HOLOCAUST TESTIMONY

OF

BERTRAM KORNFELD

Transcript of Audiotaped Interview

Interviewer: Philip G. Solomon
Date: March 7, 1994

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BK - Bertram Kornfeld [interviewee]
PS - Philip G. Solomon [interviewer]
Date: March 7, 1994

Tape one, side one:

PS: This is Phil Solomon of the Holocaust Oral History Archive of Gratz College, interviewing Mr. Bertram Kornfeld. The date is March 7th, 1994. Mr. Kornfeld, can you please give us your, the date and place of birth?

BK: Yes. I was born February 1st, 1925, Vienna, Austria.

PS: Can you give us the names of your parents? Mother? Father?

BK: My father's name was Ernest. My mother's Margaret. [unclear]

PS: Are, mother's maiden name if possible?

BK: Mother's maiden name was Gottfried. And she was born in Vienna. My father was born in a little town in Czechoslovakia.

PS: Do you know if any, your father or any members of your family had ever served in the military? German or Austrian?

BK: I don't think so. Oh but, yes, as a matter of fact. I had an uncle, my mother's brother, served in the Austrian Army. And then there were distant cousins who served.

PS: Did that have any bearing at all on the treatment, do you know, after the *Anschluss* in Austria?

BK: No, fortunately for us, the uncle who had served in the army...

PS: Oh...

BK: …we think was slightly shell-shocked, and he left Austria immediately after the First World War and came to America. That was our fortune, because was over here.

PS: He went, oh, he was here prior to...

BK: Yeah, he came here in 1920 or so.

PS: Oh, oh, so that was long before the ascension of Hitler to the...

BK: Well, of course.

PS: …rise in power, yeah.

BK: Yeah. Right.

PS: Do you know much, do you recall much of your parents' religious affiliations?

BK: Well, my parents were not affiliated. My grandfather was, and he belonged to the main temple in Vienna, whatever the name was.

PS: Do you have religious training, such as bar mitzvah or...

BK: Oh yes.

PS: Yeah.

BK: Yeah. I was bar mitzvahed in Vienna just before the...

PS: Yeah.

BK: The *Anschluss*.

PS: Did you have many friends or associates and schoolmates in the non-Jewish community?

BK: Yes, because the school I went to, I don't think there were too many Jews.

PS: But you did have. Were the, you had ple-, normal pleasant relations with non-Jewish friends?

BK: Oh very much so.

PS: Were these relationships prior to your leaving Austria affected at all by what evolved starting in, let's see, starting in, as Chanc-, when Hitler became Chancellor in 1933? You--at that time, you were only...

BK: Well, I was only eight years old, yeah.

PS: Yeah, yeah. By the Nuremberg Laws in 1935?

BK: Well that didn't affect Austria until 193-...

PS: Yeah. You were still only...

BK: Eight. [1938]

PS: You were about ten...

BK: Yeah.

PS: About ten years old then.

BK: Well, in '38 I was 13.

PS: Yeah. Did you, when you first became aware of the hazardous future of the Jewish people in Germany and German-occupied territories, do you recall when you first became aware of the hazards or [unclear].

BK: The hazards existed in Austria long before Hitler.

PS: Yeah.

BK: And antisemitism was quite evident in Vienna. I personally never felt much, but I read about it, and I knew about it. It was there. And history tells you that Austria was not overrun in March of '38. It started long before...

PS: Yeah.

BK: That Hitler really prepared, it was the fifth column really in Vienna particularly.

PS: Mr. Kornfeld, as young as you were at that time, do you recall any of the events leading up to the decision of your family to leave Germany?

BK: Oh, very much so...

PS: Austria?

BK: Yes. Of course my father died in 1935.

PS: Oh.

BK: And the Depression hit us quite hard. His business went bankrupt just before he died, and my mother had to go to work as a secretary. And there's no doubt about it, we had financial problems. [unclear] just to make ends meet.

PS: Then it was you and your mother and...

BK: And my sister.

PS: Siblings? One sister.

BK: One sister, right.

PS: Do you recall how and when they reached the decision to leave Austria? The, that is the possibilities to migrate to the United States.

BK: I would say the day after Hitler came.

PS: And when, when did that actually become a reality?

BK: It became a reality in August of 1938. We were one of the lucky ones who...

PS: One of the late...

BK: Got out early.

PS: The late ones.

BK: Well, the early ones. Most people didn't get out.

PS: Oh, I mean of those...

BK: Didn't get out, [unclear].

PS: …who were fortunate to get out.

BK: Right.

PS: Even though you recognized the future dangers of remaining in Germany...

BK: Austria.

PS: …and the threats, did you ever in your wildest imagination think that it could become the Holocaust, a total Holocaust?

BK: Yes. Total, nobody could imagine at that point.

PS: Yeah.

BK: However, we knew about it, about some of the, some of the threats, some of the executions. My mother worked for a law firm. There were two lawyers. One lawyer, his name was Erlich, I think, was the president of the Vienna Jewish Community Council. And I believe, I think it was a week after Hitler came, the SS troops came into her office, dragged Mr. Erlich out, and he was never seen again.

PS: And that was 1938?

BK: '38.

PS: '38.

BK: That was in late March of '38.

PS: Did his family ever receive any kind of...

BK: The notice that they received was that he was executed.

PS: Oh.

BK: In other words that was before the concentration camps, but because of his position in Vienna...

PS: Do you know where? Did it--I know quite a number have stated that when they received the death certificate it gave for instance like Mauthausen...

BK: Yeah. I don't know.

PS: Yeah.

BK: This happened so, so quickly. They said that he was taken to Dachau, but Dachau at that time was not...

PS: No.

BK: …a major extermination camp.

PS: Mauthau-, I believe Mauthausen was.[1] And that was fairly close to...

BK: That's right.

PS: …Vienna.

BK: Yeah, it could have been there.

PS: Do, in your transport and your travels to the United States, did you receive assistance from any agencies or any family in the United States?

BK: Yes, well my uncle who...

PS: Yeah.

BK: …signed for...

PS: He...

BK: …to come over here.

PS: And then there was as far as you know not too much of a problem, you came within your, the quota and...

BK: We came within the, on the quota. We had the visa, and really had no problem at all leaving. Except we left the family there, you know, my uncle.

PS: It was your mother and sister and yourself.

BK: That's right. The three of us.

PS: And your...

BK: It was, the things you recall. We took the train. My uncle saw us off at the train. We didn't expect to see him ever again. My grandfather, we never expected to see again. We took the train to the--for some reason she booked, we booked on the German, North German Lloyd, on the Bremen, which was no problem at all. When we got to Bremen, it was an overnight ride, and my mother--we had to stay at a hotel somewhere. My mother walked up to somebody on the street and asked, "Is there any place, any hotel that takes Jews?" And the man was astounded. He said, "What do you mean? We all take anybody." Now of course this was...

PS: Yeah.

BK: A few months later all hell broke loose.

PS: Yeah. Well the Nuremberg Laws were, well that was in '30, 1935 [Nuremburg Laws were issued in 1935.].

BK: Right...

PS: So this was...

BK: But Bremen was [unclear].

PS: Yeah, I heard [unclear].

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[1] Mauthausen Concentration Camp established August 8, 1938. Located approximately two hour train ride from Vienna.

BK: Exception rather than...

PS: Yeah, I heard that Berlin also was...

BK: Very possible.

PS: That there were many Jews...

BK: Yeah.

PS: I [unclear] who...

BK: And we got on the boat, and you would have thought it was, you know, the *Queen Elizabeth*, you know, it could have been the same thing, the *Queen Mary* at the time.

PS: On the trip, your transocean journey, were you restricted as Jews?

BK: Not...

PS: To...

BK: …not at all.

PS: As far as you recall, you mingled and...

BK: As far as I know we mingled, well, you know, as kids we didn't talk to too many people but...

PS: Yeah.

BK: I think we all got seasick the same as everybody else did.

PS: So, same pills, same...

BK: There was no discrimination there!

PS: Now you arrived at, in the United States, Mr. Kornfeld, about what date was that, do you recall?

BK: August 22nd.

PS: And your...

BK: 1938.

PS: 1938.

BK: Yeah.

PS: And you, your destination was Philadelphia?

BK: That's right.

PS: Due to the fact...

BK: We arrived in New York and...

PS: Yeah.

BK: My uncle picked us up.

PS: Yeah. Your uncle who was at that time the uncle who left Germany in the '20s?

BK: Austria, yes.

PS: Austria. And at that time was residing in Philadelphia?

BK: In the Philadelphia area.

PS: And you settled in Philadelphia in what, what area?

BK: We wound up in Logan, because my mother found a job as housekeeper there.

PS: The uncle was living in Logan also?

BK: No, no, my uncle lived somewhere outside of Philadelphia.

PS: I--your earliest recollections and experiences on your arrival into Philadelphia, the U.S., and specifically Logan, can you sort of reminisce a little bit about your impressions as a young boy, your experiences, your schooling?

BK: Well you have to remember that naturally we were all delighted to be here.

PS: Yeah.

BK: And no matter how strange the country might have been at that time, I was here for two days and school started, maybe a week and, it seems like two days, and the kids in school were just wonderful. They all tried to help the refugee boy.

PS: Yeah.

BK: And they took me to their homes after school. The parents fed me milk and cookies. And they took me to the park and to play football, what they called football, what was totally strange to me, but, since I was used to playing soccer in Vienna. But, I suppose it only took about a week or two before I became part, adjusted to the school.

PS: Yeah.

BK: I was very fortunate that the family I lived with were American Scottish people, elderly people. I had to speak English. The first two weeks I don't think I said a word to them, but then I got...

PS: Little by little...

BK: Little by little and after about six months I was doing pretty well.

PS: Yeah. In the meantime, though, your relationship with your, with those, your playmates, your schoolmates and playmates, were you able to converse to any meaningful degree?

BK: It worked out. It worked very well. For some reason we communicated and...

PS: Was, were you knowledgeable in Yiddish?

BK: Not at all.

PS: Oh.

BK: No, but there was one lady at [Jay] Cooke Junior High who helped me. She was the German teacher, and she took me under her wings and she helped me. And the other teachers helped, so...

PS: Yeah.

BK: They were...

PS: In addition to that help, did you have any formal transition in your education from Germany to English?

BK: No.

PS: Any extra tutoring or classes?

BK: They gave, what they did it for me at Cooke was, they gave me speech classes.

PS: Oh. That was good.

BK: And, which certainly helped. And the rest of it was just plug at it and work at it.

PS: In the meantime you were hearing more and more of what later became known as the Holocaust.

BK: Well we, we were only here for two months before November...

PS: Yeah.

BK: Of '39. Of '38, I'm sorry. See, *Kristallnacht* was...

PS: Yeah.

BK: Well, yeah, it was '38.

PS: Yeah, '38. Yeah.

BK: And that became reasonably well-known. My grandfather and my uncle were still living in Vienna at the time, and they came here just shortly right after that. So, we knew quite a bit. We also knew that my uncle, my mother's brother, and my grandfather were the only ones who got out of Vienna alive, of the family.

PS: Were you in communication with the rest of your family, so, it made all communication with any of your family in Austria or Germany?

BK: Oh, we were very much in communication. The mail service still worked…

PS: Yeah.

BK: …in '38 and '39. And, as a matter of fact we want to have some of my other relatives come here, but there was no way for them to get out. Most of them disappeared after '39.

PS: Yeah. I was just going to ask you if there was any point in time that communication ceased, indicating that...

BK: I would say the end of 1939. I don't think we heard from anybody after that.

PS: You didn't receive any word of where they--when they were transported out of Vienna?

BK: Only after the war. The Red Cross told us where they went.

PS: But all those years, from say 1939 to 1944...

BK: [unclear] we had no idea, except that we were quite sure they were gone.

PS: Yeah. Now then your educa-, your general education continued? You were what about...

BK: Well I was 13-and-a-half when I came here.

PS: You continued in junior high, then it was Cooke Junior High School.

BK: Cooke Junior High, right.

PS: And then to high school?

BK: No, I went to vocational school.

PS: Oh I...

BK: For one main reason. First I like to work with my hands.

PS: Yeah.

BK: But, the only choice we had was to get a job as soon as possible, and nothing like learning a trade.

PS: You graduated vocational school then in what year?

BK: Yeah.

PS: It would be...

BK: This was '43.

PS: And you entered the army at what...

BK: I entered the army in, it's exactly 50 years ago, in February of '44.

PS: So you, did you, prior to your going into the army, did you spend any time say in college after your high school?

BK: Not at all, no.

PS: Oh.

BK: I went right to work.

PS: Right, yeah. And then into the army in 19-...

BK: In '44.

PS: …'44. At that time, Mr. Kornfeld, did you--you were drafted. What was the situation? Were you, did you become a citizen prior to entering...

BK: No, as a matter of fact, the way they worked it was, first of all, I worked in a machine shop. And we were well-trained machinists. So I had a six-month deferment. And that's why I didn't go in until I was...

PS: Yeah.

BK: …almost 19. Otherwise I would have gone in when I was 18 or 18-and-a-half I guess.

PS: Yeah.

BK: No, my, because of my training, the army put me in a special category. I was an armour artificer, which, you want to know what that is? I was trained to repair rifles.

PS: Oh.

BK: Which did me no good at all once we got into combat, because I was an infantry man basically.

PS: Yeah. So when you...

BK: When I went to the army, I don't know if they could have gotten me another deferment, but I was really tired of everybody else having gone in, and I was still here. So I didn't ask for a deferment again. They probably couldn't have gotten it anyway. And, you know, I was drafted.

PS: I just want to...

BK: Regarding your question of citizenship, I went through basic training as an alien. And when we were finished basic training in Texas, those of us who were not citizens were made citizens automatically, if the five-year requirement was waived. And I became a citizen in Fort Worth, Texas.

PS: As a soldier in the United States Army.

BK: As a soldier in the army, yes. Which made me eligible to go...

PS: Yeah.

BK: …overseas.

PS: Your family, your mother and sister became citizens eventually?

BK: Oh yes. Right, as soon as the five-year limit was up.

PS: So you then were drafted into the army and as so many others, were anxious really to get in. What, now that was in 1944.

BK: '44, right.

PS: Do you remember the date about?

BK: Yes. February 12th is when I went in.

PS: Oh that was then well before D-Day.

BK: Oh yes.

PS: The invasion of...

BK: Yes.

PS: The Allies in Normandy.

BK: As a matter of fact, when we were finished with basic training, most of my colleagues were sent right overseas as replacements, because June 6th was D-Day and we were finished basic training I think it was a week later. And most of them went right over. But because I was not a citizen, and [unclear].

PS: Oh, they actually couldn't send you over...

BK: They couldn't send me over.

PS: Oh, I thought you were jo-, you said it smiling.

BK: No, no, no. They did not send anybody overseas...

PS: Oh.

BK: …who was not a citizen. Because the Germans could have, you know, shot us and there would have been no protection whatsoever…

PS: Sure, yeah.

BK: …you know, if they, if we fell into their hands. But, most of my buddies from basic training went right over. And I was lucky because of that two-day interval, my orders came through to go to Indiana and join the 106th Division. And, whether I was fortunate or not, I don't know but...

PS: Well, but at this late date I think we can all consider it very, very fortunate.

BK: Well.

PS: In that you--we're here speaking about it. What part, the 106th infantry division, what, what unit were you involved in?

BK: Well, I was in the 423rd Battalion.

PS: Right.

BK: Or whatever, [unclear].

PS: In any kind of specialty?

BK: No, my specialty was as armour artificer, which every infantry…

PS: Oh, you did say...

BK: …unit had to have, somebody who could repair rifles.

PS: Yeah.

BK: Don't ask me about rifles today. I don't know the first thing about them. I'm not sure how much I knew then, but I, like all of us, we could take rifles apart in our sleep, you know. But, once we were getting ready to be shipped out, I was just a plain infantry man. And we left the States in October of '44. My whole unit went to England, and we were there for about a week, and then we were shipped overseas, over...

PS: Oh for...

BK: …across the Channel and to France. And we were told we were moving into a very quiet sector where nothing has happened and we're the replacement for some outfit. I don't remember what it was. It might even have been the 28th Division, the Keystone.

PS: Yeah, the Keystone.

BK: And we were there stationed in a town called Saint-Vith in Belgium. And on December 16th, all hell broke loose. Up until that point it was quiet. It was just a matter of going for reconnaissance.

PS: Yes.

BK: And that's...

PS: That was December 16th. Now, between the time you landed in France on the European continent, how many weeks or months were you in combat prior to the...

BK: Prior to the Bulge? I can't really say we were in combat, because all we did was reconnaissance. We met Germans. We saw them. There was never a shot fired, and we retreated. You know, went back home. We said, you know, we found 'em. That's [unclear].

PS: You were in a reconnaissance company?

BK: No, not a reconnaissance company, no. Just...

PS: The plain infantry.

BK: …plain infantry outfit, yes.

PS: And yet you were still the specialist in the repair...

BK: Well, that didn't mean anything anymore.

PS: Oh. Oh that ceased and you were a rifleman.

BK: Right.

PS: Yes. The--how, as you advanced through France, were you aware at that time of any, well did you see any evidence of atrocities by the Germans against the French people?

BK: No.

PS: Or...

BK: The only thing we know, we landed in La Havre, which was about two days after La Havre was liberated. The people of La Havre were not happy to see us at all, because all they knew was that the Americans bombed their town. And, they threw water

at us. They spit out the windows as we marched through. And, but that's, that's the only recollection I have of any unpleasant reception.

PS: But no evidence of German atrocities against the...

BK: None.

PS: During [unclear].

BK: The only thing I remember was when we first got to Belgium, I was the company interpreter since I spoke German. The officers called me over one day and said, "We want you to go in town and get some liquor." And, I went in town, spoke German to them. They refused to understand.

PS: Ohhhh!

BK: Because they were a little bit afraid.

PS: But you were in your American uniform?

BK: Yeah. But still they, they just would not let on that they spoke German. I had to speak French to them.

PS: And then came your, the battle...

BK: The Bulge, yeah.

PS: Now when, you mentioned that you were captured. The Battle of the Bulge, now we know, it's certainly sharp in our minds, the Battle of the Bulge. But future, many years into the future there might be people listening to this tape who really don't know what the Battle of the Bulge was, or what it represented. Can you give, Mr. Kornfeld, just a little insight as to...

BK: Yeah, number one, when we were in it, we had absolutely no idea what the battle was, what it was all about. When we came back, we found out this was the last attempt by the Germans to drive the Americans, the English, and the French, who were in part of one sector, and not too many French I don't think, but, to drive them back into the sea. And the Bulge almost worked. By luck, the clouds lifted.

PS: Yeah.

BK: The Air Force got in there. The ground tanks were able to drive the Germans back. And once the Bulge was over, I would think that, I know the Germans knew that the end was coming. But, the Bulge was the one last attempt to drive us back. And as far as my outfit was concerned, they almost succeeded. Because, I would say about half of my division was wiped out. I would say another quarter was captured and supposedly, according to the literature, some got back to the back lines.

PS: When the initial German attack began, which led, became, evolved into the Battle of the Bulge, about how, do you remember roughly about how many days prior to your capture?

BK: It's hard to say. I really don't know the number of days, because all I know is on the last day, this, the Bulge started, the bombardment of our town Saint-Vith, started at 5:00 o'clock in the morning. They just [unclear].

PS: The town again, Mr. Kor-...

BK: Saint-Vith.

PS: S-, can you...

BK: V-I-T-H.

PS: V-I-T-H.

BK: Yeah, they pronounce it Saint-Vith [Veet].

PS: Yeah.

BK: But the bombardment started, and we--whatever we were trained for, I don't remember exactly how it worked out, but we left the town immediately to take our positions against the Germans. And that's when the combat started. The number of days is totally beyond recollection because all I remember is, I had a D-bar in my backpack, a chocolate bar, which supposedly sustained you for a while. And that lasted me for the next two weeks.

PS: Two weeks of...

BK: Two...

PS: …captivity?

BK: No.

PS: Oh, oh...

BK: Part of this was captivity, and part of it was, you know, because there was no way to feed us. And we went from one position to another, digging in, being bombarded, supposedly attacking the Germans. And we did. How much damage we did...

PS: But during that period there was really no, no chow, no meals being...

BK: No, no meals whatsoever. It could have been five days.

PS: Yeah.

BK: It could have been six days. I'm not sure. But it was a--there was no such thing as being able to sleep, because it was a matter of digging in the snow and taking new positions. I can't say how long it was. All I know is we were on top of a hill in a town called Schönberg, and, in Belgium. And after the bombardment ceased and our lieutenant, a captain, had disappeared, we said, "It's time to surrender."

PS: Right.

BK: We can't do any more. It was a terrible surprise to us, because up until that point, they kept telling us we're attacking. It didn't look too good, but...

PS: Even as you retreated you were attacking.

BK: Supposedly.

PS: Just a short time back on this tape, Mr. Kornfeld, you mention about the enormous number of casualties of our Americans...

BK: Right.

PS: …who were in the Battle of the Bulge. Both killed, wounded, and captured.

BK: And captured, yes.

PS: Did you hear of, where entire units were massacred after they laid down their arms and...

BK: Well, where Schönberg, if you look at the map, was ten miles from Malmed, Mal-, Malmédy, sorry.

PS: Yeah.

BK: And, at Malmédy the Americans surrendered, and the Germans-[2]

[2] Malmedy Massacre - Ninety American POWs murdered by German captors December 17, 1944 during the Battle of the Bulge. (www.historylearningsite.com; www.JewishVirtualLibrary.com)

Tape one, side two:

PS: This is Phil Solomon, continuing the interview with Bertram Kornfeld. Mr. Kornfeld, we were speaking of the massacre of, the surrender of American troops at Malmédy. Will you please continue?

BK: Malmédy as I said was ten miles from where we were captured. And, of course, we didn't find out about this until long after the war was over. But, the Americans were just mowed down at Malmédy by the Germans. So you see, it's a matter of luck where you are, under the conditions under which you surrender.

PS: Yeah.

BK: When we surrendered, we came down from the hill that we were on. Our rifles were thrown away. And, when we got down to the bottom we saw a sight that was probably as tragic as anything you can see. A line as long as the eyes could meet of American prisoners, and all of them standing there with their arms up.

PS: It's so shocking. Well I survived long enough to see the Germans doing the same thing, coming down from the...

BK: Oh yeah.

PS: …hills in Austria. When it became obvious to you that capture was impending, did you give any thought to the fact of, knowing what was going on to the Jewish people within Germany, did you give any thought to your own security or of safety on being, when the Germans discovered your religion?

BK: Well, I'm not sure that they ever did. Don't forget, when we were captured, we had all been in combat for, you know, at least a, six days. Even before then, most of us hadn't had a chance to shave. I think we all looked like rabbinical students. And, the Germans made no attempt as far as I can recall of sorting out who the Jews would be. As far as surrendering, when you're in combat, as you well know, you lose all feeling of reality. You just don't think of what could happen to you, except that you're there for survival. And, get the enemy before he gets you. I don't recall any thought of what could happen, what will happen. I do recall one man in our outfit saying, as we surrendered, "Well, that takes us out of the war." Little did we know, you know, most of us didn't agree with that.

PS: Yeah.

BK: Little did we know that, yes, it takes you out of the war, but it puts you into some other hell that...

PS: Yeah.

BK: …that can be almost worse in some cases. No, after we surrendered, by that time, you know, it was late evening. And how the Germans ever survived for any length of time--their supply lines were brought up by horses. I remember that as we walked, they had us march in an easterly direction, naturally. We were almost run down by horses, pulling carts, pulling wagons of supplies. They had us march for, I believe, it was two days. And when I look at the map now, they finally stopped us, somewhere, just on the western

side of the Rhine River. And we stopped there. It was bitter cold. You know, this was one of the toughest winters. And then they put us in the cattle cars. And that was the only thing that, when I saw the Schindler cattle cars, you know, that, I really could relate to my experience. We were pushed in there by, I don't know how many were on there, but in each car there must have been 100 of us. There was no room to sit. We stood and once you hear that lock go on there, you just hope for the best. Once the train started to move, and this was about four days, after four days of marching, we crossed the Rhine. I think we were among the first ones to cross the Rhine. First Americans to cross the Rhine. The train stopped in a town called Koblenz. And, Koblenz was one of the targets, an industrial town, and a big railroad yard, which was bombed continuously by the Americans in the day time, by the British at night. And they purposefully stopped our train at the railroad yard in Koblenz. And, the only reason I know it's Koblenz...

PS: Yeah.

BK: …is because I looked it up later on.

PS: Yeah.

BK: And the night we, they just left us there. They pulled the engine off. The guards left, because our train, our cars were all locked up. And sure enough, the RAF came over and bombed us. And luckily, a direct hit would have killed all of us, but they, the bombs dropped a few yards from us. So, all that happened was we know the trains lifted off the ground, the cars, and a couple of our guys were so frightened, they lifted the roof of our car. I mean, it's an inhuman feat.

PS: Yes.

BK: You know, you can't do that.

PS: Yes.

BK: But under the conditions, they did it. They climbed out, and as soon as they jumped out, no bomb hit them, but as far as we know, the air pulling from the bombs killed them. And...

PS: That would be a concussion.

BK: It could be concussion. It could be that the lack of oxygen...

PS: Yeah.

BK: …that comes about as the bomb hits, you know. Whatever it was, but...

PS: And the railyards probably were a prime target.

BK: Well, it was a prime target. That's why the Germans left us there.

PS: I see, yeah.

BK: But they...

PS: Oh, you think...

BK: Oh sure.

PS: You really?

BK: Oh, I'm convinced of that because that would be the easiest way to say...

PS: Yeah, to say...

BK: …"We didn't do anything. You guys did it. You bombed them. We didn't. We didn't tell you to bomb the railroad yard!"

PS: Oh.

BK: But luckily we were not hit. But it, I am convinced that when they pulled the engine off, and we heard the engine leave, that they wanted to save the engine. They didn't care about the cattle cars.

PS: Isn't that a horrible, horrible...

BK: And if there are a few hundred Americans in there, nobody can blame them.

PS: Between the time, Mr. Kornblum...

BK: Kornfeld.

PS: …of your capture and the, that incident at the railyard, had you and the others been, had any interrogation or search?

BK: No. There was no interrogation at all, nothing. The only thing was that as we marched, we saw bodies lying along the road...

PS: Yes.

BK: Mostly Americans. And, there were a few of our men who just couldn't make it. And, whatever happened to them, I don't know.

PS: Although it was a sad sight to see all the Americans surrendering, probably there was a brighter side to it for you folk in that probably much, many more than they could handle as far as individual searching and interrogation?

BK: That may have been the bright part of it. We didn't even think of that.

PS: Yeah.

BK: What also happened was that they obviously couldn't feed us. And since there were too many of us they didn't feed anybody!

PS: Oh.

BK: The only thing that did happen was we were in the cattle car for a few days, which, I think that it was a total of 14 days we went without food. And, we stopped. The train stopped somewhere in Germany. I have no idea where. They opened the doors to the cattle car, and they let us out. And what they said was, "If you can find anything to eat, go ahead." And we all started to dig, and we found turnips.

PS: Oh.

BK: And, you never ate such good turnips in your life.

PS: Oh, I bet. That was your appetizer, your entrée, your dessert.

BK: That was it, yeah. It was great.

PS: You were free to--you weren't free at that point to roam. You were still...

BK: Oh no!

PS: …under the guards.

BK: Oh, the guards stood there but all...

PS: Yeah.

BK: …we could do was go into that turnip field…

PS: And...

BK: …and, remove the snow. We ate the snow first, you know, because we hadn't had anything to drink either. It's, it has to be a period of 12 to 14 days. Just, which is unbelievable [unclear].

PS: It is. I was just gonna say unbelievable.

BK: But it had to be, because in checking back I, it couldn't have been less.

PS: You were free of the boxcars then for about how--were you forced back in?

BK: Oh, about half an hour.

PS: Oh, and then back into the...

BK: Right back in there, yeah.

PS: Oh. And then how long a period was...

BK: I don't think it was more than four days till we got to the prison camp, *Stalag* IV-B. Here, this is the evidence, my dog tags.

PS: Oh.

BK: Which is located between Leipzig and Dresden. And once we got to the camp then they did the interrogation. But as far as I can recall, the Germans never asked for more than we were allowed to give anyway, name, rank and serial number.

PS: Probably there were too many for, to handle.

BK: There were too many.

PS: Yeah.

BK: And, the only thing in, that happened was when they got to me, and I spoke German to them, they did ask questions.

PS: Yes.

BK: But I also found out that they knew a lot more than we did about what happened.

PS: Absolutely. I was--one of the questions I was gonna ask you, Mr. Kornblum, was that your proficiency in the German language, your ease and fluency probably would arouse suspicion.

BK: Well, suspicion yes. One night, as, when we marched, we did stop. And they put us in the tent. And there were thousands of us Americans in that huge tent. It was bitter cold. And, I became the spokesperson for the entire group and I walked up to the colonel who was standing there, a Nazi colonel. And I started to talk to him. And I said, "Do you know that we have some very sick men and some dying men? Just right here." And all he did was clear his throat and spit in my eye.

PS: Oh no.

BK: So after that I, I was a little more cautious. And it's true that not everybody left that tent the next morning. In fact, some of us were stupid enough to take our shoes off, our boots, and we froze. So the next morning when we started, when they had us march again, all we could do was, we couldn't get into them. We had to walk in our stocking feet and carry the boots.

PS: Were you fed during that period?

BK: No, no.

PS: Still no...

BK: There still was no food. The only food that I recall was when we got to the camp, then we got a piece of bread. And then we got used to the diet...

PS: Yeah.

BK: …of the prison camp, which was a cup of coffee in the morning, which was black water, vegetable soup at midday, and once in a while a potato and then a piece of bread at night. And, somehow when you have to, that makes your daily diet. And that, we did that for, you know, five months.

PS: During that period were you at any time interrogated as an individual?

BK: I don't recall that. The only thing I recall is they did send some of our prisoners to Dresden to work in factories. And I talked to one of the German officers once when they brought me in for questioning about going there. Because they knew more about us, they knew that I had been trained as a machinist. They knew that I was an armour artificer and I talked to him and he said, "No, we're not going to send you." Now, sending you to Dresden was the same as sending you to purgatory, really, to certain death because Dresden was bombed every night. And as I understand it, after the war, when the bombings took place, the Germans went into the shelters, and the Americans did not.

PS: [unclear] didn't.

BK: So, I don't know. But that was the only time that there was any question about this. I don't ever recall the word "Jew" being asked, not at all.

PS: Yeah, I was just gonna ask you, Mr. Kornblum if you knew of any...

BK: -feld.

PS: Oh, Kornf-, I'm sorry! If you were aware of any cruelty inflicted especially upon Jewish prisoners.

BK: No, not at all. No. Americans had problems surviving. I did too. My--I had frostbite on my feet and I went to the camp doctor, a British doctor, who looked at my foot and he said, "Well, we gotta start by removing a toe." And when I heard that, I went back to my, to the compound, and I never went back to the doctor because he was gonna remove my toe. And luckily all I had was frostbite, and not, it didn't have to be. Cruelty, yes, we saw a lot of it, but not because of Jewishness.

PS: Right.

BK: It was because of being Russians. The Russians were totally mistreated by the Germans. No food whatsoever. They were given the potato peels from the wagon after the, after we got the potatoes. No, I don't recall any, any cruelty other than the normal not being able to eat, you know, you just survived. And, but the Russians I definitely recall.

PS: Yeah.

BK: And part of the reason was that the Germans did respect the Geneva Convention for prisoners of war. And, since the Russians were not part of that, and they hated the Russians more than they hated us, they really did mistreat them.

PS: So this *Stalag* IV was mixed personnel, Americans...

BK: It was mixed, luckily, I say it's, they had British, French, Australians, and a large part Russians. And the reason it was lucky is because some British had been there since the beginning of the war. And somehow they managed to either build or import a short wave radio.

PS: Oh.

BK: So that, I never saw the radio, but we got the news every day. So we knew more than the Germans did of what was going on in the war. And also...

PS: Can you...

BK: One, one thing I must mention is by the time we were captured, the Red Cross was not able to do very much for prisoners of war. We did get one Red Cross package, which we had to share among 25 of us--which used to be for one, of course, which helped. Because I got sewing equipment in there, a chocolate bar. I became the official tailor for, I made gloves for my buddies out of blankets, you know, and that sort of thing. And, at one time I did see a Swedish Red Cross representative in the compound. And apparently the Germans respected that. That's why we got out alive.

PS: You were then--*Stalag* IV was close to Dresden.

BK: Very close to Dresden.

PS: From the point of your capture in Belgium, did this distance to Dresden, do you think that could account for the number of days you had to spend in the boxcar?

BK: Oh sure. Oh of course. But part of it was also, they claimed, the tracks were bombed, and they had to repair them. So we stood in, in the cars…

PS: Right.

BK: …without moving for quite a bit of the time.

PS: During the period of your incarceration, well, the fact that you did have available a short wave radio, were you aware then of the progress of the war, the progress of...

BK: We, we were very much aware of it. As a matter of fact, the German guards used to come to me to find out what was going on.

PS: What was going on!

BK: And don't forget, the German guards were, at that time I called them old men. I wouldn't dare say that, because we're a little bit older than they were then. But, that's all they had left to be guards. In fact, one time the Germans did permit us to go out into nearby woods to pick wood so that we could at least light the stove once a day and keep warm for a few hours. And, I used to love to go on those, we called them details, to pick the wood. First of all, you get past the barbed wire, and that can affect you after a while, you know, being around barbed wire all the time. And, you were free, almost.

PS: Yeah.

BK: At least free to pick wood. And the other thing that was fun for me was that the guards, I used to walk with the guards, and talk to them, and tell them what was going on in the war. And one time I almost got killed because of that. The guard I walked with was old, and he couldn't keep up with us. And he said, "I have to sit down. Stay with me." And I stayed with him. He said, "Hold my rifle." And I was holding the rifle just as an officer came by on his motorcycle.

PS: Oh!

BK: Well, when he saw the prisoner of war holding the rifle, and the guard sitting there, he really, he almost killed the man.

PS: Oh God!

BK: And, I thought he was gonna kill me too, but luckily, I think we both survived.

PS: Yeah. He probably respected the fact that you hadn't used the rifle on the guard or...

BK: Oh, I wouldn't have attempted it.

PS: Were there many attempts of escape? Were there any successful...

BK: Well, I know of none, of esca-, of attempts to escape, because at the time, it would have been immediate suicide. My friends always said, "Look, with your knowledge of the land and the language, why don't we try?" You'd get killed! And, from what I know of, the ones, I don't know of any Americans who tried. I know of a Frenchman who tried, and he was killed. So, no. Escape was not exactly what we had in mind. Besides, we had the radio. But every night we could hear the RAF go over the camp, the planes go over and, we always yelled, "Give 'em hell!"

PS: Yeah!

BK: You know, whoever it was.

PS: That at least helped to keep the spirits up.

BK: You keep spirits up by what we did. Every day, many of us, my friends particularly and I, took walks, around the compound, in the camp. And that helped. You know, you have to deal with, see some, somebody once in a while. And just keep moving. Keep in shape. And I think that was a good thing I did it.

PS: At that time, you were, you were aware of just about how the progress of the British and American troops advancing toward Dresden.

BK: Yes. We were also very much aware that the Americans stopped quite a distance from our camp, and what we heard on the radio was that they were waiting for the Russians to overtake East Germany, which is, which is what had happened. And that was the reason why the Americans could have crossed the Elbe River to our camp long before the Russians got there.

PS: Yeah.

BK: But they waited. And finally we were liberated by the Russians, Russian Cossack troops. Not like in Schindler...

PS: Yeah.

BK: …where one officer comes in and says, "You're free." We had the Cossacks who were rather brutal, because, well the, most Germans tried to leave before they got there. The ones who stayed wound up without a head.

PS: Oh!

BK: They were, they were not only brutal, they were all drunk.

PS: Yeah.

BK: The ones I met. And we lived in, we lived probably greater fear of the Russians than the Germans.

PS: Right. I've heard, I've heard that.

BK: Well, actually what happened was when the Russians came in, they said, "You're free. But don't go anywhere." And, then they baked bread for us in a nearby town. That was the most delicious Russian black bread and we ate it. It was the best piece of bread I ever had in my life.

PS: Did they make an attempt to feed you from their own...

BK: No way.

PS: …their supplies?

BK: They had no supply! That, we didn't know that.

PS: Oh.

BK: They raided the local bakery, baked the bread, one day. By the time the next day came around, we asked them, I says, "Are we getting bread today?" He says, "No, there is nothing left!"

PS: Oh, gee.

BK: "If you want anything, you can go out in the field here." So that's what we did. They did let us do that. But we had no place to go, until finally they marched us into a nearby town and we were there for about a week. We were on our own, and in the town.

PS: What, the date of your liberation?

BK: Was April 22nd.

PS: Oh, that was getting to the last two weeks of the, of combat.

BK: That's right.

PS: Prior to the German surrender.

BK: April 22nd, and then we were with the Russians. May 6th we were definitely with the Russians, because I distinctly recall one late evening they lined us up in the field somewhere nearby where we stayed. And we waited, and we were not in condition to stand very long, because most of us had, were skin and bones. You know, we lost, I lost 50 pounds. Most of my buddies, you know, were in the same condition. Finally the Russian colonel came out with an interpreter, and he announced that the glorious Russian armies

have defeated the Germans, and the war is now over. And we all stood there saying, "What were we doing?"

PS: Right.

BK: You know?

PS: Now that date was May the 8th? The 9th?

BK: May 6th.

PS: May 6th, 1945.

BK: Yes. What happened after that was interesting. I happened to be nearby where an American colonel and a Russian colonel were discussing the exchange of prisoners of war. And I, they spoke in German. That was the mutual language. And the Russian said he is not permitting the Americans to leave until the Russian prisoners are released by the Americ--those who were in, in France and wherever they were, until the Russians are returned. And I heard very definitely that the Russians are going to send us to Siberia if there was no exchange. So when I told my friends that, there were five of us, they said, "Why don't we escape?" And we escaped from the Russians. And that was probably a more daring...

PS: Yes.

BK: We didn't realize at the time it was stupid. All my buddies who were, who stayed, got to the same place in the west two weeks later. But we left, and we spent about a week escaping from the Russians.

PS: You were fleeing to the west?

BK: To the west. All we knew is which direction to go. All we knew was that all the Germans who wanted to walk with us, that we had to get rid of them, and we knew that every time we met a Russian, we ran up to them, told them we were Americans, and how much we loved Stalin and *tovarish* [comrade, in Russian] and all that stuff.

PS: There was no distinguishing equipment or clothes? In other words, you were clothed exactly the same as Russian prisoners, that your prison...

BK: The clothes that we wore were whatever we could find.

PS: Yeah.

BK: I happened to have a so-called Russian winter coat on. It was so thin that it didn't, it didn't do any good. But, and I think I still had my American GI shirt. But that was it.

PS: Yeah. Nothing that would distinguish any of you as...

BK: No, that's why we had to run up to them all and tell them we were *Amerikanskis*, you know...

PS: Yeah. The word was *Amerikanski*?

BK: *Amerikanski*. I think that's correct.

PS: Now going back during your period of incarceration, were you at any time aware of what was happening in the concentration camps? Were you aware of the gas chambers, the...

BK: Absolutely not, no. However, the interesting thing is that the prisoner of war camps, and what we now know, the concentration camps, were built on the same plan, exactly alike. The showers were exactly the same, because I remember when we got to the camp the first thing they did was put us into the shower. And the only remark that I remember somebody making, we, we didn't know what was going on; we were lucky it was a shower, and somebody…

PS: That water came out.

BK: And somebody said, as we walked in there, the guy was a clown but, he said, "I hope it's water that comes out." But...

PS: He didn't realize how true...

BK: How, yeah.

PS: How true it was.

BK: And, of course, what could we do? And, we did not know at that point what they were going to do with us. Fortunately when we got out of the shower, they gave us the clothes back and we walked and it was minus fifteen degrees I think or minus five degrees. But it was cold. What can you do?

PS: You mentioned...

BK: You do what you're told to do.

PS: I believe a little while back on this tape, Mr. Kornfeld, that you believed that the Germans did adhere reasonably well to the terms of the Geneva Convention.

BK: Yeah, part of the terms of the Geneva Convention was to feed prisoners of war on the same level that they were fed. And they claimed that that's all they had.

PS: Oh.

BK: I don't believe that, but at least they did not mistreat the prisoners, certainly not in my camp that I know of.

PS: How large, *Stalag* IV, was it a major...

BK: It was a major camp.

PS: Major.

BK: Very major, yes.

PS: During that period also, was there any medical, did you have your own medical officers...

BK: The, they did...

PS: Fellow prisoners who...

BK: Because the British had been there so long, there was a British doctor. And he, of course, he was a doctor without supplies...

PS: Yeah.

BK: …except what was left over from the Red Cross bundles, you know, the boxes that came in. But by the time we got there there was precious little.

PS: Yeah.

BK: So all they could do was give advice.

PS: Were there both officers and enlisted men as prisoners?

BK: No, very few officers. I don't know of, in fact I don't know of any officers at all. Again, the Germans respected officers.

PS: Yeah.

BK: And they separated them and they took them to camps that supposedly, where they were treated...

PS: Yeah.

BK: …a little bit better.

PS: No work details.

BK: Well, no work details and I think their bunks were a little bit better. It wasn't six on top of each other and you know, we used the wood of the bunks of our beds, shaved, used to shave it down so we would have something to keep warm in. And I'm sure that officers had stove-