HOLOCAUST TESTIMONY

OF

KURT KUPFERBERG

Transcript of Audiotaped Interview

Interviewer: Josey G. Fisher
Date: July 24 and 29, 1981

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KK - Kurt Kupferberg [interviewee]
JF - Josey Fisher, [interviewer]
Date: July 24 and 29, 1981

Tape one, side one:

JF: Could you tell us a little about your childhood, where and when you were born, and a little about your family?

KK: I am born September 21, 1907, in Berlin, Germany. My parents come from Galicia, formerly Austria, to Germany and settled in Berlin. My father was a tailor. He never was a German citizen, because, when you are in Germany, you have to be a rich per son. You have to have a certain amount of money in the banks and what you can show them that you have a lot of money and then you can be a citizen.

JF: About what year did he come to Berlin?

KK: He came in 1898, 1898, right. He came to Berlin with two children. Two girls. He settled in center city and worked as a tailor. We were never rich people, because we were a big family. Seven children.

JF: Where were you in that? Which number were you?

KK: I was number seven. There really were eight children, but one died as a little baby, so I never count this girl.

JF: What restrictions did your father find not being a citizen in Germany during those years?

KK: Not at all. He was an Austrian citizen then, you know, because Galicia was then in this time was at the Austrian part of the land. After 1918, the First World War fin ished, this piece of land became Polish. He tried to be an Austrian citizen, but it doesn't help. They told him by the Austrian consulate in Berlin, "You can do nothing; you are now a Polish citizen." So automatically we children became Polish citizens. But we had nothing to worry about. In Germany you can live, too. You can live to be 200 years old as a foreign citizen. But not a *Burger* [citizen].

JF: What kind of community did you live in, in Berlin?

KK: There is no community. Jews and Gentiles lived together. O.K., certain Jew ish quarter, but it was not big, maybe three or four streets in center city where Jews were living with kosher bakeries, butchers and so on.

JF: And this is where you were living?

KK: No, no I wasn't living there.

JF: You were living in a mixed neighborhood?

KK: Mixed neighborhood, yes.

JF: And what was your experience like? Did you experience any anti-Semitism?

KK: Yes, sure, as little boy, the other children in the school said to us, "Jew, you dirty Jew," or "Christ Killer," you know, we killed Jesus.

JF: Was this common, or did you have any non-Jewish children that were friends of yours?

KK: Yes it was common...oh sure I had Jewish boyfriends. In the school was more Gentiles than Jews. In a class of forty children, maybe six was only Jewish. Only six.

JF: And you were friends with the non-Jewish children as well, or...?

KK: I don't want to say really friends. We played together, that's all. I wasn't in their house and they didn't come to my house, but in the street we played together. Foot ball, and you know like this.

JF: What kind of school was this?

KK: Public school, or German *Gemeindeschule*. Then came the First World War. The trouble began with the food. We suffered a lot in Germany. Those poor families. Rich people could go outside in the country and buy for money different kinds of food, meat and fruit and everything. But my father was a poor guy, but he made as a tailor working for other people, he wasn't working for himself. He worked for factories and took the work home and sewed in the house. You know?

JF: Who owned those factories that he was working for? Were they Jewish or non-Jewish?

KK: Yes, I think it was Jewish factories...yes sure. They cut the pieces of material and he took them home and sewed them together, and brought them back. He didn't make much money. But with a big family we had *kaum* [barely] food to eat. And then the war was started and the ration cards came out; they had cards for bread, cards for meat, for different kinds of ration cards. And bread was the first thing...but when we bought bread, this was the first thing that was too little for the whole family. Very often, I begged my mother for a piece of bread. Butter, we never had butter in the house, we only had margarine and the margarine was terrible. Smelling. Most of the time we eat marmalade. But not really from fruit, it was made from different kinds of vegetables and sweeted it with like Sweet and Low, what you have today, saccharin. It was not a nice time, as a little boy or a little girl to grow up in a poor neighborhood. But, on the other side, when I think now about it, this saved my life in concentration camp.

JF: In what way?

KK: I was six years in concentration camp alone. From 1939 to 1945, and liberated from American Army. People came in concentration camp...some people, you know, they every time they had always rich food and good food, and they died for hunger in the concentration camp. They give us only a little piece of bread every day and a little bit water-soup and there was really nothing in there. Maybe a little bit of green stuff, or what was swimming in there, but never a piece of meat or nothing. After a couple of weeks there, they shrinked. Those people, you know, the rich people, came into the concentration

camp...on this little bit of food they couldn't live. They became[1] diarrhea and died...after a couple of weeks, they died. I was a small eater. With this little bit what my mother could give me, I was satisfied. This saved me my life in the concentration camp. That's what I think. With this little piece of bread what they give us, and the little bit water-soup like I have [not clear] one soup ladle full—I was satisfied.

JF: Your father could not fight in the army, I assume?

KK: No, my father was a Polish citizen. In the First World War they didn't take him because he was already...always when they called years...when they called the people in to serve for the army, he was always a year older.

JF: They would have taken him, though, as a Polish citizen?

KK: No, no, then he was, in the First World War he was an Austrian citizen. Austria was in war together with Germany against Russia. He went very often and said, "Gee, I want to serve for my land," but they wouldn't take him, because his year wasn't on. He was born 1864 and they never took his year. He was already a little bit too old, you know, to serve. He was a big patriot and he was a soldier in Austria...army.

JF: He did fight in Austria then?

KK: He didn't fight, he was a soldier three years. There was no war at this time and he was serving in the 1880's, whatever it was. So, coming back...this saved my life. This was a big factor. And people died like flies from the bad food. It was not nourishing. It was nothing, you could just live like, what do you call it, vegetated. Yes, like...

JF: Can you tell me a little bit about your Jewish upbringing?

KK: Oh, I went to a...my father was very conservative, Orthodox, not too crazy *fromm* [religious] but he went to *shul* [synagogue] every morning you know, in synagogue...he was a member from a synagogue, but so at home he doesn't care much only about his only son, what I am.

JF: You were the only son?

KK: I was the only son, and six girls. He cared only that I went to the *cheder*, you know to the religious school. The girls...he didn't care. He was old fashioned, he was...boys are the main thing.

JF: So you went to *cheder* then?

KK: I went to *cheder*, yes. I learned Hebrew, *davening* [praying] you know.

JF: And was your home kosher?

KK: Yes, we were kosher. We kept all the holidays, Passover, everything was clean and we had extra, extra dishes. Rosh Hashanah, and Yom Kippur, we went around, my father and mother was crying all the time and he was *davening*...

JF: Did you also speak Yiddish?

KK: No.

JF: Not at all?

[1]Perhaps bekam, meaning received or got.

KK: I went in a German school. My parents talked Yiddish to each other, to each other. But we understand, but we couldn't talk to them back in Yiddish. We talked to them in German and they answered us in Yiddish. Oh, a little bit German, sure, in time they learned a little bit German.

JF: What happened after the First World War? What happened with the change in German politics? With the start of the Republic? Did that affect you in any way?

KK: Not at all, really, not at all. The Jewish life went on nice and all the synagogues and everything was really smooth, and good. But then started the era when Hitler go up. Hitler came off. After 1918 with a couple of officers they were not satisfied with the circumstances where Germany has to pay reparations to the Allies and friends and so on. And they lost the war, you know. I don't know if you know it, in 1918, Kaiser had to quit his throne and then starts a revolution, with different kinds of soldiers with different kind of officers, *untereinander* [among themselves]. *Kapp Putsch*[2] was shooting on the streets, people died on the street.

JF: So you remember seeing this?

KK: Oh yes, yes, I saw it. Then sometimes those different kind of rifles hit in the house where we are living, behind those big doors, the house doors. We were living in a cellar at this time.

JF: Why?

KK: My father had a little tailor shop after the First World War with cleaning, repairs, alterations he made on men's clothing, most of them men's clothing. This was a cellar, it was a little store, but a couple of steps went down. So half in the earth, went down. Big windows, so you see more when you are like on the street than you are upstairs in a house, an apartment.

JF: Your father was able to work during the war? The First World War?

KK: Yes, he worked, yes. But he did never make much money. Like I said to you, other people had lot of money, had a good job that made a lot of money. And he had a big family, he couldn't afford many things that other people could afford.

JF: Did anything change for him and for the economics of the family during the 1920's?

KK: Yes, we lived a little bit better. We had more food on the table, you know, because he made better and the business went good. He made not too bad. I started after school and went eight years in the, what's it called, the *Gemeindeschule*, *Volks*-school. After eight years, my father said to me, "You have to be a tailor, too." I had nothing to say as a little boy. He give me to a master, *in die Lehre* [in an apprenticeship] and I had to learn the trade. Then started the depression to the...we had a big inflation in Germany. He said to me, "You work with me." I was jobless, I lost my job, it was a depression in Germany, in the '20s, you know. I started to work with him together. We made not too bad.

[2]A failed uprising led by Wolfgang Kapp in Berlin, 1920.

JF: Was your father at all concerned with Hitler's attempts to get into politics?

KK: Not at all. The German Jews, I am not one of them, but...because I am born there you can count me, too. They didn't care much. They said, "Ah, a *shtick mesh uginne*, Hitler, he's crazy. He never can make something...people are much too democratic and not so big anti-Semitism. We didn't take it for real that he was there and made a lot of *Unruhe* [unrest]. And then he was in prison, he came to [not clear] in many years. He was in Landsberg in a *Festung* [fortress] and there he wrote his book, *Mein Kampf*. But then started the S.A., his Stormtroopers, they, they became bigger and bigger, you know, and the *Reichstag*, and the, like the Congress here, the *Reichstag* in Berlin. Berlin is the capital of Germany, there was the *Reichstag* and many, many Congressmen became Nazis, too.

JF: What was your feeling and your father's feeling when this happened?

KK: It was very, very, we felt very bad.

JF: Were you frightened?

KK: Yes, we were frightened. Sure, then they were marching on the streets—the S.A. and sing songs about the Jewish blood has to *spritz* from the knives. But the really frightening moment came when Hitler came to power on January 30. Hindenberg was then the President from Germany and he took him in and made him *Reichschancellor*. Then it was frightening. But still the Jews said, "He won't long exist. Give him three months." The Jews in Germany, they were very secure, they said, "Nothing can happen to us," and that's why all of them, the German Jews, really went under. The rich people could go out of Germany easily in the '30s, in the first years, in the '30s. They took their money and went out.

JF: Did anyone in your family talk of leaving Germany?

KK: No. We had not the possibilities. One sister married a Polish Jew and they emigrated to the United States in 1922 or '23, but they couldn't help us. They were struggling too, here in the U.S.

JF: But there was no talk that you might want to leave, even if you could leave, financially?

KK: I would never...I never felt that I go take my skin and save myself. My parents were old people, my father was in his 70's, and my mother was in the 70's, and both of them were very sick people...with the heart. I always felt obligated to watch them, to be there...to always be there. When they get a heart attack, sometimes I have to be at night at my father's bedside, and watching them. I very often was thinking, "You can't go away and save your skin. I have to be with your parents." I felt this, you know? An inside voice said to me, "You have to be with your parents. You can't run away."

JF: Was your father involved in any way in the Jewish Council and the organization of Jews in Berlin?

KK: No, not at all.

JF: Was he affected or, at that time, you were working, were you affected by the boycott?

KK: Oh yes, sure, sure.

JF: Can you describe it to me?

KK: In 1929, I took over the business. I was twenty-two years old. I took over the business; my father couldn't see anymore. He was very bad with his eyes. See, a tailor has to see what he is doing. The needle, you know. So I took over the business, but then in 1933 when Hitler came to power, the first thing what he did...his soldiers, you know, the S.A. put on all the Jewish stores a big sign with swastikas, "*Jude*, *Jude*." Jew, Jew, Jew. In the beginning of April 1933, a boycott started against Jewish businesses. Not that they threw stones in the windows, only they marked all Jewish doors with "Jew, Jew, don't buy by Jews."

JF: This was on your shop?

KK: Mine store too.

JF: Then what happened?

KK: A big S.A. man in uniform had a big sign around his neck here with a big sign "Don't buy by Jews."

JF: Did he put that on your store?

KK: No, no, no. On my store he only put up a big swastika on the window, with white chalk or whatever. But the trouble was one thing—in this house where I had my store and I was living in the back of the store. Upstairs on the third floor was living a S.A. *Sturmfü hrer* running around in uniform. He watched Christian people, when they go into mine store, and bring me some work, you know. When they came out, he warned them if they do this again they gonna be sorry for, you know. So then the Christian customers, one after the other, went away. Then my business lost maybe 90 percent.

JF: The first S.A. man you described with the sign, did he stand outside the door?

KK: Outside the door. Front of the door. Let nobody go in.

JF: How long did he do that?

KK: A whole day.

JF: The day of the boycott.

KK: The day, one day.

JF: And how long did the S.A. man live in your building, stop the Christians from coming in?

KK: Always, he always was staying there.

JF: From that point on?

KK: He was leaning out of this window from his apartment and watched people.

JF: How long did that go on? From the time of the boycott?

KK: All the years.

JF: Starting at the time from the boycott?

KK: Yes.

JF: Starting in 1933.

KK: '33.

JF: And going on?

KK: This is the difference between Jews in Germany and Jews from Poland, that you interview every day, they didn't know then nothing from Hitler. They lived in a freedom that nobody was doing something to them. They started 1940 when Hitler went into Poland, the whole trouble.

JF: Your problems then, you feel, started the day of the boycott?

KK: Really, sure, when Hitler came to power.

JF: What happened after that? Your business fell off 90%.

KK: Ninety percent. Only a couple of Jewish customers left. Then many Jews left the country, too. People with money left the country.

JF: And at this point, you were the only child at home with your parents?

KK: I was the only child home with my parents and my younger sister.

JF: There was a sister younger than you?

KK: Yes, yes.

JF: One child was younger than you.

KK: Yes, yes.

JF: And you felt you didn't want to leave because you were responsible for your parents?

KK: Yes. One day came a policeman to our house and said to my father, he has to come to the police station.

JF: When was this?

KK: It must be 1938, in the beginning of 1938. So my father went with his wife, my mother, and a couple of sisters. I wasn't there. I wasn't there. I know now I wasn't there. Only he went. At the police station they told him, "I wanna give you the best advice...leave this country. Go away." So my father said to the police officer, "Where should I go? I am 72 years old, *fast* [almost] blind, and can hardly walk." He walked with a cane. "I can't go nowhere." "I beg you to"...one was not a...Nazi, the police officer (all was not Nazi) he said, "I beg you try to go out from Germany. I warn you."

JF: Why did this officer warn your father? Why did he take him aside, do you think?

KK: Because he was a human being.

JF: Did he know him personally?

KK: No, no. Maybe he knows my father, but my father doesn't know him.

JF: Now, can we backtrack a little bit before this instance, to 1935 and the Nuremberg Laws?

KK: Yes.

JF: Can you tell me what happened, how you experienced that period of time?

KK: I tell you the truth, this doesn't affect me. I wasn't running around with Christian girls. The Nuremberg Laws were only affected Jews who were, or Christians who

went together with Jews, or they tried to get married or what...This was then a law that Jews can't mary Christians and opposite, too, that Christians can't marry Jews. If they had sex, and the Jewish partner got caught, became the...death *strafe* [punishment].

JF: So you don't feel that the Nuremberg Laws affected you that much?

KK: Not me, not me. I was much too Jewish to go with Christian girls in this time. I never do this.

JF: Did you feel restricted at all in your practicing Judaism during those years?

KK: Not at all.

JF: There was no effect on your religious practice.

KK: No, not at all.

JF: What happened with your business...how did you support yourself with the decrease in your clientele?

KK: I made hardly a living. The expenses were not big. I had to pay the rent, but I was living there. I had to be there anyhow, I couldn't move to another place.

JF: You rented the basement floor of this building?

KK: Yes.

JF: And your shop was in the front and your living quarters were in the back, and the S.A. man was on the third floor.

KK: Yes.

JF: And were there other Jewish families or Christian families in...?

Tape one, side two:

JF: Can you tell me, then, what else changed for you before 1938? What else did you notice, what other experiences did you have in Berlin during those years?

KK: One sister married, married sister with three children, one was already married. They emigrated to South America, in 1935. My father was hollering to his son-in-law, "Are you crazy, [we are doing all right here][3] you can live here, nobody bothers you much," he said. But the trouble was the Jewish children couldn't go more to the Christian schools. This was a law. The Nuremberg Laws, I think. Jewish children can't go with Christian children together in one school. They had Jewish schools. There had to build Jewish schools. So he said, "If mine child can't go to the school anymore, I have to leave the country. If he has no education anymore, I have to go." So he sold his business in 1935 and went to Rio de Janeiro.

JF: So this was the second sister of yours that had gone?

KK: Yes, this was the second sister. Two sisters were married to Christians, had Christian husbands.

JF: Did they convert?

KK: No, no, no. It was not necessary. They were not married in a church. They married only for the law, that's all. So all the friends of mine went away, but I said to myself, "You can't go nowhere." Till one day, there came out a law that all Polish Jews have to leave the country. So, I didn't care much. I didn't went away. I had to stay with my parents. It was my obligation to stay with my parents.

JF: Did no one check to see if you were allowed to stay in the country?

KK: Then one morning, in the 5 o'clock in the morning, was a knock on the door. The *Gestapo* came into my house. We were all in the beds. "Take on your clothing and let's go." So, it's only my father and me. We were only two men. They didn't said nothing to my mother, or to my sister. Only my father and me. I started to holler. I said, "What you want from my old father, he can't go nowhere, he's half blind and he can hardly walk. He's 72 years old." He wants to hit me because I argued with him. So we put on our clothing. They didn't say nothing, what's going to be, or what, what they have in mind with us or say, "Take money with you, or take a piece of luggage with clothing..." Nothing. We went to the police station and there were big trucks and we saw hundreds of hundreds of Jewish people, men. They were putting them on trucks and brought us all in a big *Kaserne* [barracks]. Do you know what a *Kaserne* is? A *Kaserne* is big buildings where soldiers were living. Thousand soldiers.

JF: Like barracks.

[3]In this and other instances, lengthy German phrases have been omitted and only the English translation appears in brackets.

KK: Barracks, like barracks, but this was not barracks, was big buildings, three and four floors high.

JF: This was in Berlin.

KK: In Berlin, yes. Wasn't used anymore for soldiers, was empty.

JF: When was this?

KK: This was October 28, 1938. And we heard they were gonna bring us all, that was all Polish citizen what we were living there for years and years in Germany, were born there, some of them, like me, but we all had Polish passports. And we heard that they were going to bring us to Poland. Force us, and bring us to Poland. We didn't know then that in other cities of Germany, and other little towns, or what, they took whole families and throw them to the Polish border. Women, with little babies on the arm, and pregnant women, everybody from whole family. So in Berlin, we were all in a big place behind the *Kaserne* and I said to myself, "You have to do something. I can't take...my father can't do this...and go with..." I had the feeling that he wouldn't stand the transport to the border.

JF: You knew at this point what they were going to do?

KK: Yes, yes, we knew that they bring us to Poland. But I knew my father wouldn't [withstand]...this transport. He wouldn't live through this. So I went from one officer to others. Were police, no S.S. nor S.A., only police. And I went from one officer to another and no success. I said, "Please, can you leave my father go, let my father go home. I think he wouldn't stand this travelling on this [not clear]." Then I went to a higher police officer, I thought it was a higher one, and I said to him, "Can I talk to you?" He said, "O.K." I said, "My father is *fast* [almost] blind...he can hardly walk. Is it possible you can let him free, that he can go home?" So he said to me, "Where is your father?" I said, "I bring him to you." I went and brought my father to him, and he looked at him, like this, as he could see he was 74 years old, and he said to another policeman, "Take this man to a doctor." And I saw my father...I saw him no more. He went away. I said, "Daddy, go," I was happy. I had the feeling that he was going to be saved. Then they brought us in trains to the Polish border, to the border town. German border town.

JF: You said there were trucks, you went...

KK: Yes, first trucks that brought us and trucks to the station, to the train station. They put us in the trains...

JF: Were you able to take anything with you at all?

KK: I had nothing. They didn't say nothing to us when they took us from home. In other towns, they had luggages. Money and everything. I had in my pants pocket, maybe three German marks, or what. They brought us to the border town and it was already night. Nighttime. We had nothing in our mouth to eat, nothing. From the morning 5 o'clock they took us, from the bed we had nothing to eat. From the train, they let us out of the train, and everybody has to give up his money, what he has, they took everything away. Then the S.S. took over. No more police, S.S. with rifles, bayonettes on top.

JF: This was at the border town, in Germany; do you remember the name of it by any chance?

KK: Yes, Benchin, Benchin, B-E-N-T-S-S-H-E-E-N.[4] And this train was full with men, women and children from other stops, they stopped in other towns before they went to the border; from all sides came people and then in the train.

JF: What kind of trains were these?

KK: Regular personal trains.

JF: Passenger trains.

KK: Normal trains. They took our money away, only ten marks, everybody has to have ten marks, not more. The rest of the money they took away. Some S.S. men rifled the people, and some S.S. men took watches away, so really, stealing. And then they brought us outside the train station, and we came in a big wood. And they started to hit us over the heads we should run. The S.S. yes. Hit us. Old people fell, lost all their luggage, because when they hit you over the head you have to go up and run again, or they would hit you...so I was happy I had my father not with me. I was so happy. I was young, I could run. So in a little while, they said to us, "You see the little light there in the back in the woods, this is your homeland. You go there, then you are in your homeland. Don't come back, if you come back we shoot you." So we went through the woods to the little light and there was a little border house, a little house only. And we went in there, and there was a Polish border guard. We showed him our passports. "We are Polish citizens and the S.S. told us we have to go to Poland." And he said, "Back to Hitler, back to Hitler." The Polish guard, he don't want to know nothing. "Back to Hitler." And I said...not only I said, there were hundreds of people...many trains came and we said, "You have to let us through to the first town." Then we can't stay here and it starts to rain in the woods. "No, no," he didn't let us through. Came another *Grenz* [border] guard with a rifle and we had to stay there the whole night. And the rain was going down and the people were laying there in the woods. Women with little children, with babies. It was terrible. So I had the first taste from my homeland, so to say. In the morning he went into town and he brought a lot of police, Polish police with him, and they marched us into town. Not with trucks...we had to walk. We had to walk, it was maybe one-half hours or three-quarter hours. In this Polish town, this border town, the name is Borshin, in Polish. It was my German, the town was before German, and after the First World War it became Polish.

JF: How do you spell the name?

KK: Sporshin, in Deutsch Benchin, in Polish, Spascyn,[5] I think. So they brought us to big horse stables. It was a little bit outside of town. There were big horse stables, empty horse stables, with a lot of straw inside, without windows, only windows were only

[4]This may be Bendzin, or Bedzin, in Poland.

[5]Zbonszyn

on the big doors. We had to march in and there we should lay there. The Polish citizen come over—that was the reception. After three days, a big truck came on with bread. They threw this bread down from the truck to us.

JF: This was the first food?

KK: The first food, a piece of bread. Dry bread. And water, water we had from a well, we had to pump. And then the Jewish organizations in Poznan—this may be 50 kilometers away or what—bring food. The life got to be little bit like normal, normalized. Still we are living in the straw, you know, laying there, but that's all, we had food and we could rest, that's all.

JF: How many people do you think were there?

KK: Around I think about 500 people. Then life got a little bit normalized because we, they put some people in schools. Some people had became [got] monies suddenly from the U.S. or what.

JF: They got money?

KK: Yes, from relatives. Then everybody knew then what happened to those people and they sent money to them. And I got money from my sister in the U.S. and the dollar was very good. I became [got]...lots of *zlotys*...you know the Polish money.

JF: How did your sister find out where you were?

KK: My, I think, my mother and the other sisters told them what happened, yes. They sent letters to the U.S. and told them what happened, to their brother.

JF: Were you able to get any letters from your mother?

KK: Yes, sure, sure. They could send us letters. Not the first couple of weeks, but then we find out what happened in between in Germany.

JF: What did you find out?

KK: One of the Polish boys[6] in Paris heard that their parents in Hanover, got, they throw them out to Poland. And he went to the German consulate and protested there. And he wants to talk to one of the higher officers there. And he shoot one of those high officers, Von Rath. I don't know if you heard about it. This was a Polish-Jewish boy, Grynszpan. And this was the *Anlass* [cause] for the Nazis to start the whole thing against the Jews in Germany. They start to burn all the synagogues in Germany and my wife knows the one, she was living there as a young girl. Burned all the synagogues, *plü ndert* [pillaged] Jewish homes, tear everything apart. The S.A. went into the houses, in the apartments, slit with knives, everything, sofas, pictures and everything, tore everything down. Until then the real *tsorris* [trouble] started.

JF: This was the *Kristallnacht*.

KK: This was the *Kristallnacht*. When you say the word *Kristallnacht*, you can't think nothing. This word means really practically nothing. The "Night of the Broken Glass," you can say. This doesn't say that the synagogues burned with people in there with

[6]Herschel Grynszpan.

the *Shamosen* [caretakers]. The people were living there in the synagogues...some guards, the *shamus*, you know...they burned everything down.

JF: What happened to your mother and sister during that time? Were you able to hear exactly what happened to them?

KK: I didn't hear nothing from them, nothing. We heard it only over the radio. Over the radio, we heard what happened in Germany. My mother died then.

JF: Your mother died?

KK: My mother died. She was—I think she died like of a broken heart. Because I was the only son...she was only thinking of me all the time.

JF: When did you find out she died?

KK: I find it out, my sisters wrote me a letter.

JF: During this time that you were in this town?

KK: Yes, yes. And I wrote them, too. My address where I was.

JF: How long after you had left Germany was this do you think?

KK: She died *erev Pesach* [before Passover], March, 1939. I was then around five months away from home. Still there in Zbonszyn. We couldn't go nowhere. If you want to go to the train station, where Polish border guards...*gendarmerie*...didn't let you go nowhere. The streets outside, outside the town...you couldn't go nowhere...were all guarded constantly.

JF: Were you able to work at all in that town?

KK: Work? Doing something? No.

JF: The food that you had was supplied by the Jewish committee in Poznan.

KK: Yes, and then afterwards, many people got money from their relatives, and they lived from the money that they got. It wasn't too bad. Only that you couldn't go back to Poland. Couldn't go in the land. I wasn't very anxious to go to Poland anyhow, because I couldn't speak one word Polish. I was like handicapped, you know. But they talked to me, I didn't understand. This was a border town where many Germany were living too, from years before. So, it was not too bad. Then came out a law that Jews who left Germany and had a business there can come back for a certain time to Germany to liquidate their businesses. In a sense, they took us out of the beds, we couldn't do nothing and go. So we can come back for a certain time to liquidate everything.

JF: When was this?

KK: This was around May, 1939. So I said, "Here, I am one of them." They took my passport away and I became [received] another passport. A white passport. The color was white, and when you open it up, it was a picture of me. Nationality: *Jude*. They were worser than the Germans already. This wasn't in Germany then. Was it in Germany in '38?

JF: The Poles issued this passport to you?

KK: Yes, I am a Jew. I am not a Pole, I am only a Jew. And I had to leave the country and never can come back, stand [stated] in the passport. The passport is guilty[7] only a couple months or what. Then I went with this passport to the station and I could go to Germany back. Back to Berlin, my father, I saw my father. I saved him the life, for couple of lousy years in Germany. It was '43 when they took him and poisoned him with gas. I saved him five years, five years. So I came back to Germany; my sister was still there. She was married in between to a Jewish man. This Jewish man was up when the synagogues was burning. He was a German Jew. They arrested a lot of German Jews. Hundreds of thousands and sent them to the concentration camps. He knows something about it and he run away to Holland over the Dutch border to Holland. And she was waiting that something happened to him that she could go to him. So one day she then told her girlfriend, a German Jew, too, what was there in Holland. They went to the *Holl and ish* border—you know what *Hollandish* is, Netherland, to the Netherland border and tried to smuggle through. But the *Hollandish Grenz* [border] police catch them and gave them back to the S.S. So they arrested my sister and the other girl, maybe others, I don't know, and brought them to a town called Hanover, I think, I'm not exactly sure. This is not too important, anyhow. And she was six weeks there in a prison, they didn't know what to do with her, and they sent them back to their parents. So when I came back to Berlin—this was around June or July of 1939—suddenly, maybe that was the next day, I got a letter from the American General Consulate in Berlin, I should come with $10 to get my visa for the United States. I had to get a doctor's *Attest* [certificate] that I'm all right. I have to bring ten dollars for the visa. I was happy. But, the date when I should come was September 21, 1939. I said, My God, what do you do [till then]? You can't stay in Ger many, stated in passport, only short time you can be there. To Poland you can't go back because they wouldn't let you in, so I run to the American Consulate in Berlin, American General Consulate. Hundreds of people were there, trying to get out of Germany. Jews, Jewish people. I stand in line, I tried to cry, and said, "Here's my Polish passport what they give me in Poland. I can't stay here in Germany. I have to leave the country." And then on September 1st, the war started. The World War against Poland, first against Poland. I begged him, "Please put this date [ahead] for a little bit earlier. Give me an earlier date so that I can have my visa in the *Pass* [passport] and then I'm feel good when I have my visa and *Pass*, then I am [not clear] I go out of the country." Nothing helped. I begged them. He was stone faced, this American, *Beamter* [official]. "You come when you're told to come. September 21st is your date, not one day earlier. There are hundreds of other people before you that want to go out."

JF: This was an American, that man was an American?

KK: Sure, a consular officer. It doesn't help me. I came home whining, crying. Maybe four days later, knocks on the door, in the morning, 5 o'clock, I had the feeling right

[7]Perhaps, gü ltig [valid].

away what it is. The Gestapo again. "Put on your clothes, let's go." They didn't touch my father, only me. On the same afternoon, I was already in concentration camp.

JF: This was July...September?

KK: This was September 13, 1939. I came to Sachsenhausen. This is a little...this is a concentration camp. The *Ort* [place] is Oranienburg. Before, the name was Orianienburg. Concentration camp Oranienburg. Then they changed it to Sachsenhausen.

JF: How did you get to Sachsenhausen?

KK: They put us in trains, it was a train load full with prisoners. I was thinking I'm the only one, but then they were, hundreds other people. It was a regular train, regular passenger train. The only thing was we had to lay on the floor. That nobody could see us when other train would pass this train, they couldn't look in. There is nothing to see. They are all laying on the floor and this was all S.S. already. And pilfered us. S.S. took everything that we had, something on us that was *wertvoll* [valuable] good, good pillows, pencils, you know, gold, some gold pencils, pens, watches, took everything we...mine only had a regular *blechene* [tin] watch. They took my watch, they took it. Then we came on to this town and we had to march to the camp. A couple of kilometers away. When we marched through the town, we had to keep our hands behind our head like this and we had to march. It was a hot, very hot day. The people, they are laying out the windows, you know, the people from the town, laying at the window. "What, the Jews...they are Jews. Hit them, kill them, when you wanna give them food, kill them first!" That was the "good German"...