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Oral history interview with Kurt Jilovsky

Summary

Kurt Jilovsky, born: 11 July 1905

Leibrach, Czechoslovakia, a German village about 40 kilometers north of Prague, north of the village was German and south was Czech

Father, Gabriel, four of his siblings and paternal grandparents born there

Mother, Elsa, from a different part of Bohemia, also a German district known for hops and cucumbers

Leibrach, 500 Jews, grandfather was religious, head of the community

Small synagogue, men and women separate,

Paternal grandfather, nice house and huge garden, in winter sat in house studying Talmud,

Mixed with Jewish and non-Jewish kids

Village people were peasants, but proud people, mostly Catholic,

Relations between Jews and non-Jews was very cordial and normal, no antisemitism while a child, later infected by Nazis

1200 people in community

Father was a landscape photographer, made picture postcards

Greta, sister, only survivor of close family, born 1908

Moved to Prague in about 1910, enrolled in government school, German school in Czech community, poor district so received free lunches, blue collar workers and poor people, headmaster was a Jew

After 1st year, he was sent to a convent school because it was best primary school in town, teachers were priests, every week the rabbi came to teach religion, most of the students were Jewish, run by a Viennese order

Spoke both German and Czech

Assimilated family, father only in synagogue once when he was married. All his siblings were non-religious, all his siblings estranged from Judaism

derogatory names used for Czechs by the Germans

Age 11 joined the Jewish Boy Scouts and remained member until age 19 or 20, became ardent Zionist but not religious

Austrian regime in Prague was very comfortable, but anti-antisemitic, did not affect them, this was pre-World War I

Father called up to army in World War I. was Army administrator, last assignment was in Odessa

Drastic shortage of food for family, mother arranged for collection and packaging of oak leaves to sell as tobacco

After primary school went to grammar school on the grounds of the convent but not religious, 8 years Latin, matriculated about 1922

Collapse of Austrian empire, handed over to Czech National Council 28 August, 1918

Jews were overwhelmingly German, active Germanizers, German school, German theater

First few weeks or months after Austrian empire collapse, Jewish businesses attacked because of Germanizers.

The Czech athletic group members were posted outside Jewish businesses to protect them

Jewish political party in Parliament continued to act although became part of Socialist party

President Masaryk, founder of Czech Republic, defended a Jewish tailor who was accused of ritual murder, about 1890s, blamed by local priests of killing a child, was a university professor at the time,

As a result of Masaryk's activism, antisemitism in Czechoslovakia was regarded as not politically correct.

Attended the Czech University of technology studying economics.

Grandfather was a teacher

His memories of two Jewish newspapers

Bar Mitzvah, modest reception at home, otherwise totally assimilated

Jewish owners of company where he first worked, manufactured tin household articles and steel drums to transport petrol and chemicals.

Late 1920s he had a beautiful life

Last job before he left Europe was with Philips radio company

Prague was ideal place for Jews,

Masaryk was first head of state to visit Jewish Palestine, in Palestine saw Dr. Berman who had left the University in Prague and went for Hebrew University

1933, did not affect him much,

went to Berlin to attend radio exposition after September 1938, went by express train, at border station saw Nazi Germany for the first time, SS men entered the train and studied his passport

before Anschluss Philips had booked two train cars to go through to Holland without stopping, Germans stopped the train

After the Anschluss asked for transfer and Philips transferred to Holland, Philips was pro-Jewish, saved Jewish senior executives

Christian and Jewish refugees from Germany

November 1938 flew to Holland, spent three months in Holland, then sent to Cyprus, January 1939, went to Prague first, on March 14, 1939 went to travel office in Prague because he wanted to leave the same day, would not change because he was a Czech citizen, then saw his passport issued in Holland so he could leave that day.

(1:07:00)

Train to Trieste, Czech counsel-general of New York on way to opening world fair, was told that Czechoslovakia no longer when arrived in Trieste

Boarded ship for Haifa, many Jews on ship

Largest German newspaper in Czechoslovakia, and the Jewish editors

Neuman (sp?), was mother's maiden name and father was a German school teacher

Arrived in Cyprus, prohibited from landing because passport issued by a country that no longer existed, told he would need to go back to Europe, policeman took steps to let him land

Spent two years in Cyprus, worked for Philips,

Mussolini declared war on Great Britain, Philips closed

Tried to Volunteer to serve with Czech army, in contact with Czech ambassador in Palestine, did not pan out

Summer of 1940, went to mountains in Cyprus and met a Jewish family from Palestine, then worked for orange grower in Cyprus

Germans occupied island of Crete, Jewish refugees in British camps on Cyprus, not far from Nicosia, Austrians and Germans had to turn over radios, cars, bicycles

Jewish community organized a register of Jewish refugees, received special passports and several hundred Jews boarded train, arrived in Haifa in 1941, soldiers in front of each bus were Palestinian Jews

Met up with family he had met in Cyprus, wife's mother was born in Palestine, later went back to Poland.

Wife was caught by the Russians, went back to Russia, caught by Germans, arrested by Gestapo, spent time in prison, was released by a German officer who had fallen in love with her, got her a job in Ministry of Occupied in East, worked as a clerk and interpreter, translate from Polish to German

Met up with a Jewish man he met in Cyprus who worked for farm and the Egyptian Jew who owned the farm (who was a personal friend of King Farouk)

Volunteered for the British army in Palestine, Jewish company commanded by an Irishman, officers British, sent to spend time in Celafant (sp?) then to Lebanon for a few days, then to Aqaba in trans-Jordan, Lawrence of Arabia had the only structure there, by then a corporal, port operating company offloading war materials from ships, then back to Palestine, went via Alexandria, Egypt, then to north Africa, still Jewish unit, were in Tabrook and told about Czech unit,

Went on as far as Tripoli, not fighting, materials transport company, then back to Palestine for Officers training school outside Haifa, three months in officers' school, only Jew,

Sent to Haifa as a 2nd lieutenant, then served in Ismaria (sp?) in Egypt, a large train station, joined British royal engineers

Needed to travel to cash office in Cairo to get first pay, received less pay than others, wrote letter to British army newspaper about his racial discrimination, letter not published but did get a check for the difference

(2:02:15)

Served in Cairo, Jews in Cairo spoke Yiddish, King Lear in Yiddish in Cairo Opera theater.

Jewish community in Cairo very welcoming to Jewish boys and others who were not Jewish who were injured, invited girls

Other than pay, was not discriminated, only Jew made him an outsider, was not a drinker so made him more outsider

1945 When serving in southern Italy, officer went out of his way to be nice, other officers were reserved with him

Munk, British minister of state in middle east, was assassinated in Cairo, killers were members of the Stern group, Jewish company was dissolved, Jewish boys were dispersed over positions in Italy, charged to take Jewish soldiers from Egypt to Italy, soldiers were traveling in steerage while he had a private cabin, the soldiers were from Palestine,

Stationed outside Rome at the railroad station, lieutenant at the time, applied for a vacancy as an army city commander for a city that was newly occupied, received a letter that did not qualify because not British born

When he served in Benghazi, sizable Jewish community with a synagogue, his Irish commander Major O'Shaughnessy, hated the British but was pro-Jewish, In Aqaba he put up a Jewish flag, changed name of company from 1039 port operating to 1039 Jewish operating company, Cairo headquarters told to strike the flag

1946, discharged from the army in Taranto, Italy when heard war ended,
(2:21:45)

International Red Cross helped him reunite with his sister

Returned home to Prague, 1946, that's when aftershock occurred

Then returned to Holland to Philips, had maintained contact with Philips

Jewish friend was a senior member of Czech Social Democratic party, in charge of National Food service

Friend was in touch with Russian embassy that were still allies,

Delegation of Jewish brigade stationed in Holland was meeting,

British soldiers in first group going back to England,

Received a lift pass to Austria at great risk, American officers gave him a lift to Prague

Dropped him off in Pilsen, Czechoslovakia,

Arrived in Holland at headquarters of Jewish Brigade

Had to get from Holland to northern Italy, went through Paris, fly from Paris to northern Italy, railway transport officer.

summer, 1946, Philips sent him to Palestine,

met wife and was married in Palestine in 1946,

went back to Holland to work for Philips

Czechoslovakia became communist, , Philips would not give him a senior position because he had a Czechoslovakian passport,

Returned to Prague, joint distribution committee came to Prague and applied for position, became purchaser for JDC,

Appointed to Paris headquarters, salary banked in dollars in New York then worked for 1 ½ years

Decided to leave Europe and go as far as possible, applied for permit to New Zealand

Went to Sydney, Australia in November 1948, wife joined him in 1948

Welcomed in Australia

Believes life was wasted because of what had happened to him he did not become he had hoped to be