HOLOCAUST TESTIMONY

OF

AARON KUPTSOW

Transcript of Audiotaped Interview

Interviewer: Philip G. Solomon
Date: August 29, 1995

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AK - Dr. Aaron Kuptsow [interviewee]
PS - Philip G. Solomon [interviewer]
Date: August 29, 1995

Tape one, side one:

PS: Philip Solomon, interviewing Dr. Aaron Kuptsow, for the Holocaust Oral History Archive of Gratz College. The date is August 29th, 1995. Dr. Kuptsow, you were a medical officer in the U.S. Army?

AK: No, no, this was before I received my medical education.

PS: Oh.

AK: I enlisted in, well October of '42, in the Air Force. At the time I was a pre-dental student at the University of Pennsylvania.

PS: October of '42 was well prior to the invasion of Normandy and…

AK: Oh yeah.

PS: You, now you were in the, what division within the army?

AK: Well, I got my, I went into training as an Air Force cadet, which took approximately a year. I, in the course of the training they give you qualifying exams. I qualified for pilot, navigator, and bombardier, went into pilot training. I lasted I guess about three months in pilot training. And I washed out and was transferred to navigation school and became an Air Force navigator. And I got my commission as a second lieutenant on February 12th, that's, '44 that would be. Then I was assigned to Langley Field, Virginia, for special training. At that time, radar was a relatively new operation and the Air Force was using it for navigation and bombing, under conditions where the cloud cover or weather conditions didn't permit direct viewing of the area you were flying over or bombing. So that I was trained with a, and became a radar navigation bombardier. Then I was sent over to Europe. I got to Europe at the time of the invasion of Italy. I was assigned to the 15th Air Force, and flew my missions out of a town called Foggia, in Italy. After about five missions, I developed a jaundice problem due to Atabrine that we were taking to prevent malaria, and I had a reaction to it. Because of the jaundice I started with periods of vomiting and diarrhea and an extreme loss of weight. I was--at the time, I was scheduled to be in on the invasion of southern France. One thing you have to understand about the radar navigator bombardier, he flew in the lead planes. In other words, you send out a formation of several hundred planes, the first three planes of the formation would be radar planes. So that our job was, if the weather was poor, all the other planes keyed in on our plane. We took them to the target, we dropped the initial bombs with a flare, and everyone else then dropped their bombs following ours. So we were able to, by means of radar, see through the clouds. Due to the reaction to the Atabrine, I was transferred to England, and I was in the 8th Air Force and got some additional training there. The weather conditions flying out of England were a lot worse than they were out of Italy, and on my second

mission out of England, we were bombing a German town of Misberg, M-I-S-B-E-R-G, which is right near Hannover. This was on the 26th of November, 1944. Now the anti-aircraft was very effective that day, and we were hit right after we dropped our bombs. The plane caught fire and we were told to abandon the plane.

PS: What type plane was it?

AK: This was a B-17.

PS: Oh.

AK: In the 15th Air Force I flew with the B-24's, but this was a B-17.

PS: The Flying Fortress.

AK: Flying Fortress.

PS: Doctor, before you were shot down and probably captured, which we'll hear, had you at that point heard anything, anything really about the atrocities of Germany against military, civilians, Jews, non-Jews? Had you heard anything of concentration camps? The gas chambers or crematorium?

AK: No. We had been briefed, when we started to, well actually even from the 15th Air Force, that there was antisemitism amongst the German population and the German armed forces. The only thing we had been told was to get rid of the dog tags, because the dog tags had an "H" on them. But I think, prior to the war and things like that, I was not aware of any great problem in Germany. And up to the time that I was shot down, as I say, I was aware of an antisemitism, but not aware of any atrocities or anything horrible that could happen to me…

PS: Personally.

AK: Since I was Jewish, just the advice to toss away the dog tags.

PS: Were you given two sets of dog tags, say, one with the letter "H" for Hebrew? You were not given another set to…

AK: No, we had nothing else.

PS: To substitute for the…

AK: Right.

PS: …the original dog tags. And you really knew nothing of what later would become known as the Holocaust?

AK: Nothing at all.

PS: And you did not carry a second set of dog tags. Did you give much thought, prior to your being shot down, had you given much thought, what you knew of the antisemitism, was it disturbing to you, thinking of what might happen to you, personally, if you were shot down and captured?

AK: No, not really. Because as I say, I wasn't aware of any big problem. I was Jewish. I was born and raised in a Catholic neighborhood and had my number of fights with the children in the neighborhood because I was Jewish. So I was accustomed to a certain degree of antisemitism. And I didn't think that it would be any worse over there from what I had encountered before.

PS: Now, if you want to go on Doctor, and tell us about your capture. You were shot down. If you want to take it from there and…

AK: All right, yeah. One thing I should explain. Radar was a new gadget at that time, and it was very secret. So that we had been instructed that, in the event of being shot down, to destroy the unit before getting out of the plane, which I proceeded to do once we were told to abandon ship. The crew that we flew with was not a re-, my crew. Radar operators were assigned to a pool, and we were sent out according to our need to the different bombing groups, so that we never knew who we were going to be flying with, except there were lead planes, and the officers would be high-ranking officers. So at the time that we were told to abandon ship, I used my GI shoes, which were sitting beside me, to smash the tubes of the set, and then buckled my chute, and tied my shoes to the harness of the parachute, and went to get out. And most everyone else in the plane had gone out. I went to the door and jumped. Unfortunately, in the haste to get us overseas they never really gave us training on the parachute. I remembered vaguely we're supposed to count to ten. I forgot all about it, and as soon as I jumped out, I pulled the rip cord. Fortunately the chute opened and I started down. The only problem was that my GI shoes were tied to the harness and they flew off when the string broke, and when I did land, all I had were the flying boots, were very large fleece-lined boots. Of course, flying you're up in a very cold atmosphere. On landing--fortunately I landed very well--I don't know how it happened, but I landed in the right direction, jumped out of the harness and started to run. I couldn't run too fast because of the flying boots, and I suddenly was aware of shots being fired and hearing things whiz by my head, and I dropped to the ground. I was in a field of a farm, and I lay there and some farmers came. One was holding a pitchfork, and they had me stand up and they walked me to a small road.

PS: Doctor, these were German civilians…

AK: These were German civilians.

PS: …who found you. Whereabouts in Germany, do you recall, what area?

AK: Well, we were right near Hannover.

PS: Oh.

AK: Now the rest of our crew--there were ten men in a B-17--the rest of them were all rounded up, and within a couple of miles of walking, why all ten of us ended up together. We didn't see, but we know subsequently that the other two lead planes were also shot down, but we didn't see them. We got to a section of the road where there were police, and they lined us up. I forgot to mention that at the time that I landed in the field, I tore off my dog tags and threw them, because we had been instructed to do that. They lined us up [unclear] on the road.

PS: Well, pardon me, Doc. While you were walking as a group, were you being escorted? Were you…

AK: Oh yes, we had Germans all around us, yeah.

PS: Civilians with…

AK: Civilians, mainly farmers.

PS: Yeah.

AK: Until they got to some police that were down the road.

PS: All right. Then these were police, not *Wehrmacht*, German soldiers.

AK: Not, no, nothing like that.

PS: Not army.

AK: These were police. And now, the other nine members of the crew all had their dog tags. I did not. However, within a few minutes, I could tell they were starting to call, saying something about spies, spies. A young farmer came running up. In his hand he had some dog tags, which were mine. And they said, made me understand that these were mine. And I could not deny it and I said, "Yes." At which one of the Germans said something to the effect of *Jud*, and I got a solid punch in the jaw, which sort of stunned me, but that's as much as I had gotten at that time. Then they proceeded to march us several miles to the police station, which was in the town of Detmar. Pardon me, one moment while I [unclear]. It was a *Luftwaffe* station at Detmold, D-E-T-M-O-L-D.

PS: D-E-T-M-O-L-D.

AK: M-O-L-D.

PS: Right.

AK: Now that was on Sunday, November the 26th.

PS: That was the same day of your…

AK: Being shot down.

PS: Being shot down, yes.

AK: Right. And I was held there in the police station, in a cell, until Tuesday, November the 28th, when we left Detmold and were transferred to a station called Oberursel, O-B-E-R-U-R-S-E-L. And that was just a stopover. And, let's see. On the next morning we left Oberursel and arrived at Wetzlar. Now Wetzlar was an interrogation station, which was located right near Frankfurt.

PS: The spelling of that, Dr. Kuptsow?

AK: W-E-T-Z-L-A-R.

PS: All right, thank you.

AK: We got there in the evening. Now, the trip was, oh, one thing I should mention. On the trip from Detmold to Oberursel, we were marched. It was a forced march. I didn't have shoes. And I was in the flying boots. We marched somewhere around ten miles. We had these soldier guards.

PS: Was this your crew only? Or other…

AK: Yes, this was our crew. We had a couple of soldier guards who were carrying machine pistols, and they had some German shepherd dogs with them. And we were, this was a forced march. Any time you tried to slow down, you were hit with the rifle and you just kept on moving. The shoes I was in were not made for walking, and I developed terrific pains in the feet and I could feel that they were bleeding and blistered,

but there was no chance of stopping. So we got to Oberursel, and they put us down in a basement, at which time I was able to take off the shoes, and my feet were just a raw mass of blisters and blood.

PS: During the march, Doctor, were you subjected to any demonstrations from civilians? Demonstra-…

AK: No, not during that, that particular, along the road. One thing I have to say, when I did get off my shoes, my feet hurt so badly I could hardly tolerate it. There was a German guard, who was a, I imagine, a low-ranking army personnel, who took a look at my feet, went and got a basin of cold water, and he bathed my feet with the cold water. I don't remember anything ever feeling so good in my life. I could have kissed that man. It was one show of man to man that he did have some humanity there. But I really appreciated that. Now, I did get to Wetzlar, the interrogation station, which was right near Frankfurt. And what did I say, it was on October [looking through papers]…

PS: Being transported, Doctor, from your initial point of capture, was it all marching, or were you…

AK: No, when we left Oberursel, and we went to Wetzlar, no, all right, no, that was all marching. Okay, and I got to Oberursel on November the 29th. Okay, then, Wetzlar was an interrogation station right near Frankfurt. I was placed in a cell or a room, let's say, which was maybe about five by nine. The only contents were a bed with a straw, very thin straw mattress, and a small table, very small, probably two by two table. No bathroom facilities or anything like that.

PS: You were with fellow prisoners?

AK: Well, we all went into separate rooms.

PS: Oh.

AK: So this was, let's say, a private suite. And that was to be my home for the next, until the, December the 23rd.

PS: So you were there like for four weeks?

AK: Yeah, until December 23rd. Now the reason I figured I was there that long was because I was radar. I was later told that having transferred from Italy to England, at that particular time, the Air Force had changed the frequency of the radar, and as far as the Germans knew at that point, I was new to England, I was probably aware of the new frequency and the potentials of the radar then. And so I had quite a few sessions of interrogation. They would come to the room and take me to a central office where I was interrogated by the German officer who looked and spoke very much like Ronald Coleman. He had a beautiful, he was, he told me he had been educated at Oxford, England. And he spoke like it. And he showed me drawings on the wall of what was going on at the Battle of the Bulge, and how the American Forces were losing, and therefore I should tell him everything. Our position was, "Give name, rank and serial number and nothing else." However, within a day or two of reaching this interrogation station, they apparently knew everything about me. They told me the name of my father and my mother, where they lived.

They knew my position on the plane. Their intelligence system must have been terrific, because he told me things that I was amazed that he knew about me.

PS: As far as the radar on your plane, now your plane, all the entire crew having bailed out, and your plane obviously must have crashed.

AK: Right, right.

PS: And all the radar equipment destroyed.

AK: Apparently destroyed, yeah. So that now I, it was very difficult in solitary. Our meals in solitary, now there was no, I think everybody was treated the same there. I don't think being Jewish meant anything in particular. In the morning we would get a cup of *Ersatz* coffee. That was breakfast. Lunch, they would give us a cup of *Ersatz* coffee, one slice of bread, which was a very heavy, brown bread that looked like it was composed more of sawdust than it was of bread, and one little slab of cheese, which we learned to keep at one end of the bread, eat the bread first, and the last bite would be the piece of bread with the cheese on it and that was the, a, dessert. For dinner they would bring in a slice of bread and a bowl of sauerkraut soup, which was the most horrible thing. I haven't been able to eat sauerkraut since that day. But it had as many worms in there as it had sauerkraut, but it was something to eat. But that was our meal through all those 26 days, whatever it was, that I was down there.

PS: During those days, Doctor, did you have any communication at all with your crew, with your fellow prisoners?

AK: No. We used to, I'd hear people, another prisoner come in next door, and I would tap on the wall and I would get a response. And we would yell through to each other. I had been in there a while and these fellows were new. I'd ask them what's going on outside, because I wasn't getting any information. But then at the same time you didn't know who was in the next room, so that being careful not to give any information about yourself or what you knew.

PS: The date being December 23rd, 1944, was right in the, during the height of the German offensive of the Battle of the Bulge.

AK: The Battle of the Bulge, right.

PS: And were you getting any information at all?

AK: No, the only information I got was from this German officer, and when I would go into his office, he had a large map on the wall, and he had a red string and which he proceeded to show me how big a Bulge it was, and the American Army and Patton's forces were being routed. And maybe if I told everything I knew, that maybe they would have a special place for me. They kept throwing up the fact that I didn't have the dog tags when I was shot down and that I could be a spy and not a, an American prisoner, although they knew everything there was to know about me.

PS: Yeah.

AK: And then I was transferred, well, from the 23rd, I was transferred to the prison camp, which was *Stalag* I, and that's at Barth, B-A-R-T-H, which is, used to be a

resort town, on the Baltic. So it's about 60 or 70 miles directly north of Berlin. *Stalag* I means that it was the first camp set up for Air Force prisoners. And at the time that I got there, there were four compounds, I being the oldest part of the camp, and IV being the newest. And I was assigned to Compound 4, and I was in a room, I guess, with about eight or nine other prisoners, none of whom I knew.

PS: None of them were your own, none from your own group?

AK: No. In fact I didn't see any of them from the time that we left the police station, way back after being shot down. Now let's see, from there. All right, now in the prison camp itself, our food was made up of Red Cross parcels, and the parcel contained a number of items. And each one of us was supposed to get a Red Cross parcel. I don't know how frequently we were supposed to get it, but within about a week or ten days of being there, we were called out for, we were always called out every morning for roll call, and the camp…

PS: When you say out, Doctor, you mean the outdoors?

AK: Outdoors.

PS: Outside the building.

AK: We would line up according to the barracks that we were in, and they would call out the names and count the prisoners to make sure that everyone was accounted for. At one of these sessions, they started to call out names and asked us to go to the side. My name was one of them, and I reported over where I'm supposed to be. After the roll call they marched us off to a different section of the camp. And we were marched into another large barracks. Once we got into that barracks, we started to talk to each other, and we realized that we're all Jewish.

PS: Oh.

AK: And we were wondering what was going on at that point. We were assigned to rooms, and there were 14 of us in our particular room, everyone being Jewish. Checking with people in other rooms, yeah, the whole barracks was a Jewish barracks. And we realized that we were in a secluded section of the camp. We had our own barbed wire fence completely around us and…

PS: Separating you from the…

AK: From the rest of the camp. And we were now…

PS: How many were there?

AK: There was 14 of us in each room. Offhand I don't know how many rooms there were. But I have a layout of the room.

PS: Were they all officers, Air Force?

AK: Yes.

PS: They were all Air Force.

AK: Right.

PS: And all commissioned officers.

AK: This whole camp was Air Force officers, British, French. Oh, and actually some of these people had been there since Dunkirk.

PS: They were all mixed nationalities but all…

AK: Yeah.

PS: This, same religion.

AK: And in Compound I, these were survivors from Dunkirk on. Once they filled up that section then they started the second compound.

PS: Dunkirk would have been well in advance of the invasion.

AK: Oh yeah, at the very beginning of the war.

PS: Yeah. Way before, long before the United States was in.

AK: United States got in, yeah. So some of these people had been in there for four or five years, at least. Well, Dunkirk must have been…

PS: There were Jewish prisoners who had been there that long?

AK: Yeah, now we had no Jewish prisoners, no Jewish British or French prisoners in our section. These were all Americans.

PS: Oh, oh.

AK: This particular barracks.

PS: And no longer you being segregated as being Jewish?

AK: Well, once we hit that barracks we were all Jewish.

PS: Oh, oh, I see.

AK: Yeah, so there was no longer anybody Gentile in it.

PS: Tell me, being in northern Germany in the end of December, was there adequate protection against the…

AK: Cold?

PS: Cold, either inside or when you had to line up outside? Did you have adequate clothes for this?

AK: No, we were, we were given GI overcoats. I did get a pair of shoes somewhere on the way between stations. It didn't take me…

PS: How old were you then, Doctor?

AK: I was I guess 20 or 21. 21. Now, the, well let's see, where was I? Oh yeah, so we decided our only recourse as American prisoners was to protest to Geneva of the fact that we were being mishandled as Jews instead of as American prisoners. The head of our camp, the highest-ranking officer in the camp, was a Colonel Zempke, Z-E-M-P-K-E. He was a pilot. He was a WWII Ace, and he was the highest-ranking man there. And the second in command was a Colonel Gebreski, also a pilot ace, Navy cutter. Now, the idea of sending a protest to Geneva was our only hope, because the rumors started to float that Jewish prisoners were possibly going to be taken out of the camp and would be disposed of. We started to hear things at that point...

Tape one, side two:

PS: This is Philip Solomon, interviewing Dr. Aaron Kuptsow. This is tape one, side two. Dr. Kuptsow, if you will continue, please.

AK: At that point we started to hear stories about the way Jewish people in Germany were being treated, and we were sort of afraid that this might befall us also. So that the colonels did decide to send a protest to Geneva. But logically we figured that by the time the protest gets to Geneva, and by the time Geneva would move us out to try to do something, we'd probably be eliminated anyhow.

PS: Did you have any reason to believe that the Germans would forward that protest to Geneva?

AK: We had no way of knowing anything that was going on.

PS: Yeah. You thought the, you had hopes of…

AK: We had hopes that…

PS: That they would forward it.

AK: But we didn't put a lot of stock in, that it would do much of anything. But at that point we were suddenly aware that we were Jewish and that we meant something special to these Germans. But there's something about Jewish *mazel* [luck], the way things work out. Now we were now in Compound IV, or Compound I, I'm sorry, which was the oldest section of the camp. Now, and when we were in Compound IV, we each had, there was a room with eight or ten POWs in it, and you relied on Red Cross parcels for your food. So you did your own food preparation, or maybe a couple of prisoners would decide, well, let's combine our food and then work together. In Compound I, they had a tremendous mess hall. The food, being that they had been there for years, they had stockpiled all kinds of things, and so there was a regular call to the mess hall for your meals, and it was organized. We had people that did the serving of the food, the preparation of the food, things like that. And there were times that occurred later when the Germans were, the German trains were being shot up. According to the Geneva Convention, any trains bringing in supplies to Germany would have a Red Cross on the top of the train, and they would be respected as Red Cross trains and not attacked. They stopped putting the Red Crosses on the top of the trains and from what we understood, our own planes were shooting up the trains that were delivering the Red Cross parcels. So that across the barbed wire we could see into Compound IV they were in dire straits. We were not allowed to share anything with them. We saw them rummaging through the trash cans and things like that, trying to get food. And here in Compound I we had the mess hall and we did have eats. So I say there's something about Jewish *mazel*, because it did work out to our advantage, being pushed in there. We never received any mistreatment, because from what we understood, the Bulge turned itself around and suddenly there was a different atmosphere to the Germans.

PS: You did, you were aware of the reversal of the German offensive? You got news of…

AK: Yeah, now that was another thing. We had news every day. There would be a knock on the door, this was at night, and a slip of paper would be slipped under the door and there was typed BBC news. We got it every night.

PS: Distributed by the…

AK: By the, within the barracks itself. Who had it, we never found out.

PS: Oh, it was not [unclear].

AK: The Germans were aware that we were getting it. They would, every couple of weeks they would take us all outside and then they would go through our rooms. They would pull up the floors, they would pull out sections of the wall looking for the radio. But somebody was getting BBC news, and was well organized, because somebody was typing it up. Copies were made, and it was being distributed throughout the camp.

PS: Remarkable.

AK: We were amazed. We had no idea how it was done, but it was very effective.

PS: Really remarkable. But, during this period, you would say that the treatment of your compound, which was comprised totally of Jewish prisoners, you think the treatment, the food, the feeding and everything else was comparable to the non-Jewish prisoners?

AK: I would say so, yes.

PS: And this was a permanent prison. That is, the *Stalag* was a permanent installation…

AK: Right.

PS: For POWs.

AK: That's right.

PS: Were they, were there enlisted men also there at all?

AK: No. *Stalag Luft*, *Stalag* is the prison; *Luft* means…

PS: Yeah, air.

AK: The air, so that this was strictly an Air Force prison. No, this was all officers. The enlisted men were in separate camps. So we had no enlisted men to my knowledge at *Stalag* I.

PS: Was there any work? Were there any work details at all?

AK: No. Another thing about, you were an officer and a gentlemen by decree. All we could do is read and sit around. When we had four men in a room, we played bridge in the day. And we got into the room until the day we were liberated.

PS: Were they pleasant companions to be with?

AK: Oh yeah. Our conversation was mainly about food, because we were basically hungry, not starving, but hungry, so that when we had a chance to speak to each other, why we talked about food. In fact in the book here, I have a list of restaurants. For example, here in the book I have a menu for Barth [phonetic] on the Baltic, which gives

you an idea of the food. For example, Monday we had creamed Spam and prunes, stew, boiled spuds, sauerkraut. Tuesday we had creamed beef, prunes, baked sea rations, mashed spuds and gravy and kraut. We always had kraut. Wednesday, fried spuds, gravy, fried Spam, spuds, chocolate pudding. So we weren't starving. But…

PS: And this was in addition to the Red Cross…

AK: Oh no, no. Because remember, Red Cross parcels were delivered to individuals, if they could get them, in other sections of the camp. The food that came into our compound was all pooled, so that we never saw the Red Cross parcels. We had cooks and we had waiters. They did all the preparation.

PS: These were German?

AK: No, these were our own personnel.

PS: Cooks and…

AK: Volunteers.

PS: Oh, volunteers.

AK: But our, yeah, discussions were mainly about food, never any discussions to, of women, because that was the furthest thing from our mind. Here's a list of the places to eat, from all over the country, that we talked about. And we always talked about some day we would, most of the fellows in our room were from New York, and we talked about going to Lindy's someday and have ourselves a big spread. But, but that's what we did, the main thing we talked about food.

PS: Through those days, the months, weeks, you had no reason to believe that you were being treated other than the way that the non-Jewish prisoners were receiving treatment?

AK: No, actually, from that time, other than the fact that we were segregated, I don't think our treatment was any worse.

PS: So really there was no reason for the segregation, as far as being discriminated, food or treatment?

AK: No, the only thing we could think of was they did have something in mind when they moved us there.

PS: Yeah.

AK: But with the change of the tide of the war, they probably, they decided not to go any further.

PS: Yeah. Was there any, did you feel any antisemitism and acts of violence from any of the guards, German, that is, personal animosity displayed by German guards?

AK: No, never had any problem. Most of the guards that we came in contact with, for example, the guards around the prison camp, were mainly older people. In fact, we watched some of them climbing up to the tower, and they looked like they were men who were in their 60s and 70s, which at that time, to us, was old. And [unclear] they could hardly get up to the tower up there. Whether they could shoot with accuracy, nobody knew.

But they were old. We used to see the *Hitlerjugend* march by on the road. They were young boys, and they were on their way to train.

PS: Yeah, the Hitler Youth organization.

AK: Now directly across the road from us there was a concentration camp, which was, from what we understood, primarily French and Czech people. We'd see them sometimes in the morning, being loaded onto trucks and apparently going out to work stations. We had no idea where they were going or whether they came back or not. But we used to see them leaving.

PS: Do you believe, Doctor, that this *Stalag Luft* that you were in, because of the fact it was Air Force and all commissioned officers, that your treatment could have been quite different than the treatment of…

AK: Oh yeah.

PS: Army enlisted?

AK: I imagine, yeah, the enlisted personnel apparently were made to work, from what we heard. They were used to repair some of the damages that were being done in Germany and stuff like that.

PS: You had no contact with them?

AK: We had, no. But these were stories that came in…

PS: Yeah.

AK: As new people came into the camp.

PS: They were within the same, a different compound, the same *Stalag Luft*?

AK: No, no enlisted personnel were in there.

PS: Oh. Not even other compounds?

AK: Not as far as I know.

PS: Right.

AK: I think they were all officers.

PS: During this period, did you have any privilege of writing to your family…

AK: Yeah.

PS: Or receiving mail?

AK: In fact, I have a whole bunch of letters here. I think we were allowed like once or twice a month, that we could write home. And these were the things that, the kind of letters that we got. There was only one problem. I wrote a number of them, and none of them ever got home.

PS: None of the mail, none of the letters you wrote?

AK: No, I have a bunch of them here, which I got after I was liberated. We raided different warehouses and things like that. And, lo and behold, all of our mail was stacked in boxes.

PS: They actually never mailed…

AK: No.

PS: Do you re [unclear]?

AK: My parents never got a letter from me from the time I was in the...

PS: Did they receive a notification that you were a Prisoner of War?

AK: Yeah, actually they were notified. It was some time, I guess two or three days after I was shot down that I was missing in action, and I think the story they got was, they thought that I was, that I was dead. But then they were notified that I was a POW. But that was a while later. My mother was a very emotional woman. She went bananas when she…

PS: Well, I could, I would think so. [pause] There are letters that you received.

AK: Yeah, these are all the letters…

PS: Was there any restriction on incoming mail, that is, how many…

AK: I never got one.

PS: Incoming mail?

AK: I never got any of these.

PS: So you had no communication either way. Your letters were not going out.

AK: As far as I knew, they were being delivered, but…

PS: You never rec-…

AK: It turns out they never were.

PS: Oh, and you…

AK: And I never received any.

PS: Oh, I thought that all of these envelopes were…

AK: No, some of these were…

PS: Letters that you had…

AK: See, these were all letters that I had written at camp, but none were…

PS: Could never…

AK: No. See, I have a whole pile of them. Here's a letter, this is a very moving letter. Now this was written December 26th.

PS: You'd only been there for about three days.

AK: Yeah, this was very, very emotional.

PS: In the *Stalag*.

AK: No, this is December 26th. I was shot down November 26th.

PS: But you arrived at the *Stalag* December 23rd, was it?

AK: Yeah.

PS: Yeah, so this, do you care to read a bit of the letter, Doctor?

AK: Yeah. It's dated here December 26th, 1944. "My dear son Aaron." I may break up on this.

PS: Yeah.

AK: "We are all well. Hoping to hear the same from you. Didn't get any mail from you three weeks. It's more than a month we didn't hear from you. We are worried. Aaron, if you want me to stop worrying, please write and write soon, as I don't know what to think of what happened, as I've been getting mail regular from you. Now I don't. You

know your mother is the caring kind. Please, Aaron, if you have any love for your mother and father, send me just a few words that you are all right and all well. Please do that for me, your mother. I don't know what to write to you just now. When I'll get mail from you I'll write more. We received the souvenirs. Preston Kuptsow didn't get his yet." Now these were things I apparently had found and had mailed out before, I was shot down. "You had said you sent it out. Did you, didn't get mail from Joe? Did you get your Christmas packages? Aaron, please write soon. God be with you, my child. God shall save you from the enemy, and you shall be with me home soon." And then it's just, "God bless you, my son. God bless you." So, they hadn't heard anything from me at that point.

PS: Yeah. Where he refers of letters received, was that prior to your capture?

AK: Yeah.

PS: What is the date of that letter, Doctor?

AK: December the 26th…

PS: Oh.

AK: 1944.

PS: So any previous correspondence…

AK: I was already…

PS: He refers to was before your capture.

AK: Before the capture, yeah. Yeah. We had, I was shot down November 26th. I had a niece who was born November 29th. And I knew she was on her way, but I never found out who or what until after I came home. But I had sent out some gifts to Preston, who was another nephew, who was like at that time was going to be two years old. And that's who she refers to, Preston.

PS: Yeah. Aside from your being segregated with the other Jewish prisoners, would you consider that the Germans were adhering reasonably well to the terms and conditions of the Geneva Convention?

AK: I would think so. I, you know, I really never really felt harshly toward them. I think I was worried, the one time I got a punch in the jaw.

PS: Yeah.

AK: And when they segregated us, we were kind of worried about it. But when we sort of, we were getting news, we saw the condition of the guards that were guarding us, we realized that, I don't know how much food they themselves had. And I think we weren't in such bad shape. I would say the group in the other compounds might have been, because they relied on more of the parcels than what we did. Oh, by the way, the, all good things come to an end, and, let's see, oh, March the 27th. Red Cross parcels arrived in the camp to end six weeks of pure Jerry rations. So that was March the 27th. Tuesday, April 3rd, Max Schmeling [German heavyweight boxing champion] made a tour of the camp. I remember it. What the hell he was doing there, I have no idea.

PS: Did he really tour the camp? That is, just to see…

AK: Well, he…

PS: To see what looked good or…

AK: Well, you know, he was a German, you know, so…

PS: Was he in the German Army at that time?

AK: I don't know whether he was at that, I don't remember him being in uniform.

PS: I don't, no, I don't recall.

AK: I think he was in civilian clothes.

PS: Did the American Red Cross ever, or the International Red Cross, ever come in physically to inspect the camp?

AK: Not that we saw. We heard once or twice that there was a delegation from Geneva at the camp, but we never saw them as such. Or, you know, they may have met with the camp leaders, but what I'm saying, all good things come to an end. On April the 4th, at four o'clock in the morning, the mess hall burned down. Now we formed a, I remember forming a fire brigade, with buckets. And we stood in line. We passed the buckets. By the time the buckets got to the front they were almost empty. So we tried to put out the fire but to no avail.

PS: This was not…

AK: Then that was the end of the mess hall.

PS: This was not a result of bombing, the fire?

AK: No, no. We were never bombed as such. I think our Air Force probably knew there was a camp there.

PS: Yeah.

AK: We used to hear, you know, in the distance, but…

PS: Now you were getting daily news, so you knew that we're into December, January. At what point in time are we up to at this time? April, I think?

AK: Well, that was in April, yeah.

PS: April.

AK: Yes.

PS: And so you're, is there anything between that point of time and your liberation that you want to give, give us information on?

AK: No, we have here, let's see, on April the 30th split trenches were dug. Huns evacuate camp. Military installations were blown up. Americans took over the camp. That is our own. We took over the camp at 2300 hours. Now the German guards left everything. Everybody was running.

PS: Now that was not the military that took over, when you say you took over, the Americans took over the camp, American prisoners.

AK: Right.

PS: And you had not at that time seen the presence of any American or British military?

AK: Troops, troops, no. The Russians were coming. Tuesday, May the 1st the Russians were three miles from us, and they had been contacted by Colonel Zempke. The *Bürgermeister* [German Mayor] in the camp committed suicide. They had planned a complete surrender. BBC playing Strauss [unclear]. The Russians arrived at 10:00 PM that night. Hitler is dead. Peace soon. Those are my notes.

PS: Going back just a bit, Dr. Kuptsow, were you, during that period, the period of your incarceration, was your physical and mental condition, would you say, you felt okay, mentally, physically? You were in fairly, reasonably good condition?

AK: Yeah.

PS: And your mental attitude was that hope, you had hope of liberation shortly?

AK: Yeah, because of the news that we were getting.

PS: Yeah.

AK: And our favorite was Joe Stalin. He was the closest to us. In fact, at night there was one prisoner who, after the lights went out and things were quiet, would yell out, "Come on, Joe!" You could hear him all over the camp. So we were waiting for Stalin to arrive.

PS: But up until then the Germans never did find the source of the news.

AK: No.

PS: The radio or whatever. Did you, did any of the men know?

AK: I have no idea. I never found out.

PS: Isn't it that you probably didn't want to know.

AK: Yeah. And we were guarded in the camp by, the barracks were elevated on stilts. They had dogs that used to go under the barracks at night. The camp itself was patrolled by Germans during the night. We used to have what we called ferrets. Germans used to crawl around under the barracks and listen to the conversation in the room. And I remember one night one of the fellows, we had a loose board in the floor, and we heard someone underneath there. And he had collected material from the toilet, and he lifted up the board and poured it down. And we heard the German say something in German and get out. But we were punished for it the next day.

PS: Doctor, when you were liberated by the Russians, what then? Did they immediately start to take care of your physical needs and…

AK: No, one, one, the Russians came in, and that was quite a sight because they had the, I think, Mongolian type horses that were the lead. They came in on horses that seemed like they were about eight feet tall, with the double bandoliers and the rifles and the wagons. And the women accompanied the troops in the carts, playing with the, their little accordions. And they would stop the march once in a while, and they would jump off the horses and the carts, and they would dance. And they'd drink their vodka. And then the line would start to move up. They'd jump back on and they'd move forward. So it was a very exciting evening when they came in. They sort of took over the camp but not directly. We didn't know anything about it. We had to fend for ourselves mainly. There was one

Jewish fellow in the camp who was well-schooled in Russian. And he became the translator with the top Russian officers that were there. And we felt sorry for him, because, I think. we were under Russian control for something like, it was either thirteen or nineteen days. During that time, whenever he sat in as an interpreter for the Russians, he had to join them in the drinking. And they were always drinking vodka. And we would see the poor guy coming home at night, and he could hardly stand up because he was so drunk from the vodka. But as far as we know he was the only one who was able to translate for them. I forget his name, off the top of my head.

PS: So that was the regular Russian Army that had come in…

AK: Yeah.

PS: And so you were under their control for about two, two-and-a-half weeks, correct?

AK: Right.

PS: Then?

AK: Well, then we were told the American planes were coming in, and they would fly us to France. And I forget now what day we left, but we were flown to, they set up camps in France. The camps, each one was a station for liberated POWs. Now I went to Camp Lucky Strike.

PS: Oh.

AK: Each camp was named after a cigarette.

PS: Yeah, I was there.

AK: And it was near Lyon, France.

PS: Yeah. Yeah.

AK: And, so at that camp they attempted to build us up, and they had these large containers of, oh, what do you call it, egg nog, all in one place. So when you came out of the PX, you came out of the chow hall, there were these big drums of egg nog, and you carried your canteen, you scooped it out and you drank it.

PS: Was your physical condition reasonably good?

AK: I would say, yeah. We were young.

PS: Much of a weight loss?

AK: I was thin, a lot thinner than what I am now, and thinner than when I had gone in. But I think by the time we finished all the egg nog and all in Camp Lucky Strike, why, by the time we got back to the States, why we were in pretty good shape. I did get the opportunity to shake hands with Ike Eisenhower. He came to the camp to visit us and to tell us he was going to try to get us home as quickly as he could. And he went down the line. And he happened to, one of the senators from the South--I have a lot of freckles--he stopped to shake my hand. He thought maybe I was from the South. And I said, “No, I’m from Pennsylvania.” Senator Duff was there, and so he shook hands with me and then Ike came over and shook hands. And he asked how anxious I was to get home and I said,

"Very." And he said, "Well, you'll be getting home soon." Then I swore I wasn't going to wash my hand, you know.

PS: At this time we're talking about probably within the month of May, the…

AK: Yeah.

PS: Official termination, the end of the war, German surrender, was May the 8th, 1945. So we're still within the month of May, Doctor?

AK: Yeah.

PS: And what, the first time you had vocal…

AK: Well, no, this was after, after the European war was over.

PS: Yeah, that was May the 8th.

AK: Now we were, at that point the war was over. I don't know when hostilities ceased and whether, when the signing was, but, and I don't know just what day, I got out of the camp.

PS: Yeah, May 8th. May 8th, 1945 was the official…

AK: It was May the 2nd I was told, that's when the Russians came.

PS: Yeah.

AK: And we were there, as I say it was either 13 or 19 days. So it'd be like May 21st.

PS: Yeah. Now…

AK: When I got out of…

PS: From Camp Lucky Strike, that was your final processing before being returned home.

AK: Right.

PS: You left Lucky Strike directly for the port for your return to the United States.

AK: Right.

PS: Which was about what, approximately?

AK: Well, I got back to the States. We were flown back. Oh no, I'm sorry. We were on the *Admiral Mayo*, which was a ship that took us back. It was a six-day voyage. And we came in, I think, at New York. We took a train to Fort Dix. I got to Fort Dix on June the 23rd, which happened to be my birthday. And I was quite surprised, because as the train pulled into the station, there was a PA system that kept calling, "Lieutenant Kuptsow, Lieutenant Kuptsow, report to the platform." I didn't know what the heck was going on, but I went out on the platform, and lo and behold my brother and sister-in-law were there.

PS: Oh. This was at Fort Dix?

AK: At Fort Dix. And they had talked their way into the station, and had arranged for me to go home because they had a birthday party ready for me.

PS: Did you have any vocal contact with your...

Tape two, side one:

PS: This is Philip Solomon, interviewing Dr. Aaron Kuptsow. This is tape two, side one, and we will continue the interview with Dr. Kuptsow. If you will continue, Doctor?

AK: All right. So this was on June 23rd that I did get to see my family. I was able to enjoy a gathering to celebrate my birthday. And then the next morning I reported back to Fort Dix. I was there a couple of days for processing. I had taken a pre-dental course at the University of Pennsylvania before enlisting. I applied while I was at home for those couple of days, I applied to the Temple and Penn Dental Schools. And then I was told that my separation would take place in Miami Beach. And after a, I guess it was a 30-day leave at home, I was assigned to Miami Beach, Florida, to await separation from the service. I get down there, and after a couple of days they announced that only married men and those with cars were allowed to stay at Miami. The rest of us were being transferred to San Antonio. I got to San Antonio. In the meantime I had been accepted at Penn and Temple Dental Schools. I decided to go to Temple and sent in my acceptance, on the condition that I would be out of the service. I hung around in San Antonio. I saw the chaplain. I saw the commanding officer, and they just all said, "Get in line and you'll get out as soon as we can get you out." Meanwhile, school started and I finally got my discharge, and it was like 19 days after school had started. I had been away from school for two years and I figured I would never be able to catch up. So I decided to do something else for the year. The Dean at Temple got me a job at the Climax Dental Lab at 16th and Walnut and I started to work there. And in doing so I got sick and tired of looking at teeth. Meanwhile, my brother was already a physician. And he said, "You came back as an officer and as a hero and everything. Why don't you apply to the Osteopathic School," which I did. They said they would take me if I got six more credits. I went back to the University of Pennsylvania, got my credits, and then entered medical school.

PS: You had been a college graduate when you went into the service?

AK: No, I had two years.

PS: Oh, oh.

AK: At the University of Pennsylvania. At that time you just needed two years to get into dental school.

PS: Doctor, I'm very curious. You know, after the war there were a couple of television programs, such as *Hogan's Heroes*, that pictured the German prison guards as bungling idiots, and the American POWs had a wonderful time pulling tricks on the German guards and all. Now I myself, although I was never a prisoner, I really resented, and I felt that, well, those that went through all the painful days and weeks and months being POWs, I thought, "God, they really must resent this." It so badly misrepresented the life of most POWs that I thought I myself would deeply resent it were I a prisoner of war, had I been a former prisoner myself. What was your reaction? You know about…

AK: Well, I didn't, yeah, I didn't really resent the programs. The camp itself was nothing like what they portrayed. There was nothing really funny about the camp. The contact with the German officers, the German guards, was very formal. When we were called out for formation, we followed orders. They had the German shepherd dogs and the, well, all kinds of vicious-looking dogs that were all around us. All the Germans had their machine pistols. To my knowledge no one ever escaped from our camp. And I don't think there was any horsing around. As far as, the programs, I think, I looked at as just a comedy type of thing, and so I really didn't resent it as such. I think they were just trying to make a joke out of the bungling Germans.

PS: Yeah, my resentment was based on the fact that I thought a lot of people viewing this would really get the idea, oh, that…

AK: It was all fun and games.

PS: Yeah, that they really didn't have it too bad.

AK: Yeah, I could see your point there. But…

PS: And I thought that POWs would really deeply resent. Looking, reflecting back, do you think that your overall treatment as a prisoner of war was reasonably acceptable, considering the fact that you were being held by the enemy? Do you think that the treatment was as well as you could have expected?

AK: Yeah, it, you know, like for example, taking showers. I think we were allowed a shower maybe once a month or something like that. I remember once, in the shower they had electric heaters on the wall. And when I went in for the shower I put my shirt, instead of putting it on the floor, I laid it on one of these heaters and I went in and got my shower, and then came out. Oh, the reason I got the shower, I had developed scabies, because I had worn the same shirt for so long that I developed this rash on my wrists, and it was determined that I had scabies. So they allowed me to take that particular shower. But the shirt, and laying on the heater, it caught fire. And it took me a couple of weeks before I got another shirt.

PS: During those months you spent at the *Stalag*, most of those months were during the cold winter.

AK: Right.

PS: Did you have adequate heat in the, in your room, in your, in the building itself?

AK: Each room had a coal stove. And we had a delivery of briquettes of coal that we used, and we used them sparingly because you couldn't get all you wanted of them. But the fire was, like damped, overnight. And overnight you slept with clothes on and there were a couple of GI blankets that you had on the bed.

PS: At the time of your liberation, you would say that you had no marked physical suffering from the, anything that you carried into the later civilian life or up to the present time? You don't think there's anything mentally or physically that…

AK: I think, my dislike of sauerkraut. I'll never get over and I'll never eat it. The other thing, I became more introspective. I had like 24 days of solitary confinement while I was at the interrogation center, with no one to speak to, actually, and I think I became more mature, if I could say that. And I don't know whether that helped or not, but I know that from the time I came back, what had been a C or a B student in college came back as an A student. And I was much more, you know, ready to, to study and become something.

PS: Very good. Doctor, we've reached the conclusion of what questions that I had planned to ask. Is there anything that we didn't cover that you would like to add to your testimony?

AK: No, I don't think. I think we've, you know, pretty much covered it.

PS: Yeah, I believe so. And certainly I want to thank you on behalf of the Holocaust Oral History Archive of Gratz College. These tapes, your testimony, will be a part of our Archive into future. This, our testimony that we store at the Archive, we hope that someday will, after the, we're all gone, that they will serve to enable historians to get a good picture of the good, the bad, mostly bad, of course. And so on behalf of the Archive, I thank you very, very much.

AK: Right. If there's anything that, you know, you would like to copy, I don't have a copy machine here, but if you want…

PS: Yeah. Oh, I'll…

AK: To go through these, right, and make copies of it and then have it for the Archives too.

PS: Yeah. Oh, very fine. And thank you, again, Doc.

AK: Right.