# HOLOCAUST TESTIMONY

OF

ERNEST KAUFMAN

Transcript of Audiotaped Interview

Interviewer: Natalie Packel
Date: May 25, 2004

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EK - Ernest Kaufman [interviewee]
NP - Natalie Packel [interviewer]
Date: May 25, 2004

*Tape one, side one:*

NP: ...Natalie Packel interviewing Mr. Ernest Kaufman at Gratz College and it is May the 25th, 2004. May the 25th 2004. Mr. Kaufman could you please tell us, tell me, where you were born and a little bit about your family.

EK: I was born in a small town named Drove, D-R-O-V-E in Western Germany. My sister Lotta.

NP: I just-- can you repeat that again. I'm sorry?

EK: Are we starting over again?

NP: Yeah, start over again, yeah.

EK: I was born in a small town called Drove, D-R-O-V-E in Western Germany. My father, who had been orphaned at the age of nine, was raised by an aunt that lived in Drove. My mother was born in a town not too far from there. They got married in 1914 in February and my sister was born in 1914. My father who had wanted to become an architect had to go into an uncle's business. It happened to be a butcher shop and that was the end of my father's dreams, of course, because the uncle and aunt had no children and he just had to take over their business. World War I broke out and my father was called to duty right away, spent four years in the, in the German army, came back, in fact during the war when he came home on leave my sister by that time was a couple of years old, she used to call him "uncle daddy", so much.

NP: She did not know him.

EK: She didn't know. And father came back after the war. He had built a house for my parents in 1914. They moved back into the house and they had to share the house with a French captain, French occupation troops that were quartered in the outskirts out of town, a Senegalese company and my mother had to share the kitchen which of course was difficult and having to live and have a kosher household and live that way, but somehow they managed and of course in time the occupation forces left, in time, I mean after 10 years, because the area was occupied by French troops until 1930, which is a lot of years after War World I.

NP: My goodness.

EK: And I had come along in 1920, went to elementary school in Drove for four years and after that I went to the *gymnasium*[1] at Dueren.

NP: How do you spell Dueren?

[1]*gymnasium* – European secondary school in Europe. (Merriam Webster's Dictionary).

EK: D-U-E-R-E-N. And while I was there, my sister was going to the *lyceum* in Dueren too and then she matriculated. I never did. I went to the *gymnasium* for six years and in 1935 after Hitler came into the area-- because until that time he stayed away from the area west of the Rhine because French troops had been there for a reasonably long period of time-- I got kicked out of school no Jews were allowed to attend schools of higher learning anymore after that time. I think they were permitted to stay in public schools I think until 1938. But I was kicked out and went to an apprenticeship in Essen in the Ruhr area.

NP: In the what area?

EK: In the Ruhr area, R-U-H-R area figuring that by that time we had to think of immigration. And I had an apprenticeship supposedly a business course, but actually I worked in the machine shop for two years with a pretty large salvage yard that was still Jewish. And that was Aryanized so to speak in 1938, of course I was kicked out.

NP: Can we go back a little bit, in the town of Drove. What the Jewish community like?

EK: We had about 10 families that lived in the community and we had a synagogue in town. And most Jewish families from the surrounding communities used to come to our synagogue for services. We had services Saturday mornings and of course on holidays, no other services because we hardly ever had a chance to get a *minyan* [a quorum of 10 Jewish men needed to pray] in those days.

NP: Was there any Hebrew school? Any instruction?

EK: No, there, there was none of it, the only instruction I got was from my father who prepared me for my Bar Mitzvah, taught me to read and whatnot. And other than myself there was only one young Jewish, Jewish fellow in my age group. It was a community of maybe, maybe 25 Jewish people there, just.

NP: Small community.

EK: It was, it was very small and we didn't have a rabbi, we had three people who took turns conducting services. My father was one of them. And…

NP: He was well taught by his father?

EK: Well, by, by the uncle that, that raised him.

NP: That took him.

EK: Sure. So…

NP: And what were the holidays like? Do you remember?

EK: They were festive, it was a nice family get together usually as a matter of fact every *Shabbat* after services there was a *Kiddush* at our house where we always had people from surrounding communities before they walked home. And that was nice and I have to say one thing, Father was, was very, I don't know whether I should call it orthodox or not, but I mean he wouldn't throw a light switch on *Shabbat*, do you know what I mean?

NP: Yes. And it was a kosher house, you said.

EK: Oh yeah, absolutely kosher, Father, Father…

NP: He was a butcher.

EK: He was a butcher, not only that, he was a *shochet* [ritual slaughterer].

NP: A *shochet* besides.

EK: Right, but the funny thing is this, I mean even though Father was rather religious, my mother did not go *mikveh* [ritual bath] and Rabbi Wolf who was a rather, the orthodox rabbi from Cologne who used to come and visit us quite often he wouldn't eat at our house because of it. So…

NP: Ah. It wasn't considered completely…

EK: Right, I mean…

NP: Kosher.

EK: I mean, father got the *shechita* [ritual animal slaughter] from somebody else. Anyhow, it was obviously enough for most of the people in the area and then of course from our relatives, who used to get packages from us with whatever they needed and wanted. So, it was a small community, the town was small too and we interacted quite well with the gentiles, we had no problems. I mean, I had no problem having gentile friends over at our house and sometimes staying overnight, of course it was difficult for me to go there, because I wasn't allowed to eat there.

NP: Right.

EK: So, but we had good relations with our neighbors and there was very little antisemitism in our town all the way through, so we didn't suffer like people did in a lot of other communities.

NP: And so, it must have been a great shock to have been told that you could not continue with school.

EK: Well, it came on slowly.

NP: Yes.

EK: And of course we became more and more aware of what was going on, so sure it, it was a shock, I mean, my parents had been, I shouldn't say my parents, my family had been living in this general area, documented since 1713 and most likely longer than 300 years. So, I have a cousin who made a record, a big family tree who was an attorney and he was into genealogy before Hitler came to power. And so he went from one office to another and from one church to another and compiled a list and a record of, of our family. So we have a family tree that dates back that way and like I say it's documented.

NP: How fortunate, oh that's wonderful.

EK: Right, so, we all, we know of the names and this cousin ended up in Israel and became an official in the Israeli government.

NP: I see. What was his name?

EK: Kurt Sella. His German name was Steinberg.

NP: Steinberg.

EK: Yeah.

NP: And now and his?

EK: And he is gone, but...

NP: His name that he took in Israel?

EK: Was Sella.

NP: S-E…

EK: Double L- A.

NP: Double L- A.

EK: In fact his daughter was the last Israeli ambassador to Finland.

NP: Oh my, what an accomplished, wonderful family.

EK: Well, [unclear] was nice and she's back in Israel now so I guess civil service status in Israel is different from ours here. It's a civil service job in Israel, while here it's usually an ambassadorship is an appointed deal.

NP: Right. And so to continue, you took on an apprenticeship.

EK: I took on an apprenticeship and of course that stopped after the firm became Aryanized. For a few months, after coming home-- oh and by the way while I was in Essen I was lucky enough to get myself a, a number on the waiting list of the German quota for the States.

NP: Were you advised, were you advised?

EK: I was advised to do it, yes, and was rather fortunate.

NP: Did anyone else in the family apply for this number?

EK: My sister and brother-in-law did and my parents did not for a very simple reason, my mother's father was still alive and after we left, well actually I am jumping ahead of myself here. And the aunt who raised my father was still alive and so my parents didn't entertain any thoughts of leaving and of course being where we are we had nice neighbors always kept telling us, "Look, this isn't going to last, this guy [unclear] isn't going to make it. Wait it out and everything will be alright." Of course, history taught us otherwise.

NP: Indeed.

EK: But anyhow, so I was lucky enough to have a number on the waiting list and on the 10th of December I was working with Christian family, family friends.

NP: 10th of December, 193--…

EK: Sorry, 10th of November, '38.

NP: '38.

EK: Right. I was working doing mechanical work with Christian family friends in a town and nobody knew I was Jewish.

N: The name of the town?

EK: Oh, God.

NP: If you don't know, okay.

EK: It's a, it's a small town.

NP: Alright. That's alright.

EK: A few miles away from my home town. And in the morning I get a phone call from my sister Lotta, telling me "Ernest go home immediately," and she said in English, "All the synagogues are burning." Crystal Night.[2] I got on my bike, went home, no sooner was I home, and our local policeman Walter, the neighbor and a customer of ours until my father closed his shop came and said, "Look, I've got orders to arrest every Jewish male between the ages of 16 and 65 because," and in fact I have this also in my speech there…

NP: Alright, okay.

EK: You know I'm basically repeating a lot of what I have in my speech.

NP: That's fine, that's just fine.

EK: "Because a young Jewish Polish man had killed a German councilor official in Paris."

NP: Vom Rath[3].

EK: Vom Rath, yes, and then he said, "I have orders to arrest everybody up to age 65 but I'm not going to take you," he said to my father, "but Ernest you have to go along." So I went along with him, spent two nights in the local jail and then where I basically was met by two other guys from town, two other men from town, one of 'em, another family man was sent home, again by our policeman the next morning, but two of us were picked up two days later by car taken to Dueren, where we were put on the-- to Dueren the school I was…

NP: Dueren, D-U-R…

EK: DUERN [Dueren], yes the town I went to school in, the county seat basically. And there we were put on the bus and taken to Aachen.

NP: A-C-H-E-N.

EK: A-A-C-H-E-N [unclear] and checked in at Gestapo headquarters. And as soon as we were checked in we were loaded on a train that was waiting for us and off we went towards the destination we didn't know. It turned out to be Buchenwald. And of course along the way we picked up more and more people and my brother-in-law was one of them and we ended up back at Buchenwald.

NP: This was Lottie's husband?

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[2]Crystal Night - in German *Kristallnacht*, "November 9, 1938, the Nazis unleashed a wave of pogroms against Germany's Jews. In the space of a few hours, thousands of synagogues and Jewish businesses and homes were damaged or destroyed. This event came to be called *Kristallnacht* ("Night of Broken Glass") for the shattered store windowpanes that carpeted German streets." (United States Holocaust Memorial Museum website.)

[3]Vom Rath – Ernst vom Rath, a German diplomat whose assassination on November 7 in Paris was the pretext for the violence of *Kristallnacht*. He was assassinated by "Herschel Grynszpan, a Jewish teenager whose parents, along with 17,000 other Polish Jews, had been recently expelled from the Reich. Though portrayed as spontaneous outbursts of popular outrage, these pogroms were calculated acts of retaliation carried out by the SA, SS, and local Nazi party organizations." (United States Holocaust Memorial Museum website.)

EK: Yes, yes. And in Buchenwald, I imagine you've heard enough stories about life in Buchenwald, it was horrible. I've got quite a description of it in, in, in my speech over there, I don't know whether I should repeat it here or not.

NP: You can say, absolutely, it would be important for us to hear it on the tape.

EK: Well, I mean…

NP: If, if it's not too painful.

EK: No, no, I mean, I've lived through it…

NP: A thousand times.

EK: A lot of times, yes. I mean, the train stopped at the train station at Weimar and we were chased off the train, rifle butts helped along because some people didn't move fast enough for the SS guards and they put us on a truck and carted us off to camp. There they land us up and the first thing they did is, is shaved our heads. And then they marched us, made roll call, and then they marched us off to barracks and the typical barracks I'm sure we've seen too many pictures of the people in camps, these three or four tier barracks where people just live on bare boards practically.

NP: The bunk bed.

EK: And basically I spent almost four weeks there. Now during those four weeks I met up with a cousin of mine, in fact, this, this cousin I mentioned before, Kurt Sella, was there.

NP: If you could just spell his last name again.

EK: S-E-double L- A.

NP: Thank you.

EK: And we weren't made to work, none of us of the *Kristallnacht* action was made to work, and I think there were almost 15,000 of us there and we were fed just once, once every day. We lined in columns, then we were handed mess kits and spoons and then some of the regular prisoners in camp, those that obviously were there for longer than we had been there or came long before us wore striped uniforms, they ladled out food to us. Everybody got a ladle full. I don't know what we ate, I called it slop, but that was probably an apt, a proper description and we had to stand in place, eat it and then hand our mess kits to the next group of people, unwashed, and this went on until everybody was, was fed. After that we were allowed to wash the mess, mess kits but under supervision, because there was hardly any water available, it's in the, it was in the hills, and we rather saw the mess kits get washed once in a while rather than, than have a chance to wash ourselves which happened very rarely. Sanitary conditions were terrible. Slit trenches if, if the term means anything to you and prisoners with buckets had to clean them out I mean it was horrible. Now, we were in a fenced in area but across the fence of course was the regular camp so-called. We watched where mornings, these prisoners were lined up...

NP: So, excuse me, so this was a sub-camp of Buchenwald?

EK: No, it wasn't a sub -- was, was we were fenced in, in other words we were segregated from the other prisoners.

NP: I see.

EK: And we watched what went on, in the mornings they lined up the other prisoners and some were marched up and some were bussed off or trucked off rather to work details and in the evening they came back and had to line up again that time for roll call and to watch punishment being meted out, that was the worst of all. They hanged people, they beat people unconscious, they tied people's hands behind their backs and hung 'em up on, on walls and of course, and these people were out of joint, so to speak, very soon and fainted and that's when they cut 'em down. And the worst thing that I ever watched was when they stuck a man into a barrel that had nail, spikes driven into it, rolled it down the hill. And then there were dogs at the bottom of the hill and they finished off these people. I mean, you talk about cruelty, it's just unreal.

NP: There are no words to describe this.

EK: No, no, no. This was supposed to be a civilized people, you know. Of course, everybody's family, everybody who got killed family always got ashes sent home, supposedly his ashes, always with the explanation that he was killed while trying to escape. That was concentration camp. Now I was lucky. Our parents had been told where we were and that also anyone who could prove somehow that they'd leave Germany before too long could be released from camp. My parents had absolutely no connections anywhere outside of this country, outside of Germany. And a friend of mine who had been with me at Essen while I was there in the machine shop had gone to this country and lived with, I mean he had family here, an uncle of his who had been here for some time. And he lived with, was rooming with a couple in New York. My parents contacted him and said, "John, Ernest needs an affidavit of support to get out of concentration camp. We have no connections anywhere, is there anything that you could think of that we could do or you could do for him?" Well, my friend John spoke to the people he was rooming with and told them what my predicament was and they said, "We'll give him the affidavit."

NP: Oh, how wonderful.

EK: Complete stranger. Didn't know me from Adam. And they posted an affidavit for me. And…

NP: Most righteous gentile.

EK: Yes, well, no, they-- Joe was Jewish, Ann was not. But anyhow.

NP: Good people, good people.

EK: Yes, in fact Joe was at one time known as the dean of the graphic artists in this country, so he was quite well-known. But anyhow, they posted an affidavit for me and my brother-in-law had a distant relative here, who also managed to contact several people together put up an affidavit for him that was large enough to, to guarantee that his family could come over here. The big problem being of course that you don't become a public charge for at least five years, the time it takes to become a citizen.

NP: Yes.

EK: So, fortunately both my brother-in-law, we were released at the same time. The camp commandant at Buchenwald was someone by the name of Koch, K-O-C-H[4]. His wife had been known as the "Bitch of Buchenwald", I don't know if you have heard that expression before or not.

NP: Ilse.

EK: Ilse Koch[5], yeah right had lampshades, supposedly had lampshades made of human skin. Anyhow, I still have the discharge certificate signed by him [chuckles]. Anyhow, we got out, after four weeks, oh, weeks and went back to Aachen where they released us after, after we paid for the train fare to Weimar and back. I mean talk about bestiality. We come home and there we find out that sometime in 1938, I mean I was aware of that, all Jews in Germany had to make a list of all their property, everything they owned and submit those lists to whatever agencies that the Nazis dictated. Here we come back from concentration camp and the Jews are all assessed 25% of whatever they owned to pay for the damages "this Jew caused in Paris," Vom Rath murder again.

NP: I think his name was Grynszpan.

EK: Grynszpan, yes. And some people had to sell their homes in order to comply with this, this stuff. We had a parcel of land that we used in the horse and buggy days for pasture, I mean, you know this is not much beyond a horse and buggy period. And things went from bad to worse basically. Fortunately, after we got home, I got a call to the American Consulate. I was in Stuttgart [laughs] on the day of Hitler's birthday, I can't forget it, 20th of April '39 and got my visa.

NP: Oh, how wonderful.

EK: I was lucky. I mean, there was a physical exam and a mental exam and, and much different from what you see today it takes to become, to come to this country. But anyhow, I got my visa and two weeks later, I was on the ship, on the S.S. Washington for New York.

NP: How did you get to the ship?

EK: By train.

NP: By train, you went by train.

EK: Yeah, in fact I had to go to New York. I'm sorry, New York [laughs], Cologne, had to go to Cologne which was about 20 miles away from Drove. And took a train from there to, to the ship.

NP: And your parents were there?

EK: And my parents. No, my father went with me. My mother stayed home and a cousin of mine who was still there went to the railroad station with my father because he didn't want him to be alone after I left. My sister had left a couple of weeks earlier. So

[4]Koch - Karl Otto Koch. (The Holocaust Chronicle website.)

[5]Ilse Koch - Prisoners called her the "Bitch of Buchenwald." She was "notorious for her corruption and cruelty to the prisoners, as well as her promiscuity with the camp's guards, she also possessed a collection of tattooed human skin." (ibid.)

the two of my parents were alone. And the one thing I'll never forget, my father's last, the last words he told me, "Don't ever do anything I'd have to be ashamed of."

NP: I'm sure…

EK: That was the toughest thing of all. Anyhow…

NP: I can understand that, yes.

EK: I got to New York and my friend John, and Ann and Joe, my sponsors -- I should mention them, Ann and Joe Blumenthal because they were just fantastic people -- were at the pier to pick me up, then I spent--, they found a place for me to stay for a few weeks, I spent about six weeks or so...

NP: In New York.

EK: In New York, with a professor at Columbia who happened to be German-speaking who had two children who, young children, they needed a, a babysitter, his wife was teaching at the Fieldstone School, a private school in New York, so for the summer while school was on, I stayed with, with that family. I had two, two little, little children speak English to me, teach me English. I had had one year of English at the *gymnasium* and after about six weeks when school let out, the Lehmann-Haupts came back and took care of their own children.

NP: Do you know how they spelled their name?

EK: Oh, God. Oh sure, L-E-H-M-A-double N, dash H-A-U-P-T.

NP: Wonderful, wonderful.

EK: He was Viennese and I think he taught, well he taught at Columbia.

NP: Were they gentile?

EK: Yes, yes, gentile, gentile. Then I went, Ann and Joe or the Lehmann-Haupts found a place for me to go for the summer, upstate New York there was a physician who owned a farm in Claverack near Hudson, on the Hudson.

NP: Do you know how to spell that town?

EK: Claverack, C-L-A-V-E-R-A-C-K.

NP: Alright.

EK: I think that's what it is.

NP: Alright, well, we'll verify it.

EK: Yeah, it's near Hudson on the Hudson. And the family spent the summer there and I was butler, chauffer, house boy, you name it, no one spoke a word of German, so I was lucky, I learned to speak English.

NP: Mhmm. Beautifully.

EK: Well, it worked. The summer was over, the family went back to New York and then by that time my sister and family had, had settled here in Philadelphia in Strawberry Mansion and I went to live with them.

NP: You corresponded or kept in touch by phone?

EK: Oh, of course.

NP: So you knew all the time where each other was.

EK: Oh yes, I mean, as soon as I got to New York, as a matter of fact, after we, after my sister and family left Germany we still corresponded with them from Germany, from Germany to the States, so it was no problem. But, no, we were, we were in, in regular touch with one another. I moved in with my sister at Strawberry Mansion, you mentioned before you know Strawberry Mansion, third floor walk-up, 31st and Columbia Ave.

NP: Oh, sure.

EK: Number 3 streetcar, and it was fairly soon after that I also met Minna.

NP: Oh, wonderful.

EK: My, my wife. Her brother was managing a soccer team with Jewish refugees, a Jewish Athletic Club. I don't know whether you heard of it.

NP: In Philadelphia?

EK: In Philadelphia.

NP: In Philadelphia, yes I remember the Jewish Athletic Club.

EK: Alright, and I think we had a house on Norris Street I think where we would meet socially. Anyhow, her brother was managing a soccer team and I joined the team and our clubhouse, not clubhouse, what's-- you got-- oh, let me put it this way, her family had rented a house and the basement of the house was where the team usually went in to change, [laughs] change into uniforms. We played on the Nicetown Boys Club's fields. And this is where I met Minna, we were friends fairly soon after that.

NP: Wonderful.

EK: We didn't get serious until sometime in 1941 or so, but...

NP: Good friends.

EK: It seems it worked out alright. Yeah, we're pushing four--, 59 years now.

NP: Oh, wonderful, wonderful.

EK: And I had a number of different jobs when I came to Philadelphia from one to the other. Sometimes I got laid off, but most of the time I went for something that was a little better. I sorted dirty rags, I did all kinds of things. I was on a help on the truck for a while for I think Joseph H. Cohn, you are probably remember that outfit. Joseph H. Cohn?

NP: I'm not, I'm not familiar.

EK: Okay, well anyhow, it really doesn't matter, it was a help on the truck and whatnot and finally I found a job through an acquaintance who was an outfit that was building, mechanical work, which I had trained for in Germany, building truck bodies for Bendix Aviation, which at the time was a defense contractor. I worked there and had an occupational deferment because in those days we were trying our darndest to get our parents out of, out of Germany, and by that time after *Kristallnacht* all Jews' bank accounts were blocked in Germany…

NP: Excu…

EK: I mean that was like, I'm sorry.

NP: That's alright. Excuse me, had you heard anything from Germany?

EK: Yes, we were in touch with our parents until sometime in ’41.
NP: In ’41.
EK: Yes, I mean rarely, but still. And, I lost my train of thought.
NP: I’m sorry, I interrupted you, I didn’t, I just…
EK: No, that’s okay…
NP: I just wanted to know if…

[End of tape one, side one.]

*Tape one, side two:*

NP: Natalie Packel at Gratz College listening to the testimony of Ernest Kaufman. Mr. Kaufman we can continue.

EK: Alright.

NP: I believe you were telling me about…

EK: Yes, that as a result of the *Kristallnacht* action all the bank accounts of all Jews were blocked. Fortunately, my parents had been able to pay for my passage yet, but later on the Germans would not permit this anymore and any passage out of Germany would have to be paid for with foreign currency. So, I was trying to save every penny I could while I was working there trying to get my parents out of Germany, who by that time had been convinced by us with various letters and whatnot maybe they could leave the old folks with some friends and neighbors and as soon as the parents were here we would try to get them over as well. Of course, it didn't work out that way, still this is the reason that I had the occupational deferment. And then of course, came Pearl Harbor and after that things changed. It so happens that on the 5th of December 1941 my parents had gotten an entry permit into Cuba.

NP: Oh.

EK: All they needed was an exit permit out of Germany which of course they didn't get any more because on the 7th of December came Pearl Harbor and, and two days later or three days later Cuba declared war on Germany. But the thing is, is in order to get the entry permits into Cuba we had to deposit I think 3500 dollars with the Cuban government, again security that whoever would come there would not become a liability to Cuba.

NP: Yes.

EK: I had gotten that money from Joe, my sponsors. I mean they, those people were just fantastic.

NP: Indeed, indeed.

EK: And at the time I had told Joe, "Look, you know, it doesn't look good, there might be a war, I may have to go to war, and I don't know whether, if I go, I'd ever come back." And Joes says, "Forget about it, if that happens, don't worry about it." I mean that's the kind of people they were. Anyhow, my parents couldn't avail themselves anymore of the entry permit to Cuba and after that Pearl Harbor and I told my boss, "Look, I am going to enlist." I go to City Hall here in Philadelphia. I gave my boss two weeks notice, or rather, yes. And go to City Hall at the time to enlist and I had a physical and then there were a bunch of papers to fill out. One of the questions on the papers was citizenship status.

NP: Citizenship status.

EK: Citizenship status. I'm getting konked up.

NP: That's alright, no, no, not at all.

EK: And I simply wrote in there, "applied for." No, thank you I'm fine. So [laughs] whoever questioned me at the time said, "Look, you can't enlist, you're not a citizen." And I said, "Look, but I want to get in. What can I do to get into the service?" And they said "Well the only thing you can do is go to the draft board and tell them to cancel your occupational deferment and then to call you." That's exactly what I did and I imagine the reason why as a non-citizen you couldn't enlist is because if you wanted to enlist you had the pick of the service that you wanted to…

NP: I see.

EK: …go to and I imagine that there were security considerations and I imagine that this is why they didn't permit this. So, anyhow, I ended up being inducted at Fort Meade in February...

NP: In Maryland.

EK: In Maryland, in February of '42, went to Camp Wheeler, outside of Macon in Georgia for basic training. Of course there, actually when I was inducted I was asked, "Well which branch of service would you like to serve in?" And my preferences were armored corps because I felt, being mechanically…

NP: This would be a good fit.

EK: Yes, inclined, it would be a good fit or the Army Air Corps, in those days it was the Army Air Corps, of course what they do, infantry. So I go to Camp Wheeler outside of Macon in Georgia and have my basic training. The basic training is a three month proposition, when that was over, I was asked at Post Headquarters to volunteer for Officer Candidate School. Then they looked at my records while I was there and "Oh, by the way, you can't go. You're not a citizen."

NP: Mmm.

EK: Same thing again. They sent me to New England on Coast Patrol for a few months which was a rather nice assignment. We were stationed in Damariscotta in Maine.

NP: How do you spell that?

EK: Damariscotta, D-A-M-A-R-I-S-C-O-T-T-A, I think. And riding up and down the coast looking, looking for, for submarines landing, saboteurs or something like this. Sometime in 1942 Congress passed a law that anyone who served honorably for at least six months would not have to wait the usual five years to be become naturalized. Well, I had been in six months, needless to say, I applied for naturalization, was naturalized in Boston and a few weeks later, I was at Fort Benning in Georgia in Officer Training School. And I got my commission in Fort Benning in April of 1943 and by the way, this is strictly military career now I don't know whether, whether this is of interest to you here in this [unclear].

NP: No, because I did glance through and it does lead into important information so, just as you wish, whatever you wish to say is fine.

EK: No, you know what I mean, this is just strictly military career and, and I don't know whether this has to do, that much to do with the Holocaust anymore.

NP: This is your life and this is what…

EK: That's true.

NP: Yes.

EK: And I got my commission. I became what they used to call a 90 day wonder, because after, and gentleman by act of Congress as they used to say. They were going to send me to the Pacific. I spent some time in Anniston, Alabama at Camp-- oh God, I can't think of…

NP: That's alright.

EK: Anyhow, in Alabama training recruits for a while and then I got orders to the Pacific.

NP: There was no question of your going to Germany.

EK: No, I got orders to go to the Pacific.

NP: Alright.

EK: I went, I went to Camp Headquarters. I said, "Look, I speak German, I have a working knowledge of French. It doesn't make sense that I go to the Pacific." Well, they changed my orders. I was sent to an Intelligence Training Center in Camp Ritchie in Maryland after that. Went through a rush course there in intelligence training which has to do with all kinds of military stuff and then went to Europe, on the Queen Elizabeth in November of '43, as a member of an interrogation team, prisoner of war interrogation team, which today is a pretty hot issue, isn't it?

NP: Mmm, yes.

EK: And when we were, I was in England for, for gosh about six months almost, until the invasion, during that time we trained and practiced interrogation on German prisoners of war that had been captured in Africa. And of course we did skits, informative skits to core units and eventually when the invasion came, I landed on Normandy with a mechanized cavalry outfit that usually is the head of the infantry, reconnoitering and protecting flanks of infantry units, well anyhow this is tactical stuff, and interrogating prisoners. And at one time I was able to talk 100 German pris--, Germans into surrendering where, in some woods that we thought were pretty heavily defended.

NP: I see.

EK: And I managed to talk them into surrendering without us losing a single man and there were a few other things that I did during the war that were rather, shall I say, helpful to our war effort. I think I'll leave it at that [chuckles].

NP: Whatever, however you feel, whatever is appropriate.

EK: Now one thing I might say, is that I was wounded on the day President Roosevelt died, 12th of April '45. And...

NP: Where were you wounded?

EK: In a place called Wernigerode, in the Harz mountains in Germany.

NP: Harz mountains. Renigerode.

EK: Wernigerode.

NP: R-E-N…

EK: W-E-R-N-I-G-E-R-O-D-E.

NP: In the Harz mountains.

EK: In the Harz mountains, yes. And of course that was the end of the war for me. I spent three months in a hospital in England, they didn't-- they couldn't move me. And…

NP: Never were able to go back to Drove.

EK: Not during the war.

NP: Not during the war, okay, I just wondered.

EK: I should say though that during the war I got myself attached to the unit, yes of course I was there. During the war I got myself attached to the unit that was heading for Drove, again it's in my article there, in my speech and got into my parental home, the town had been evacuated, the Germa-- it was a combat area, the Germans had moved everybody out of town, I couldn't speak to anybody. Got into my parental home, it looked horrible.

NP: Mmm.

EK: Oh, and after the war I found out that the Germans had evicted shortly before they were deported, all the Jews from their homes, moved them all, all 25 people into my parental home where they stayed until they were deported. At night, nice Christian neighbors sneaked food to them, to augment whatever the Nazis allowed to give them. I don't know for how long they were all herded into our parental house, it was the largest home in town, it had five bedrooms in the house, and indoor plumbing which in those days not all houses had yet.

NP: It was a rarity, yes.

EK: Right. So, but they were there until they were deported. And again, decent neighbors and there were lots of them, sneaking food to them at night. So, I mean that was my contact with, with Drove. And of course and as soon as the unit that I was with moved on, I went back to my unit. I tried to go to the cemetery at the time, couldn't because it was still under, under fire by the Germans. So I didn't know exactly what was what until sometime later. But anyhow, I was wounded, the hospital stay in England, came home in July of '45.

NP: Who assaulted you? Who?

EK: In Wernigerode, we had taken the town the night before. It was a town, I don't know, probably 30, 35,000 people, I'm not sure of that. And things were pretty much in a state of flux already then, we were moving rather rapidly across Germany. It was close to the end of the war, April '45 and the war was over in May, and a couple of SS men had obviously had hidden out in town during the night…

NP: I see.

EK: And in the morning I was on my way to city hall to the mayor to tell him, "Look this is what, what I want you to do," how weapons have to be turned in and things of that sort. And they got me in a crossfire. So, I and another man that was with me, we

were both wounded and that was the end of the war for me. Then, came home, as I mentioned earlier in July of '45 got home the 23rd of July, on the 29th I got married [chuckles].

NP: Oh wonderful.

EK: As a matter of fact, you might, I don't know if it goes back a lot of years, Rabbi Max Foreman. Used to be I think in Wynnefield at the time.

NP: I do remember the name.

EK: Who, by the way was a soccer player with me on the soccer team…

NP: …oh.

EK: …while I was, I mean before the war, he married us in Minna's mother's house.

NP: Wonderful.

EK: Right. So that was July '45 as I say a week after I came home on a stretcher, I got married. [laughs] Anyhow, it lasted. And convalescence almost a year and a half because I had a nerve injury I had a paralyzed arm for a year and a half and it, I had a nerve that re-grows rather slowly. It took a year and a half. And I was still in the service. I had been operated on in Atlantic City, where what is today a resort, it used to be England General Hospital in 1945.

NP: England.

EK: England General Hospital, yes.

NP: England General Hospital.

EK: Yes.

NP: In Atlantic City.

EK: Right, and well it used to be the Traymore [unclear] and Convalescence Center at the time, Hotel Traymore. During that time, having much time, I went to Rutgers University and studied poultry husbandry. I wanted to become a veterinarian as a kid, and I figured this was one way of getting to work with animals if and when the time would ever, would ever come.

NP: Excuse me, one thing, all this time, when you return, your marriage, trying to find, you were trying to find out anything about anyone?

EK: I'll, I'll get back to that.

NP: Very good, very good.

EK: So, this was all going on and of course in the meantime we hadn't heard anything anymore about our folks. I mean we knew about the camps. Then in November '46 I got myself, actually it was a name request, went back once more, overseas to Germany, by that time I had recovered somewhat and went back once more to Germany. Most of the German linguists by that time had left the military service of course and it wasn't too hard to get someone to request me to come over. In fact, my former C.O. wanted me back there in the worst way.

NP: A valuable man.

EK: Well, I don't know about that. But anyhow, so I went back once more. That time I ended up at the European Command Intelligence Center. And I was put in charge of a document center, a document section, primary function being of course first of all collecting intelligence on what in those days was perceived to be our enemy, the Russians. But we were also doing a lot of work internally collecting documents that helped convict some of the war criminals at Nuremberg. And we happened to--, at the time a good friend of ours who was there the time, too, I am sure you know the name, Robert Kempner…

NP: Yes.

EK: He was good friend of ours.

NP: KEMPN…

EK: N-E-R, yes.

NP: N-E-R.

EK: Yeah, then it was a back and forth between us and him. Fortunately, Minna was able to join me for a while, while I was over there which made the stay rather nice, but I mean by primary purpose and reason for going over there once more was not so much being in the service, I mean by that time I had obtained the rank of major and basically I wanted to see if there was anything at all that I could find out about my parents.

NP: Of course.

EK: Absolutely nothing. So, by that time we tried by and with any available sources and means to see if there is anything at all that we could find out. The International Red Cross, the Polish Consulate, the UNRRA, the United Nations…

NP: Relief.

EK: …workers, our own diplomatic staff, our own intelligence sources, absolutely nothing. They disappeared from earth so to speak and only later on did I find out that all the records that had anything to do with this, this place called Izbica[6], had been obliterated or destroyed by the Germans so there is absolutely nothing that could be found of people that went through there, I guess that's how we have to say it.

NP: Mhmm.

EK: Anyhow, I came back home, back after two years over there, the doctor sent me back, but and I spent two more years in the service and then Uncle Sam decided they didn't want me anymore and we went looking for a poultry farm and we found one in New Jersey, one that we could afford.

NP: In Vineland?

EK: No, not in Vineland, a place called New Egypt.

NP: New Egypt.

EK: New Egypt, which is not too far from Lakewood and also not too far from Freehold or Mount Holly, anyhow, 20 miles from, from most of the known places in New

[6]Izbica – a transit camp-ghetto where German, Austrian and Czech Jews were sent before being sent off to other extermination camps. (United States Holocaust Memorial Museum website)

Jersey and that's where we had a poultry farm for a number of years. We raised our children there and after, after…

NP: Made a life.

EK: Made a life. After 30 some odd years, our equipment gave out on us and our age told us it's time to quit. We sold our farm and we ended up in what is today a continued care type community-- Medford Leas. I don't know whether you have heard of it or not.

NP: I see, I think I have seen it advertised.

EK: Yes, it is basically Quaker-run, it's not a Jewish organization. And we've been there for the last three years.

NP: You have done so much with your life.

EK: Well, it's. I don't know about that, but...

NP: And raised good children.

EK: We have two lovely, well I mean I am a father speaking, two lovely daughters who still come home, you know this is something.

NP: May I just for one moment. Were there any other family, cousins anybody that survived?

EK: I have a cousin in Seattle...

NP: Yes.

EK: …who survived, both his mother and his brother did not survive. He was in various camps including Auschwitz working coal mines and whatnot and he has been interviewed by I think Spielberg and some others too. And he had a rough life, a rougher life, I mean I was lucky, let's face it.

NP: This is important testimony and it will be used by scholars in the future and it's been a privilege…

EK: Well, you, you…

NP: …to hear your…

EK: …you might be interested in reading some of the stuff that I have…

NP: …material that you gave to the archive.

EK: …left, left there, but, but as I say some of it has to do more with mili--, let me put it this way, I am more proud of my military record than of anything else [laughs].

NP: Yes, you obviously went forth with a great drive and a great reason to try to search out perpetrators and bring them to ju--, help to bring them to justice.

EK: Right, right.

NP: Which was a tribute to the memory of your parents.

EK: Of course.

NP: And those that did not have a voice.

EK: Exactly, well of course the main thing is, was in those days winning the war. I mean once you put on the uniform that has to be your main objective and personal considerations take a back seat.

NP: Yes.

EK: But it worked.

NP: It worked and I thank you.

EK: I hope this worked out all right.

NP: This was, this was just absolutely fine and I thank you again.

EK: Well, glad to do it.

[End of tape one, side two. End of interview.]