

HOLOCAUST TESTIMONY

OF

LIZA KESSLER

Transcript of Audiotaped Interview

Interviewer: Janice Booker
Date: January 18, 1983

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Gratz College
Melrose Park, PA 19027

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LK - Liza Kessler¹ [interviewee]

JB - Janice Booker [interviewer]

Date: January 18, 1983

Tape one, side one:

JB: The first thing I want to ask you is some background, when and where you were born and a little bit about your family.

LK: Well, I was born in Russia in Ukraine. My father...

JB: Will you talk into that, Liza. That would be better.

LK: I was born in Russia in Ukraine². My father, before the revolution, he was supposed to be a rich man and after the revolution everything was taken away from him, even the right to vote. This meant we were people without having privileges. Going to college [unclear] were not workers, or independent for the workers. But, in my way I get my education in the beginning, as high school, later I was married, to a man who had a background of being a proletarian, you know, a working class, and later I went to college. After I had two children, I went to college.

JB: In the town where you were born?

LK: In the town where I was born.

JB: What was the name of it?

LK: Vinnitsa.

JB: Vinnitsa³, yeah.

LK: It's near between Kiev and Odessa. It was a Jewish center. We had in that time we had fifteen Jewish schools, not Hebrew.

JB: Continue.

LB: Not Hebrew schools but schools where they had education. Yiddish, Russian, Ukraine, and this was considered as educational. Even if you had finished a Jewish school you could go to colleges. There were colleges which taught in Yiddish, but they had the same privileges after they graduated. They could go to business or engineering and so forth, but in the late thirties antisemitism became very big and people could not, Jewish people specially. The schools were closed and you couldn't get any Jewish education. Again, I'm not talking about religious education. I'm talking about plain Jewish education. Then the war start.

JB: I get the impression from what you are saying that you and your family had a strong Jewish identity.

LK: Yes we did. When my grandmother was alive she was very religious. We kept a kosher kitchen, *milchike* and *fleyshike* and so forth. And then in the late '20s she

¹nee Rak.

²Her personal history sheet indicates that she was born April 26, 1909.

³Vinnitsa - a city town located 70 miles south of Zhitomir/Zhytomyr (www.jewishgen.org).

passed away and at that time in Russia you could not get kosher meats. It was forbidden by the government. The *shochet* could not continue, and if you would call him in, you used to call him during the night, if you bought some poultry and this was illegal and if he would have been caught he would be sentenced to big penalties, the *shochet* and of course, the people who would call him in would have problems. The Jewish education, my father was praying every day with the *tefillin* and *tallis*, but not having kosher meats, my mother used to revolt. She said I cannot be a hypocrite, put *treife* meat on the table and having, and having *licht* candles Friday night. This was against what's going on in that time, what was going on in that time about not having the privilege being a Jew.

JB: This was in the late '20s?

LK: This was in the late '20s and beginning of the '30s.

JB: So it was the Soviet government?

LK: The Soviet government.

JB: ...was supporting the antisemitism?

LK: Of course, of course you could not get any kosher meat. You could not get kosher anything so the people-- I remember the first time when it started my mother used to cook and put the meat on the table, and nobody touched it and it was very hard to get it, don't misunderstand, it was very expensive, not everybody could afford to put meat at the table and mother used to go and buy it and nobody was eating it because we were not used to it. Little by little we got used to it. You could starve a day or two or a week or a month, but not for years. My mother insisted and that is the way we start to eat and we accepted it.

JB: You were in school during this period of time?

LK: Yes, I was in high school in the early '30s, when I finished high school.

JB: What was your experience with antisemitism in school?

LK: In school I was attending the *Yiddische* school, Jewish, and I graduated the Jewish high school, 10 years. And that time it was customary, you know.

JB: And your community was a Jewish community?

LK: It was a mixed community, but with the majority were Jewish people.

JB: What kind of interaction was there with the non-Jews?

LK: With the non-Jews they start to, like if a Jew had a good position they used to go and say well, a Jew has a leading position, a Jew is a manager of a department store, a Jew would not be in a country or a laborer where you could use physical work. So this was their opinion that a Jew is not capable of doing this kind of work. A Jew is only for business, a doctor, a lawyer, something that he could lead the other nationalities.

JB: What about your family, did they have much to do with the non-Jewish community in which they lived?

LK: We were very close with our neighbors, and our neighbors were non-Jewish. Non-Jewish and they were very nice. My father had a excellent relationship, it's a matter of fact in 1941, when the city was bombed, a couple of our neighbors came in

and they suggested that we should stay with them, and they would say that we are their children. One had no children, so, he said “Well, what are you afraid? I’ll tell them that you are my children.” But what happened, we left and my mother with my sister could not go with us because...

JB: When you say us...?

LK: Myself with my two children, my sister with a child, my one sister-in-law with a child and another sister-in-law with a child. We left two hours before the Germans came in to the city because the city was already on fire from one side from the northern side.

JB: The men were in the army?

LK: The men were in the army. The only thing my younger brother worked as an auto mechanic in the KBG and he was left with the leaders. He was fixing, repairing the transport, the trucks and the big commissar was taking care of the city, there shouldn’t be any panic because the city was evacuated already. But we decided not to leave the city because my father saw that the Polish people who came, ran from the Germans. We were on the border, our city was a border city so many Jewish people came from Poland to our city looking for shelter, and my father saw the way they were struggling without a house, without food and clothing. He said that if he would have to leave the city and leave his house he will not survive anyway. He would not survive. So the only thing is if he didn’t want to go and my mother would not leave him, we decided, my sister and I, and my oldest sister which was with her husband and two teenage girls, they were in the center city, we decided not to leave the parents and not to leave the city. And we thought that the Germans would come in and five days we will hide ourselves. Later the Russians will not give up the city because we believed the Russians are strong. And we didn’t believe what would be with the concentration camps. Nobody believed in it.

JB: No one did that’s right.

LK: Nobody believed, because the Polish people who came over they did not see the concentration camps it was too early. The only thing they saw they told the story that the Jews on the border were called in by the Germans into a synagogue and they were surrounded with gasoline and they were burned alive. So many people didn’t believe them.

JB: Did you, did you believe that?

LK: Yes, I believed it because I saw it. People ran away in their night clothes so there must have been a horror, so I believed them. My father believed them. But we did not believe that Russia will allow the Germans to come in, even believing there is going to be a fight between the two leaders between the two armies, so we decided to stay. But two hours before the Germans came into the city, my brother came from the southern side of the city with the two leaders from the KBG. They were running away and my brother told them that he wants to take his wife who was staying with us, my

sister and myself and another sister-in-law. So they stopped because they did pass by our area where we lived. So we didn't want to leave our parents. My brother came and he said "Come, there is a truck." See, he had the equipment for repairs and he said we should go. We didn't want to go with him so the KBG leader came over and he grabbed his gun and said "What do you want to collaborate with the Germans? You are young women with young children, come on."

JB: How old were your children?

LK: In that time? My daughter was two years and my son was five. So we left. We jumped on the truck what we were wearing ourselves, and my mother put a couple bundles, what we had bundles because they were bombing the city so people put everything in bundles so it would be easier to throw out from the house in case there was a fire. So we had a couple bundles with us. Of course, things were-- we didn't need what was with us or what we needed was not. This was the way we start to run. My brother took us from our city about 200 kilometers, and from there on we start to go and we went in *echelons*. *Echelons* this is a transport which they took away machinery. The Russians were evacuating machinery and the people were sitting on the top in open platforms, on open trainloads on the top of the machinery, and this is the way we were going further from the front.

JB: Did you have a destination in mind?

LK: No, nobody had a destination, as a matter of fact when we came [unclear] one of the ports in Russia, we thought we were boarding a barge, you know, there were oil barges, again transporting from place to place so on top on these barges people were-- they could board 200 people they were putting 2,000 people, and with the children, you know, sick and healthy and we boarded one of the barges. We were told, you're going to Novosibirsk, going north. What happened, we wind up going to central Asia. We wind up the opposite direction going east instead of going north you wind up in the east.

JB: How long did that trip take you?

LK: Well, we were 13 days on this particular barge. We were 13 days, and we were on the lake Nieba and the lake froze so nobody knew where we were, but we had some young people they were supposed to report to the draft board. They start to search for them and they were on the barge with us so they sent out a ice breaker and they broke the ice and they took us out and they transferred us to another area and we went on the Black Sea. Just, we came on the Black Sea, the Germans bombed a ship with about 4,000 to 5,000 people, you know how they were, like sardines and the only thing what you could see from the survivors was, you know, no survivors but there were pieces, boards and different parts of the boat was floating on the Black Sea where we were going.

JB: Now, at this time that you were running away, you had in your mind that you were running from the Germans.

LK: Only because there was a war.

JB: Did you have any knowledge or feelings about running specifically because you were Jewish or that the Germans were...

LK: Only because we are Jewish only because we are Jewish again taking what the Polish Jews when they came to our city, what they told us what the Germans were doing to the Jews. There were other nationalities, but in the beginning they did not touch other nationalities. In the beginning they only touched the Jews. They were burning and putting them in concentration camps later we would find out.

JB: What year was this, Liza?

LK: They start in 1941.

JB: Does that mean that the majority of people who were on these barges thinking they were going north but actually going east were Jewish?

LK: Ninety nine percent were Jewish and the one percent were Gentiles which were Communists. They were afraid to stay in the city because if the Germans will come in somebody will finger them that they are Communists. This is the only-- the rest were only Jewish people.

JB: So this was you and your children, your sister, your mother...

LK: No, my mother and father did not want to go, they stayed there.

JB: How did you feel about that?

LK: Well, there were times we were saying that the mother and father were lucky because at least they are on their home. We thought they are on their home because the struggle that we went through with the children with no food, no clothing and with no sanitary conditions, there were times when we were on open space and the snow was covering us and we were-- I had a blanket with me and I made a tent from the blanket. Yena was then two years or three years old and in the morning when she crawled up from under the blanket, you could see only the eyes. The face was swollen and the snow with the frost with everything. Many times I used to see a dog hiding under a porch or someplace where people were still there. I used to say how lucky the dog is at least he has a place to hide himself. We didn't have it.

JB: What place were you in that this took place?

LK: This is since we left home 1941 in July until November we were traveling from place to place. It's the end of October we wind up in a village in Georgia where Stalin was born. It was a vacationing place so there were empty places so they put us into these homes.

JB: Who is they? Who was in charge?

LK: City authorities, the city authorities. It was a *kolkhoz*, a collective farm and the Communists took us in and they said that this is your home now, you got to stay and you have to be like home. This means tomorrow morning you have to go in the fields and take up the help to take in the-- it was in the end of September. There were many things in the fields and we had to help them. It's for me in particular, I had experience in agriculture laboratory and there was a very good laboratory there and

somebody asked if somebody was in agriculture, familiar. I volunteered and I worked there for a month.

JB: Did you get paid for doing this?

LK: No, no pay, the only privileges I had was I used to bring home every day to warm the house from sunflower sticks, you know. With this we used to heat our home. Because...

JB: So you lived in what was someone's summer cottage?

LK: Someone's summer cottage so we were there myself with the two children, my sister with a child, my sister-in-law with a child and another sister-in-law. This was the wife from my brother which took us with her and two girls from our city which was the parents-- we find them we felt sorry for them. I felt like it's my niece. My sister was left, she was in the center city so she was left there so we felt sorry for the two children, teenagers. We took them in and we stayed altogether. And we stayed in this village for over a month. Then the Germans start to come there and we had to start to run again. They didn't let us out because they wanted us we should work on the fields. So I was lucky, there was a woman too with a car, I paid her money and she took us out from there and we went to one of the very large stations, railroad stations, which was bombed day and night, day and night and the bombs were flying like-- pieces, the city was in pieces and many times when we were on the train with the children and the Messerschmidt, this is the German airplanes, were bombing our trains. We had to jump and this what you jump and you grab a child. One child is running and you hear screams mommy, mommy and you can't catch him. You see it on television in movies, but this is unbelievable, but, of course, we went through it. And here you see the bullets and people dying, people are wounded, people losing a leg, people-- parts of a body and the children and the train is in motion the train doesn't stop.

JB: Where was the train going?

LK: The train going-- east away from the Germans.

JB: You didn't really care what the destination was?

LK: No, nobody knew.

JB: Just to go...

LK: Just to go away from the front father from the Germans. And we were part in the front, we were with the soldiers. Half of our journey was with the soldiers. The Germans were bombing us and we were-- the women and children were in the back of the soldiers in many places. The soldiers were going back because the Germans were going ahead. And the Russian soldiers were running back, so the families, not the real families, but from the cities were going with the soldiers.

JB: How long were you on the train?

LK: On the train, were for three months, two months, it depends on time where-- and some people were sitting from the first day of the war they were in these trains and they didn't get off they didn't know where they're going. They didn't have any

destination, they didn't have any homes. So they were sitting in there. And every time the train passed by new people trying to push themselves into these trains which were filthy with sick and unsanitary and you go in. One of the stations we came in to a train and it was so filthy that we decided, no matter how, on the next station we get up, my sister with the children, and we get up. There was hot water and we bathe the children because we were infested with lice. So we took all our clothes with everything and we threw it away and we had our bundles so we took out from the bundles what we could use to change our clothes and then we stopped going into transport where they had covered and we start to go in machinery. They have open places, this way at least we knew will be clean.

JB: What did you do for food?

LK: Well, the trains used to stop on a railroad and we used to jump off. The Russian government used to-- because they took away many things from the Germans, they used to bring this on the railroads and you had opportunity to buy if you had money. Well, I had money with me because in 1941 I start to build a house and I finished building this to my father because my first husband died. You know that I was married before?

JB: Yes, but I didn't know that he died.

LK: He died, he died just before the war.

JB: Young man?

LK: He was in the forties. He was older than I. He was established lawyer, so when, what was I saying?

JB: You decided to go in the transport rather than in the train because it would be cleaner.

LK: It would be cleaner so we would continue to-- until they brought us to Osterheim where we were close to go to Central Asia. They took us in a boat on the Caspian.

JB: This is still the Russian government?

LK: Still the Russian government, but there it's like wilderness. It's like in Israel, like the Arab countries this is Uzbekistan. Some of them are more progressed. They have colleges and they have schools, but the majority of those people they couldn't read, they couldn't write, they had their own language which was destroyed by the Russians. They tried to teach them Russian and they were fighting it so the younger generation was accepting it but the older one couldn't speak Russian at all and there I came in 19-, end of '41 and I start to work. I worked as a manager in a department store and it was easier for me and there I met Stanley. Because Stanley's brother worked in a college where I worked and more or less the people were starving. In the beginning it was very bad because you couldn't get any food. They were rationed everything and the ration was just a book but in the stores was nothing because the government didn't have anything and they didn't care. Most of the people who came there were Polish people,

Polish Jews and the Russian people, the Jewish, we came there they didn't have anything to-- the city was not equipped to let in so many people so we were put in the homes like shacks and there-- we stopped in this particular city because...

JB: What was the name of the city?

LK: Bukhara. We stopped there because the children were caught-- in the train they caught measles. So my daughter-- only my son didn't catch any disease, but the rest all my nephew and my other niece, they all had measles and my daughter got pneumonia. The schools were converted into hospitals and being their climate is all year round summer they did not have equipment for warming the building so Yena having measles and pneumonia and the building was not heated you can understand how much it was. No medication so the only thing we were giving her is transfusion. They used to take blood from my hand to give it to her. This was the only thing that we used.

JB: How long did you stay in this area?

LK: In Bukhara, I stayed for five years.

JB: And what did you hear of the family that you had left behind of your parents?

LK: The family-- we heard in 19-- after the city was taken over by the Russians and my two younger brothers returned because they were in the fight with the Germans in 1945 and they took over the city, were the first soldiers. They find out that my sister, my parents were put in concentration camp. There was a area that was like a ghetto. They took out all the Jewish people from their homes and put them in one little area and of course, no question about it, later they were mistreated. The same thing with my sister with the two teenage girls. They were there and they were killed. And one day there was-- in the city a very large stadium, in a park, so the Germans were playing music in the park and people were dancing and in the back of the stadium they took all these Jewish people, within three nights they dug out graves. For the infants there was a very large well. All the infants were put in the well alive. The people were put in three graves, I visited them, three graves, each night there was another grave dug out and 3,000 - 4,000 people during the night. The first night they were killed, you know, massacred and put into this grave. Nobody know they were alive or dead, they were there, they went with tanks over it and covered it with soil, the tanks, and leveled it and this was within three days they cleaned up the city.

JB: So you were in Bukhara till the end of the war?

LK: Until the end of the war.

JB: And tell me how you got from Bukhara to America. I'm going to turn the tape over now.

[Tape one, side one ended]

Tape one, side two:

LK: Stanley was a Polish citizen. The Russian government had an agreement with the General Chikofsky that he was helping the Russians to fight the Germans. The agreement was after war all Polish citizens if they desire to go back to Poland they will have the right and if they will marry and will be in contact with people which will desire to go back with them to Poland, they will have the right. So when I married Stanley I became automatically a Polish citizen so I returned my passport officially to the Russian government and I went back with Stanley to Poland. But in Poland we were on the Russian territory. He thought maybe some of his family-- he was a bachelor, but his parents and sisters when we came to Poland they find out that his family perished the same way in the concentration camps. He had a very large family, sisters and brothers, parents, young people, all of them were killed. And then the Russians were moving around there. They were the bosses in Poland so we saw that Poland is not for us because it's going to be the same as Russia. We left everything we brought with us and we smuggled the border from Russia, from Russian territory into American zone to Austria, went to the border at night and we went to Czechoslovakia. And Czechoslovakia had agreement with the Jewish *Brihah*, with the Jewish organizations, to help people who will smuggle the border to Czechoslovakia, because this was the closest border. And from there they took us to the camps into Austria; which America had agreement with Austria to leave the people, and this was under the leadership of the UNRRA [United Nations Relief & Rehabilitation Administration] which supplied with food, and more or less that we could survive in Austria. In Austria we stayed five years.

JB: Five years?

LK: Five years until-- it's a quota, we had to wait for our quota. Being Jewish we had to wait for the quota because the non-Jewish people could go any place more or less-- because I tried-- because of the children I tried to go to Canada, I tried to go to Australia. I volunteered to be as a maid, as a farmer, as a worker in different thing-- industry in different countries and all over they find out that I'm Jewish and they didn't want to take me. So the last resort was when mom sent us the papers. I had to wait three years. Then the papers expired. You know, mom Booker sent us papers to come to the United States but the papers were not-- it was expired, it was over three years. Then I had to wait another two years for my quota until I came to the United States.

JB: When did you first hear of the name Hitler?

LK: The first Hitler? Well, when the agreement between Russia and Germany was-- there was a pact, if you recall, it must have been in '39, then we heard of Hitler. But we didn't hear at that time that Hitler is going to-- what with the concentration camps. We knew that Hitler is the head of the German government, but we didn't know what's going on.

LIZA KESSLER [1-2-10]

JB: When did you first realize what had happened with the concentration camps and that the idea of the Nazis was to exterminate the Jews?

LK: The most was during the war, 1941, during the war. We had met some people who were in contact with people who fled Germany, who fled Poland and they brought in the news about the concentration camps.

JB: Alright, just one more question, Liza. I just want you to tell us the story of coming to America. How you made contact with your family here.

LK: When we were in Austria, this is Ebenzer [probably referring to Ebensee], this particular camp was-- it used to be a destruction camp during the war and after the war we came in just when the concentration camp was freed. At that time was still the sacks with human hair and the crematorium was still there and there were so many people. Our camp was a transit camp. People were coming like 2,000 - 3,000 dead each day. There were 40 people in a room, 30 people in a room, but we decided to stay in one place, we thought this will maybe give us hope, maybe Stanley will find somebody from his family. If you stay in one place maybe you'll have a chance to contact somebody. But it was impossible, but we still stayed in this particular Ebenzer. Then the food was very bad. We used to get a ration from the surplus from the army. The food was filled with worms. There was a kitchen, they were cooked, food was cooked. It was very bad. People got TB there within a short while, but American soldiers used to come in. They were stationed there and of course Jewish boys looking for Jewish people. They used to bring in chocolate for the children, they used to bring in certain things from the rations to give to these people and one boy particularly liked us very much. He start to tell us, don't you have somebody in the States, and he spoke German with us. Well I said, I have my mother's sister, she lives in Philadelphia. We had the last news many years back. My grandmother used to write with Aunt Prima, but we never had a chance to write to them because we were afraid, because if you have in a foreign country family, then you would never get a job, you would never get in college because...

JB: This was in Russia?

LK: In Russia, so I was never in touch with my family, my mother's sister here, but when this particular boy start to say, you're struggling so much, you're starving. At least if you find somebody in the States they will help you. I said I have my aunt but I don't know how to get in touch with her, I don't know the details about her. He said, you know, in your language Russian or Jewish what you write, write a letter and I'll send it to my mother to New York and maybe she could do something. So I wrote a letter who I am and where I came from and I'm looking for my mother's sister her name is Prima Booker and so forth and it took almost a year. One day I received a letter from the Jewish Exponent, happy to sa-- to announce that they find my mother's sister with the daughters and they are very anxious to help me and I should write more details. In the same time, I received a letter from Aunt Prima in Jewish where she expressed the same thing. She's very happy to hear from me and she would like to know who I am, more

details. Then, of course, I wrote to her right away and I got right away a package, a carton of cigarettes. A carton of cigarettes this was the best thing because you could exchange with the Germans for food. The Austrians you couldn't buy the first year. You could have thousands of dollars they wouldn't sell it to you, but a pack of cigarettes you could exchange for bread, you could exchange for something more for food. And this I wrote to my aunt I need the only thing, money wouldn't help, the only thing if you could send cigarettes, not because I'm not smoking, I explained the situation and I received two packs of CARE and I received two cartons, 10 cartons in each, and this was a very big help. From this I start to buy a little bit of food and this I got in touch with-- it's the way I find the family.

JB: How do you think your children went through this whole experience?

LK: Well, even they were young, five years. And my daughter was two years and they grew during the war. And they saw so much hardships, heartache, shortage of food and they saw every morning during the war when they opened the door and people were working already that time was supposed to be quiet in Bukhara. You opened the door and there were dead people laying around so that became to them such a daily routine that for children's mind usually children are afraid to see that, but to them it became like a normal routine. Of course, when they came here and they saw we had a family, my aunt was very good to us, I felt like my mother came back from the grave, *tante* was so good to me. The children saw my love to her and they loved them very much. The war to me-- the war embedded in their mind a very bad feeling and I think it's still with them, maybe they don't talk about it, but I would say they feel it in their minds. Sometimes I look at Yena and I see her mind is wandering and I wonder if it's not the war, she's thinking about it.

[Tape one, side two ended; interview ended]