad S.S. to fight on the front. He sent them to the West. Oh, the S.S. were afraid of the Russians, and, so, only the old so-called S.S. were there, and they were more human. Some of them even gave us a piece of bread once in a while. So, and...on the 8th of May, Herr Shindler invited all the people in the factory...all...and told us that it was...that Germany signed the unconditional surrender, that we shouldn't be afraid, he would not leave us until we are again in good shape and he saved some materials for us and that we will...and that he gave us the material so we can have new clothes, and new underwear and that we are fitted before we go home that we are again in good shape. It was the 8th of May. And, so, we went to our barracks again. We were

locked up. The next morning we woke up. No S.S. were there. Just the Jewish kapos were there and they told us we should stay where we are as the German army is coming back. We should stay in the lager with the...with the [...]. Not to move. He even gave to the kapos weapons and told them to shoot when somebody would try to get in. So it happened. The army came close. Some groups came close to the camp and they shoot on them just in the air, but I admired what organization the Nazis had. They knew that there was some armed people when they were going by the camp, they came around the camp. So, we survived there. Two days, nobody came. We...and after two...three days there came the Russian and one of the Czech army and they told us that we are free, but we are not supposed to go any place. It is not safe, and after that, another group came and one of our...of our three...he was from Austria...he had a friend there who was an officer there...and he said, "We going back to Prague, so when you will...and we will sneak you out of the camp and you can go home." So, on the 14th of May, we went with the Czech soldiers back to Prague.

EB: My!

EK: And we arrived there on the 16th and that was the way that we came to Prague.

EB: Uh, huh. And your two friends went with you?

EK: My two friends were with me. The other friend, he had a big...he was a...his father was rich man. He had a big villa in Prague and we came to the housekeeper of...and they always...they celebrated [...] and we got so much to eat that we were sick.

EB: Yes, I'll bet. How long did you stay in Prague then?

EK: Well, I stayed in Prague till my mother came. And, that was another story. I didn't know that she survived. That she was in Thereisenstadt all the time, and she was all ready at this time to be transported, but my other brother asked he was sending the last transport and my mother wanted to go with him, but they refused to let her go with him. And, when he came there, he was sick. He had a hernia, and he was underweight and everything. So he brought himself sick and he went to the gas chamber. The same happened with my wife. She came there with a 13 month old boy and they told her, "Get rid of the child." She was strong. She didn't. They took the child. They burned her alive, as they didn't have enough cyclone. She went to the gas chamber.

EB: Your wife? I see, you were married before.

EK: Before.

EB: And, your child was gone too. So you lost them both. Did you know that right away then?

EK: I didn't know until we came to Bremeztz. As one of the friends who was working with me in the kitchen. He arrived in the later transport, and he told me that...what happened.

EB: And so now, your mother was the only survivor, really.

EK: My mother was the only survivor.

EB: Beside you.

EK: Yah.

EB: And you met again in Prague?

EK: With my wife?

EB: No.

EK: Yah. It was not so simple. As I was in Prague and I was looking after somebody, I was sure that my brother was strong, that he would survive. Then I found somebody whom I knew. He told me how it happened. He was very strong and it was two days before and they heard already the American army coming to liberate the camp. There was a small S.S. man, and he was yelling, and my brother just told to himself, "You will not yell long here anymore." And, he understood Czech. "What did you say?" And he wanted to beat him. My brother just turned around and he fell on the ground and he started yelling and they shoot him. They shoot him and they trampled him to death. It was my younger brother.

EB: So, there was nobody but your mother and you?

EK: Yah. But I didn't know that. I was expecting somebody was coming beside...We were a family of...with my relative like cousins and uncles, aunts...we were 56 people and only my mother survived and my cousin who was here in the United States. All others were gone.

EB: Everybody else was gone. How long, then, did you stay in Prague before you...

EK: I stayed in Prague. Then, one day, it was just my birthday. I went for free soup to a place, and there I met the wife of my former boss, who was...when I was working for the Jewish community...and I had the bad task to tell her that her husband was executed.

EB: Uh, huh.

EK: Before we transported. And she told me, "So, when will you bring your mother home?" I said, "My mother?" She said, "You don't know she is still in Theresienstadt?" So, the same day I wrote to her, I found out she was a nurse for my younger brother's girlfriend. The girlfriend was the only one who survived in Theresienstadt. She was supported my mother. So she kept her there when she got the typhoid. Before when she got the typhoid. So she was nursing her there and I have to wait until the quarantine was over. So she came to...in the end of May, she came to Prague and we stayed there about a few more days, and we went back to our farm.

EB: Oh, and what did you find at the farm?

EK: Everything was in bad shape. Stolen everything. Everything destroyed. You couldn't find anything. All the tools and tractors and everything what we had was gone. So we had to start from scratch, and we had German laborers there. Some of them Nazis. But they had to work, and we were slowly fixing everything. There was enough food and, in a short time, I had back my 150 lbs.

EB: I'll bet.

EK: Yah. And then the Russian soldiers came there, and they were very nice to us at first. And then they were not so nice any more and they started to...to...to do bad things so we...even the Russians on the Russian side was complaining, so I went complaining to the officer and told him what was happening. And he said, "I will come this evening to see you." Captain Lazar. He was a Jew.

EB: Oh.

EK: And he didn't want that they knew that he is.

EB: Of course.

EK: So, he told us that he will arrange everything that we...that we aren't bothered any more. Before we had a big [...] there and we had some soldiers there. They made orgies on the fourth floor...on the second floor...with the German girls. They were drinking and making noise and threatening us. We couldn't sleep. After he moved in and we had a nice time.

EB: Um, hum. And what brought you to the United States?

EK: It was a long story again...

EB: Uh, huh. Uh, huh, huh.

EK: We stayed on the farm and we hoped that we will be able to...but then the Germans were evacuated and we couldn't get any laborers there.

EB: Uh, huh.

EK: And I was not able to work. I was still...it was not my job. I was not at this time to take to the farm. So, we moved to Prague and we rented the farm to a person. Shortly after we moved, it was...we left in '47, and in '48 the Communists took over everything.

EB: Oh.

EK: So, we did just the right thing in the right time. So, ...

EB: You know, is there a word, they call it "Beshert?" You were from the beginning. It was meant to be.

EK: Yah. Always, I don't know whether it was God, or whoever...

EB: Of course it was. Of course it was. And so, how long did you stay there?

EK: 'Till March '47, and I went back to the bank where...

EB: Oh, my goodness.

EK ...where I worked. The bank changed, by that time, three times the name, but it was always the same bank, and my Jewish colleague and I...just a few left...from about 200 or 300 Jewish employees...there were only a couple of them...I don't know...then...

EB: Uh, huh.

EK: And I started working there. One day I had to dictate some letters and then I saw [...] who had numbers also, and I started to dictate to her, and she was not too happy about it, and then I [...] departments. And I gave her just to type this and one day I talked to her and she said she has a small cottage close to Prague. I asked her what she is doing there. And she said she has it rented, and that she goes there over the weekend. I said that I would like to go there, too, so we had a date. And, it was just the way when the time changed that I overslept and I didn't exactly know where she was, and I took the bus anyhow. And, I was talking with a guy in the bus and he saw my numbers and we started talking, and I said, "I am going to see a girl from the bank, and I exactly don't know where she is." And he said, "We will try out." And, finally, I couldn't find out the name, but then, "Isn't it a Jewess...the little Jewess who came back?" I said, "Yes." So I found her. She was so surprised that I found her.

EB: Of course.

- EK: So, we had a nice time, and went for dinner to a nice restaurant there, and then we started dating. And, in three months, we got married. She had nobody. Just an uncle.
- EB: So, you found each other. And, you stayed there then?
- EK: We were looking for an apartment. It was...
- EB: Where was your mother now?
- EK: My mother was living with my brother-in-law's girl friend who married her previous boyfriend, who came back from the Army. And, she was staying with her.
- EB: Uh, huh. So you were free to go and marry and...
- EK: Yah. And we had hard time to find....I had to live...I finally managed somehow that we got an apartment...terrible apartment. After...but, we didn't get it until our son was born.
- EB: So, you did get your son after all.
- EK: Yah. Then we had three children and when the Communists came we wanted to go to the West as we didn't like the idea to live in a totalitarian state. But, it was not possible. It was too dangerous. It took us twenty years before we could come here.
- EB: So, you came around 1968?
- EK: 1969. We defected in '68.
- EB: Uh, huh.
- EK: It would be another story...
- EB: For another tape. And you came to New York then?
- EK: We came...our cousin, who was living in Lima, Ohio, he sponsored us.
- EB: I see.
- EK: And, originally, we should come to Lima, but then we decided, especially since I am international banker, there was no international bank, and our two daughters...there was not a university in the place that should take a bigger city. So the HIAS found for us Toledo...Toledo, Ohio, and the people there were lovely.

EB: So, this is where you spent time, and are you retired now and living here?

EK: Yah. I am retired. I retired in '82 and I was waiting for my wife to retired. But now we are living here. We sold our house in Toledo. We are living here.

EB: Thank you so much.