

Interview with VILEM KRIZ

Holocaust Oral History Project

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Q: WE'RE AT TEMPLE BETH SHALOM FOR THE
HOLOCAUST ORAL HISTORY PROJECT. WE'RE
INTERVIEWING VILEM KRIZ. MY NAME IS PEGGY
COSTER, AND WITH ME IS JUDY COLLIGAN AND DENISE
LEITZEL.

WOULD YOU START BY TELLING US YOUR NAME
AND HOW YOU SPELL IT?

A: My name is in Czech, Vilem Kriz, but
it's difficult to pronounce to almost every other
nation than Czech. For this reason I am calling
from beginning in the United States, Vilem Kriz.
Spelling is V-i-l-e-m, K-r-i-z. I am born in
Czechoslovakia, in Prague, October 1921, and
during the war I live there. After the war I
leave August 1st, 1945 -- '46, pardon me. I beg
your pardon. '46 I leave to Paris as a foreign
correspondent for peace conference.

Talking about this project, I think
that I must start much earlier than 1938 when we

were occupied by Nazi Army. My first recollection of Nazi is my uncle. My uncle has a hotel in Zahori, Z-a-h-o-r-i, which is about one hundred and fifty miles from Prague. It's a beautiful valley and the river, and he open it like a tourist hotel we will say today.

During the winter of course was not many people there and one day visit him, with about another three people, visit him Engineer (Formis). Engineer (Formis) will be first who broadcast anti-Hitler or Nazi propaganda, and was the first victim outside of Germany for this activity.

He broadcast about for half a year, maybe longer. I have no recollection how long it was. One day came the four people like a German tourist, which was nothing unusual, and would like to stay in hotel for one week. But as we know later, one of these four, which all was SS in civil clothes, but one of this SS was a very important man later, Reinhardt Heydrich, who was a protector in so-called protectorate ().

About second day when live in the hotel, suddenly at night two of these four attack my uncle with aunt in their hotel office, take a

Spelling

rope and tied them, and go upstairs later and kill engineer (Formis) and one more person, which I don't know the name. But two people was killed and disappeared.

This was the first tragedy which I think the war not feel it's too much important, but it was because after this was no other propaganda from this part of Europe. And because we were neighbor of the Germany was not big distance and everybody in Germany can listen. So, this was my first encounter with Nazi. My uncle was sentenced to four years. Of course he don't need to go to jail and was on condition. This year was about 1936.

1938 was one of the most painful days for Czechoslovakia and for Czech people. We were betrayed in Munich when Chamberlain, DeGaulle and Hitler signed the agreement that so-called Sudetenland will be occupied by Germany. For us it was a sentence to death because we knew then Hitler will not stop and will occupy whole Czechoslovakia.

To say about Germany and Czech people, Germany is a certain historical enemy of Czech because already nine hundred century we have the first problem with German Reich. So, it was

never after we were occupied by Austria,
Hungarian. We was part of Austria-Hungarian
empire for three hundred years. Finally after
three hundred years we was liberated and our
republic was established 1918 by

(). And unfortunately this
independence, and one that I am very proud of, it
was one model of the best democracy, if not in
whole world, in Europe for sure.

Unfortunately, after 20 years, almost
exactly 20 years because 1918 and 1938, well,
well, well. Munich was certain horrible
frustration for nation. Number one, we was never
think that we will be so humiliated when
Chamberlain say we will not go to war for the
nation about we know nothing. His peace of our
time was not for long, and I am very sorry that
Great Britain pay the very, very, very high price
for this peace of our time.

Czechoslovakia from 1937 mobilize and
everybody from 15 to 60 was mobilized, so you can
see we really mean to fight. The enthusiasm to
fight for freedom was so great that I cannot
even -- I have no words to explain it. It was
just something what you will never see again. I
hope so. But it was absolutely not ()

the nation are willing to fight, and that we are not giving anything voluntarily, and we lost our enthusiasm when we know about pact in Munich.

The life after was just wait when we will be occupied. Even then in many newspapers and how we will have a nice life, especially certain foreign newspapers. We not believe it. We knew that it's a matter of year, not years. And of course 1938, March 15, came occupation. This day was so ugly. Winter is not pleasant month in Czechoslovakia, but this was most ugliest month. Of course it was no more Czechoslovakia in this months because (Slovaki) take with Hitler's blessing was independent state already which was not occupied by Hitler and so was only Czech people who really drink the chalice of the poison to the bottom.

Spelling

Next this day was empty street. All in the certain places people were crying, crying. Completely like freeze, but crying. And looking you can see through the photo archive you can see people in heroic face. I am not saying this because I am talking about my nation, but I am talking as an objective journalist who saw it and somebody who was inside of me the sad, same like these millions of people.

This first time my nation have no reputation to be united. When we are free everybody have a different opinion about everything, but this time there was a first time again in the history of my generation when I saw really nation completely united. Why I am talking about it, remember it. It's a very important because we, and again I am very proud, we never was anti-Semite nation. And as nation united so much I would like say then whole nation was anti-Semite.

This was a year which we take heroically, then we have nothing else to do. We must immediately obsolete the army, Czech army. All our weapons were taken away from us, and this is what also help a lot Hitler because we have one of the armament and preparation for the war. We know today that Great Britain was not ready even for skirmish with Hitler, and France was not much better if he lost the fight in I think three weeks. Even Belgic and Holland cannot be too much prepared. So, the Czechoslovakian army and weapons was a very, very welcome help to Hitler. This was sad and tragic day of March 15.

What was after this days was calmness. Hitler, German army I must say, was correct to

the population. But Reinhardt Heydrich was the one who came with the army, German army, to Prague and first was arrest my uncle because Heydrich never forget, and his two daughters and his wife. My uncle die in Dachau. From the beginning it mean from 1938 up to 1945 he was in Dachau. And we have no proof about it, but he died on March of the hunger during almost on the end of the war.

Two daughters was keep, for some reason which is unknown to me, in Dresden jail in few cubic meter was their cell, so life was much worse than dying. I spoke with them and told us to die would be much more mercy then to be keep so many years under such circumstances. Maybe why not die is of course much, much later I read in the literature. Then one of this was this hotel live also both brother Streicher.

Streicher, as I am sure you know, was the first who start Nazi party, but was first Hitler have the number seven. It was the first who absolutely recognize the bestiality of Hitler. Immediately denounced any, any membership in this party because it was absolutely not their intention to make something what Hitler make from it.

Hitler always would like have a party. He was a very good speaker, demagogue, and need the party someplace to put organize, organize, organize. For this reason he organize SSSR first, SR first. After all these huge, huge machine of terror. For this reason Hitler like party which have nationalism, which was his greatest thing, Great Germany four thousand year Third Reich, and have the possibility to put together and speak to the millions. This party was one what he very much welcome.

But Streicher immediately left Germany and stay in Prague. Maybe it was then why it was safe and keep in jail because maybe Gestapo was thinking they can know more and more by completely dehumanize and so on. But it's my theory. It's not true. My niece never talk about it.

Q: I WANTED TO SPELL STREICHER'S NAME.
WAS THAT S-T-R-E-I-C-H-E-R?

A: Yes, s-e-l-l, cell. You know how you call a small jail, small jail where one person is only? Cell.

Q: NO, I WAS ASKING ABOUT STREICHER'S
NAME, THE GUY WHO WENT TO PRAGUE.

A: Oh, Streicher. S-t-r-e-i-c-h-e-r. And

was two brothers. I knew first name, but now I cannot remember what was their first name. But was brothers. One brother --

Q: JULIUS?

A: No, no. If you will tell me, if you will help me I will definitely know. You know 45 years I never spoke about them.

Q: THAT'S OKAY, I JUST WANTED TO MAKE SURE.

A: Streicher. One I think lived few years ago he still live in Canada. What happened to second I don't know. I think he die in Prague after. I think that he commit suicide. This is not that I know. But I think then the husband of my niece die in Prague and his brother left to Canada. This is my knowledge.

Some more? Something else? Is it all right?

Q: IT'S GREAT.

A: It's not too much talking? I would like to say only fact, what I live, what I know, what I was witness and so on and what, of course, is very close to my family.

Q: JUST GO AHEAD AND GO ON WITH THE STORY AND WE'LL ASK QUESTIONS LATER.

A: Okay. So, this is also true. I don't

think that brothers Streicher was ever, ever
someway guilty of the Nazi party. What Nazi
party was later, it was Hitler's work no doubt
Hitler, Goering, Goebbels, and after the others.
I think then Czechs know more than any other
nation because number one Czech was always by
Hitler called Bolshevik nation, which by this
time we definitely not think this is bad.

Second, as you know, Jews, Slavs and
Gypsy was on the list to completely make the same
Holocaust for all these three groups. So, it was
only a matter of time. For example, after the
war I read about then Hitler has a plan the
Czechs which will be not killed. Gypsy will be
completely wiped out, and then Czech, only few
highly specialized people will work until will be
able, and then after lost of uselessness will be
sent -- he already for us, I am not sure that he
asked Brazil government about it, but I know for
many years during the war we talk about it.
After the war some documents came to the light
and I know then we will be relocated to the
Amazon someplace to horrible climate, and so and
this will be the next place for Czechs. But I
think then owner of this land was Brazil and in
my opinion Hitler never asked them if it will be

possible for them.

Of course Russian was also will be mercilessly destroyed because Hitler would like to use Russian territory especially () and all this for the recreation for SS and Gestapo and all the members of party, and for the movie studios. Has a fantastic plan was Russia, fantastic plan. So again, he don't ask Russian people what think about it, and you know then Russians fight at Stalingrad so hard that this was a turning point in Hitler war luck.

I am definitely no communist. Even though sometime when I am talking like this call me communist, but I am Czech. In the time of Hitler you have two camps. One was pro-Nazi and one camp was pro-Russian. For us, a Slav, was much easier to be with Russian than Nazi. Nazi was impossible, absolutely impossible. Then on the other hand be with Russian, even though was communist, was possible, easy, absolutely easy because if we can trust somebody then we'll fight. On the end Hitler was Stalin, all Russian people.

We know that British are very weak. We know that France is lost. So, who was the third power in the war in Europe? Only Russian. When

war start one was absolutely true. Russian was not fighting for communism Russian, was fighting for mightier Russia and this is different. Same like during Napoleonic war, was not communism and Russian fight and sacrifice everything. Same was in the first war and same thing was in the second war.

First war, second war, and then came the revolution was a domestic affair because Czar make so many mistakes that no one can be surprised. If only Czar have the common sense or have the much more interest about Russian people, I am sure then never was revolution. But revolution was possible then everything was rotten, everything.

But second war, beginning of second war, for example, then Stalin signs agreement nobody take to seriously. Why? Not then Russian will attack Germany. Slav people very, very seldom, as a matter of fact I don't I think it's in history one case when Russian attack, but I don't know how start Russian-Japanese war, so I would like say then it is not our character attack first. I think it's Slav character is really endure lot and lot of humiliation. So, nobody believe that this is forever, but

everybody was believing that Hitler will attack Russian sooner or later, that this will be the case, and it was. Believe me, the joy, the joy when Hitler June or July 6th I think, and when this Hitler attack, oh, everybody was surrounded by joy because everybody believes then this is the beginning of the end. No doubt about it. When you read the history it's true. Stalingrad was the most important change in Hitler victories. And what was really -- I will tell you just very little story.

? Victory in every European language is victory, but in German it's () and start with "C". So, legally everybody, with the greatest enthusiasm, was painting "V".

? Everywhere you saw big "V"! People was in this time already, it is not the Churchill who first started, I don't know if we started, but definitely I remember our greeting was like this, [holds two fingers up in a "V"] because this makes a beautiful victory, which is () in Czech. So, everywhere in Prague overnight was victory.

Believe me again, this was such atmosphere that even when the war was over people was not so enthusiastic and so full of life, full

of hope, and full of everything. We knew that now we can sacrifice everything, and we sacrifice lot after this, but we know that victory is ours. Nobody believe, nobody. And what was good, that also not believe the Czech Nazi.

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(sic) We have the small, but very unpleasant people, which was publishing the newspaper, the name was in Czech () and in English it's (Flack). And in this paper of course denounce the Czech, who was well-known anti-Nazi and also anti-Semite. It was very anti-Semite newspaper. So, nobody read it because it was so disgusting that even Czechs, who say don't like Jew, but cannot read this garbage. It was the worst, worst disgusting garbage. And of course after the war all these people, some was killed, murdered and some was just hanged for all this activity against Czech nation. So this was also one of the two more probably people which are in every nation.

So, I would like to say, this was good. When Hitler attack Russian was very good. Then many people collaborate because was believing that now is the time will be four thousand years, so at least during his life he would like live good. And here was one of the most bestial side

of people. For better money, which was not millions, which was not something extraordinary big, in America you will say for a couple bucks, betray, and this was disgusting, was disgusting.

(? on name) And again, I must say who was brave in this time was communist because (Goebbels) is a fascist will no going against Russia, and no communist will do it in this time. So, communism has completely different imagine then he has after (Kudeta), communist (Kudeta) in Prague.

spelling So, it was one of our greatest days. Most sadness day was March 15, and the greatest day was Hitler attack on Soviet Russia.

After, biggest demonstration was 1939 from, again, Czech students. Czech University students have the one greatest tradition, demonstrate. Even if the nation do nothing, this is almost duty, almost duty, visibly protest against enemy. One, I think it was in Eleventh Century, Czech students attack the Sweden soldiers, Swedish soldiers. This is well known, and won the fight, and save the Prague from Swedish.

So, in Europe you can be attacked by everybody. You don't never know from what side. So, you can see then, for example, in this

() revolution, '89, it was nothing extra or nothing was unusual. It was just tradition of university student. University students fight in the ancient time of our nation and also we fight -- I was there of course on the street. I am proud of these things you know. Do not take it as vanity. It's proudness, and I was together with nation. With all this we was only one, Czech, and nothing else.

So, we make great demonstration and hundred thousand, ten thousand, five thousand every night, every time. During the day too, but the night was our time. When Nazi soldiers attack us and here was a little bit, don't take me wrong, a little bit of civilization, little bit. I not saw it during the 70's here. We always when we feel that we will be take over by Nazi and usually SS, which mean (death), and so we start () which is very emotion () and usual stop, don't attack us. So, at least plenty of people can disappear. Of course, who was in first line, (). This never, never fail. Always (). Of course this was 1939. I not believe that 1942 will help, you know, but this was few months after occupation

when Germany still would like put some picture on face, would like save the face.

But November was something what I hope shows the world that with the Nazi it's not compromise. This was, in November Nazi occupied all houses where students live, university houses where students live and circle and circle it, and many and many thousand take to the concentration camp. Of course in this time I think after, I do not know the exact date, but say five months or so, many of them just sent home. Of course with one order. Never, never you will talk about where you were and what you saw. Of course no Czech can keep mouth shut, you know. This is definitely one of our national tradition.

Soon we know about all this hell because these people saw other prisoners, talk with them because almost everybody speak fluent German. Was not difficult to have the conversation, and so suddenly very soon we know everything.

Other things what Nazi did, one of things which never nation will after the war will not forget to the Czech who collaborate with Nazi because after this -- before this things 1939 even when Nazi occupied us the Czech say look it

British betray us French do the same thing so what. It's only one way. It's collaboration with them. Of course this was minority not majority.

And another thing, people was very unhappy then in this crisis and government don't do this or do this and such things and say at least Hitler will make the world order, so first time when I here that somebody will be make new world order. A few times we can read it now in our paper too. But it was first when I hear it 1939 in Czechoslovakia. Of course people say this order we don't need. And was a discussion between Czechs on right side and Czechs on the left side or Czech in the middle, but Czech.

Of course in November or something would shake the nation and Hitler never have the sympathy of nation. I'm not saying it's the first time we start hate him, no, but in this unity he has no more sympathizers. If everybody condemn the occupation nobody, nobody and even if somebody not condemn the occupation and say fine this will be new order, nobody collaborate with this new order and this was closing Czech university. () University and every university in Czechoslovakia was closed forever,

and was open first time 1945.

Hitler of course was generous. He say that if Czechs would like study in University then to go Germany. No one was studying in Germany. It was one, again one thing which I know, two which would like but I say, "You are absolutely insane," and I know he was no Nazi. He was only how to say, greed, you know, "I will have doctorate and I will have better money," and he don't care about morals, what was behind it. And greed, greed for, you know, "I am smarter than other." So I say, "Are you insane? If you will go there you know what will be? One day Hitler will lost." And I spoke with him in the Inn with a good Czech beer, and we talk about two hours. After two hours he say, "Please don't tell to anybody. I know that was stupid, it was so stupid."

Second one same way. He was a good Czech. Of course both spoke fluent German because in very Czech nation spoke German, spoke very fluent. Children of parents who live under Austrian-Hungarian empire spoke, if not fluent, very well. Students of University spoke fluent because must speak German. So, was only one thing was thinking look I speak German and I am

Czech, so I say, "Look it. If you are Czech you will not go there and no more talk." "Oh, okay. Yeah, I am stupid." Very often after came to me and say, "Vilem, don't say so. I am so ashamed now," and of course I never say. Against this Czech nature I not say anything to anybody. Because was not from the bad will or from sympathy to Nazi. No, have nothing to do, so sometimes we must forgive.

This close of University was one of the greatest crimes that people were thinking the Nazi make the our county. Because for six years we not have the new doctors, you lost doctors, lawyers because all studying only University Philosophers and intelligence. But on the other hand it was a turning point in thinking of the nation. After this was not sympathy for anybody. Not for German and not of course not for Nazi. This was a turning point.

Now in September 1st Hitler attack Poland and I must go few years only very few years back to Austria. Already when Hitler attack Austria we were thinking then the world will be smarter then at least let him occupy
() and do nothing in the time when the war which will be definitely much, much, much

smaller then after nobody do anything.

And now when Austria was occupied again we were thinking, even then we have no big hope in the western democracy in this time because we say well Hitler is Austrian so what. He is going home with army. And was many, many joke about it. Some pretty anti-joke then call it joke. But very witty illustrate the situation when Schuschnigg was a victim of the Gestapo torture and all this and nobody cared.

But we was again wrong, we were again wrong with all this because after came Munich and was much worse, much worse. And until when Hitler attack Poland, England and France make finally to go war with Hitler finally. But I would like to tell you then it was not British people, it was not French people who betray us. It was Chamberlain with DeGaulle and for what reason because Chamberlain was a man who really believe in peace and who has advisors who believe that Hitler is a very good man, that he will never betray him and he promise him.

I know the situation for example when the Sudeten, Munich -- no, it was not Munich. It was before when was Sudetenland -- yeah, Munich. Right, Munich Pact. At midnight President

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(Benish) was wake up and British Ambassador in Prague and French Ambassador, (Monsieur Leon) came to () and read them to President (Benish) read the protocol which tell him then British and France sign this and then Czechoslovakia must except it. Both was crying. Both was crying. Two diplomats and both during this when read this do (Benish) was cry.

Today when I am saying so, many people are telling me cannot be true. I never read it anyway, but I know from the people who was around (Benish). Matter of fact, one was his very close brother. I am very bad in this family relation, but was a son of brother of president (Benish). He knew this very well then this pact or this announcement was also then in the case then Czechoslovakia would like fight against this agreement what Britain for Chamberlain and DeGaulle sign then he must say then British and France will never help us. So it was really a sentence of death.

Under any circumstances this country these two countries will never came to help. Another thing, which nobody believe, then will be allies with Hitler. I don't know.

(). I not hear it, but I only

hear it from men who definitely can know. I never read it this protocol in any book. But I never forget what I hear and this also was another very tragic betrayal and also tragic to way of thinking.

Spelling

For this reason president (Benish) make pact with Russian because nation after the war 1945. '44 he was in Russia spoke with Stalin Stalin give him () and Czech always will have independence and independence will be absolutely never will be scratched. And only what ask (Benish) about two things. One then our army will be under Russian army. Second agreement was foreign policy will be same with Russian policy. So we will never go against Russian. If Russian will make certain foreign policy we must be also for us.

So, it was two things which after all, all the war, why not. And many people think why (Benish) go to the Russia and not go to () again. Impossible. Nation will never, never accept it. How you can accept who betray you after 20 years of friendship, big, big friendship. We was brothers and who knows the most civilized nation and look at Munich. So how 60 years later and millions of dead can you

accept friendship again.

I know from my own experience France was very, very ashamed after the war. I don't know nothing about England, but I believe English people was not guilty same like French people was not guilty.