Introduction by Anatol Steck, Project Director in the International Archival Programs Division of the United States Holocaust Memorial Museum:

These are English summary transcription notes of the digitized interviews recorded by Leonard and Edith Ehrlich in the 1970s (and in this case the early 1980s) as part of their research for their manuscript about the Jewish community leadership in Vienna and Theresienstadt during the Holocaust titled “Choices under Duress.” These notes are intended as a finding aid for the researcher; researchers are strongly encouraged to consult the digitized recordings for accuracy and authenticity and not to rely solely on the notes. As much as possible, persons mentioned by name in the interviews are identified and described in the text; however, as persons are often referred to in the interviews only by last name, their identification is sometimes based on the context in which their names appear within the interview (especially in cases where different persons share the same last name). In case of the interview with Benjamin Murmelstein, unless specifically stated at the beginning of the tape by Leonard Ehrlich, it is not always clear whether a particular interview segment continues in the correct order or, as the interview was recorded over several days, a particular interview segment continues where the interview was concluded on the previous day. It is possible that the individual interview segments are not in their correct order. Leonard Ehrlich and Edith Ehrlich are identified in the summary notes as LE and EE.

RG-50.862.0017 Oral history interview with Dr. Charles I. Kapralik

Interview with Dr. Charles (Karl) I. Kapralik (d. November 1, 1993) recorded most likely in May 1980 in London. Most of the interview is conducted in English, a small part is conducted in German (as indicated in the summary). Although the place and date are not explicitly stated on tape, there are indicators within the interview that point to Dr. Kapralik’s home in London as the location for the interview and May 1980 as the approximate date of the interview. At one point during the interview, LE states “here in London” and the Ehrlichs mention that they shall purchase a couple of books which Kapralik recommends to them “while we are still in England.” LE mentions at one point in the interview that it is being conducted on the 25th anniversary of the signing of the Austrian State Treaty (which was signed on May 15, 1955).


[00:00:06] Interview begins with Mr. Kapralik speaking about the Jewish Trust Corporation and the Jewish Restitution Successor Organization for which he worked; LE states “You were beginning to tell us about how Raffegerst [i.e. Reichsbankoberinspektor Carlheinz Raffegerst] endangered himself,” Kapralik concludes the sentence “to get out in fourteen days” and describes his emigration from Vienna and how his belongings were expropriated in the process.
Kapralik asks: “Now, what question would you like to ask me?” LE and EE describe the purpose of the interview and their research project “about the function of the main Jewish leaders in Vienna and Theresienstadt.” Kapralik mentions Emil Engel and calls him a “wonderful man;” LE states that Engel emigrated in 1941 and that this was 40 years ago; Kapralik mentions that he stayed in Vienna together with his wife in order to work for the community despite having the opportunity to emigrate and that he knew Benjamin Murmelstein; talks about his respect for Josef Löwenherz; his positive opinion about Murmelstein and his relationship with Murmelstein whom he considered a friend; what survivors from Theresienstadt told him about Murmelstein after the war such as Murmelstein wearing jackboots during the deportations from Theresienstadt; talks about rumors after the war circulating around Murmelstein such as that he is living as a monk in the Vatican; Kapralik states that he considers it his mission to “right the wrongs;”

Kapralik talks about Josef Löwenherz after the war, including his arrest by the Communists and his subsequent time in London; talks about the informal Jewish honor court which took place in London and which exculpated Löwenherz; mentions Dr. Immerglück who died some thirty years ago who took part in the Jewish honor court proceedings; EE mentions that Dr. Immerglück’s wife is still alive; Kapralik asks LE and EE to convey his “very best regards and respect” to her should they see her; EE mentions that Dr. and Mrs. Immerglück’s son is a well known musician.

Kapralik offers his guests a drink. Light banter and the pouring of drinks.

EE asks whether Kapralik knew Robert Prochnik in Vienna who worked for Murmelstein; LE clarifies that Prochnik was Murmelstein’s young assistant in Vienna and Theresienstadt and that it was Prochnik and not Murmelstein who wore the jackboots during the deportations from Theresienstadt; Kapralik reemphasizes that he personally has the “best possible opinion of Murmelstein;” EE states that very few good things are being said about Murmelstein and that is why it is important to have Kapralik’s assessment of Murmelstein; Kapralik states that he not only respected Murmelstein but that he genuinely liked him.

EE informs Kapralik that Murmelstein is still alive which appears to surprise Kapralik who asks EE and LE to tell him more; he asks whether Murmelstein has converted; EE and LE laugh and tell Kapralik that Murmelstein does scholarly research in the Gregorianum library [i.e. Biblioteca Pontificia Universita Gregoriana] in the Vatican but that he has very much kept his Jewish faith; Kapralik states that he is very happy to hear this; LE states the difficulties of asking survivors about Murmelstein when many of them had no direct contact with him; LE and EE state that the reasons that they sought out Kapralik was what he wrote about Murmelstein in his memoir and the important position which Kapralik held within the community in 1938 and 1939 and that he is an authoritative source; they briefly talk about Sofie Löwenherz; EE and LE ask Kapralik’s opinion why he was not requested to provide testimony at the trial of Adolf Eichmann; Kapralik states that he is glad that he was not asked to participate and that he disagrees with Eichmann’s execution; Kapralik states that “Eichmann was not a simple person” and (somewhat coyly) asks whether LE and EE want to know more.

Kapralik shares two anecdotes about Eichmann, one which took place on Yom Kippur in 1938 which Kapralik was part of and another which took place on September 25, 1938 involving an Aliyah transport to Palestine that Kapralik was told about; quotes in German what
Eichmann allegedly said to the transport that was about to depart for Palestine; how Eichmann “played the Zionist.”

[00:31:25] LE asks Kapralik about his work for the Jewish community in Vienna, in particular the “transfer of foreign funds;” Kapralik clarifies that [Reichsbankoberinspektor] Raffegerst did not initiate this (states that Raffegerst was only “ein ausführendes Organ”) but that the transfer of funds originated in Berlin from Eichmann; Kapralik explains the use of foreign currencies in the emigration process including the landing monies and the sliding scale exchange rate based on the financial assets of the individual Jewish applicants; discusses his role in the process; the role Raffegerst played; Kapralik explains that half of the foreign currency was earmarked to help the poor and the other half for those who were financially better of; discusses the receipt and distribution of the monies; the involvement of the Joint until 1941; states that he knew the required landing monies for each country, gives the examples of 100 British Pounds for Cyprus and 250 Pounds for Havanna, Cuba; states that no landing monies were required for emigration to England; they discuss emigration to England, Jewish refugees crossing the channel by boat from mainland Europe; discusses his own internment in England; the transit camp for Jewish refugees in Richborough, England [i.e. Kitchener camp].

[00:39:19] LE asks Kapralik a follow-up question about the Richborough camp while Kapralik takes LE’s glass saying “Give me your glass. You cannot have just one glass of sherry, this is ridiculous.” and refills both LE’s and EE’s glasses. LE wants to know whether the Richborough camp was a military training camp for Jewish emigrants as Murmelstein is claiming; Kapralik states that he did not have much to do with it but that Murmelstein was involved with the Richborough camp, that he referred to it as “my camp,” that his running joke was “Mein Kampf/My camp.” Still, Kapralik doubts that the camp in Richborough was set up as a military training camp and claims that Murmelstein was mistaken.

[00:44:50] LE asks Kapralik about a published article in which he is described as having criticized Hannah Arendt’s assessment of Eichmann; Kapralik states how he met Hannah Arendt.

[00:46:45] Tape interrupts

[00:47:00] Tape continues

[00:47:02] At EE’s request, Kapralik shares an anecdote about an interaction he had with Eichmann when he was asked to travel to London to organize foreign currency and had to appear before Eichmann to get his permission. Kapralik quotes in German what Eichmann allegedly told him: “Sie haben Geld mitzubringen. Und wenn Sie binnen acht Tagen nicht zurück sind, wird Ihre Frau eines Todes sterben dass ganz Wien davon reden wird.” Recalls how an unidentified caller called his wife by telephone at home after Kapralik had left and how he thinks it was Eichmann checking to make sure that she had remained behind in Vienna. LE asks whether Kapralik took Eichmann’s threats seriously; Kapralik states that he did not and explains the reason why; that he considered it “Gerede” (“just talk”), states “This is how he talked. I don’t hold that against him.” LE wants to know whether Kapralik thinks that “this method” was successful; Kapralik responds that he does not know, that he considered it his duty to return to Vienna, that he knew that great harm would befall the community if he did not return. Still, he did not believe that his wife was in danger. LE asks whether Kapralik needed Eichmann’s permission when he emigrated; Kapralik affirms this in the positive, states that he had to go through “his fantastically organized emigration office” [i.e. the Central Office for Jewish Emigration], that he could not have emigrated without Eichmann’s approval. States that the
date of his emigration was March 13, 1939 and that he emigrated via the Czech Republic, just in
time before the Germans invaded the Czech Republic, that Raffegerst told him “Sie müssen weg
und ich werde Ihnen helfen dass Sie weckommen.”

[00:52:16] In answering a question by LE, Kapralik talks about the need for strict adherence to
the foreign exchange regulations of the German authorities while procuring foreign currency
from abroad. Kapralik states that Raffegerst knew that he could count on him and vice versa.
Discusses the sliding exchange rate which he refers to as “enhanced rate of exchange”. Talks at
length about the “economics of foreign exchange.” Provides a practical example of the sliding
exchange rate: well-to-do Jewish applicant Mr. X purchases 1000 English pounds for his
emigration against 60,000 Reichsmarks, which could then be used by the Jewish community for
its soup kitchen (“Ausspeisungsstelle”) and other welfare programs, with the approval of the
Nazi authorities. Kapralik makes the point that Mr. X would have lost the 60,000 Reichsmark
anyway due to expropriation and better that the monies go to the Jewish community for the
financing of its welfare programs. Kapralik addresses the complaint by some survivors about
how much they had to pay the community to facilitate their emigration by stating: “If the
money was so important for some that they did not want to give it to the Kultusgemeinde, then
they could have stayed in Vienna. I am not sorry about that.” LE raises the question why the
Germans allowed this scheme, considering that the “Germans never permitted anything unless
they thought it was to their advantage.” Kapralik answers “Their problem was to get the Jews
out” and that the money was being used to facilitate emigration. LE asks whether the Germans
exercised control over the foreign exchange account. Kapralik states that the community had
full control over its foreign exchange account. Recounts an anecdote when he was summoned
to appear before a high-ranking SS officer (Kapralik does not mention the name) who asked him
“with exquisite politeness” to provide 50 British pounds for use by a “Jewess of enchanting
beauty” who was not Austrian but from the German Reich and needed to emigrate quickly.
According to Kapralik, the SS officer told him “Diese Dame ist in grosser Gefahr. Wir müssen sie
heute noch aus dem Lande bringen. Wir wären Ihnen sehr verbunden, wenn Sie ihr 50 Pfunde
zur Verfügung stellen würden. Wir möchten Sie bitten in unserem Namen den Doktor
Löwenberg [sic] zu bitten, Ihr 50 Pfunde zu geben trotzdem sie eine Jüdin aus dem Reiche und
nicht aus Österreich ist.” [The interview switches to German] Kapralik states that he obliged
with the request, that he had no choice in the matter. EE asks whether he knew the lady’s
name or who she was. Kapralik answers he does not, that he had other worries at the time. LE
asks whether Eichmann profited personally in some way from the community’s foreign
exchange. Kapralik states that he is convinced that he did not.

[01:04:00] LE asks Kapralik to recount the events of Kristallnacht. Kapralik states that he
received a call early in the morning warning him not to go out.
Just then, the telephone rings and Kapralik states that “the office is calling me;“ gets up and
answers the phone in English; leaves the room to take the call in another room.

[01:05:46] The interviews continues with LE stating “You were in the midst of telling us the
story.” Kapralik recounts the events of Kristallnacht: he took a taxi in the morning to the Jewish
community offices although he had been cautioned not to go, the Waffen SS was present in the
community headquarters, he heard a woman suffering a beating by the Waffen SS, Eichmann
appeared at 11 am in Murmelstein’s office while Kapralik was present and stated that “Alles hat
tzu arbeiten!”, at 2 pm Kapralik and the other community officials were dismissed and were
allowed to go home. LE asks about Eichmann. Kapralik recounts how Eichmann and a troop of SS men manually destroyed the interior of the synagogue in the Seitenstettengasse but prevented it from being burned as to not also destroy the connected Jewish community offices. Doing so, according to Kapralik, would have “prevented the flow of emigration.” LE asks how Kapralik knows that this was the reason behind Eichmann’s decision. Kapralik states that he assumed as much and that in conversation with Emil Engel and Josef Löwenherz all agreed that this must have been the motivation behind Eichmann’s decision not to set fire to the synagogue in the Seitenstettengasse. Kapralik states that it was Emil Engel who witnessed Eichmann and the SS men destroying the synagogue from the vantage point of his “Dienstwohnung” [an employer-provided apartment, presumably in the Seitenstettengasse]. LE, EE and Kapralik discuss the Kristallnacht in Vienna in the context of forced emigration. Kapralik states that the Zentralstelle für jüdische Auswanderung (which he refers to as “Auswanderungsstelle in the Prinz-Eugen-Strasse”) was founded before Kristallnacht, in August 1938 on Eichmann’s initiative. LE wants to know who in the Jewish community “did the concrete work of how to go about [emigration];” Kapralik responds that this official was Emil Engel and not Murmelstein. Calls Engel a “very good organizer who was in charge of the welfare and emigration.” EE asks what Murmelstein’s function was. Kapralik states that he was Löwenherz’s right hand, his advisor, and maybe his “Beichtvater” (father confessor). Praises both Löwenherz and Murmelstein for their brilliance. LE wants to know how Löwenherz comported himself in front of the SS authorities. Kapralik states “with the greatest dignity.” Kapralik states that Löwenherz never mentioned anything about Eichmann allegedly having slapped him, he surmises that both men respected each other. LE asks Kapralik multiple questions about his interactions with Eichmann. LE and EE ask whether Kapralik knew Margarete Feiler, a lawyer who worked for Murmelstein [see: RG-50.862.0001 – Oral history interview with Margaret Feiler]. Kapralik confuses her with someone else who had emigrated to “here in London;” LE asks whether Kapralik knew Mrs. Mezei but he does not [i.e. Margarete Mezei (1899-1993), maiden name Neufeld, worked for the Jewish administration and was the mother of Kurt and Ilse Mezei. Her husband was the writer and translator Moritz (Maurus) Mezei, 1886-1944. Mrs. Mezei had two children: Kurt and Ilse Mezei who were twins born in 1924. Kurt Mezei was a courier and clerk in “room 8”. Ilse Mezei worked as a telephone operator for the Jewish community. Ilse was killed on March 12, 1945 during an Allied bombing raid when she was denied access to the bomb shelter on account of being a Jew. Her brother Kurt was murdered by retreating SS on April 11, 1945 in the Foerstergasse 7, 1020 Vienna. Both Ilse and Kurt were only 20 years old. Their photograph and story is part of the permanent exhibit of the Jewish Museum Vienna. See: "Mignon: Tagebücher und Briefe einer jüdischen Krankenschwester in Wien, 1938-1949" StudienVerlag]. LE asks whether Kapralik is Viennese; Kapralik answers that he is from Bukovina. LE jokes: “Mein Vater sagte immer: es gibt zwei Arten von Wienern: Wiener und Bukowiner.” LE asks Kapralik about his professional background. Kapralik gives an overview of his career, including how he got the post of heading the Devisenstelle of the Jewish community, recounts that his wife told him “Wenn man Dich braucht, ist es Deine Pflicht zu bleiben.” Discusses his work for the “Task Organization” after the war. LE mentions that the interview is taking place on the 25th anniversary of the signing of the Austrian State Treaty in May 1955. They discuss post-war Austria. Kapralik mentions that he received the merit award “Grosses Ehrenzeichen der
österreichischen Republik” from the Austrian Government. Kapralik fetches two books published by the “Task Operation” which he recommends that the Ehrlichs acquire for their library (most likely the two volume report on the history of the work of the Jewish Trust Corporation for Germany authored by Kapralik). EE and LE look at the books and LE remarks that they will purchase a copy while they are still in England. After some more friendly banter about the work of the Task Organization, EE and LE thank Dr. Kapralik for his time and conclude the interview. 
[Interview ends at 01:24:39]
Quality: Good