

## **RG-50.944.0054**

### **Summary**

Felix Kolmer begins the interview by stating that he was arrested by the Nazi occupiers in Prague. He was imprisoned first in Theresienstadt, then Auschwitz and then Friedland, a subcamp of Gross-Rosen, in Mieroszów, Poland. Friedland had 600 prisoners at the end of the war, of which 200, Kolmer among them, escaped after hearing about the uprising in Prague (May 5, 1945) through a secretly overheard BBC broadcast. Their escape was facilitated by the Soviet bombing of the power station providing the electricity charging the fences around the camp. With the electric fence around the camp rendered ineffective and the lights down, the 200 fugitives split up in groups of not more than 3, so that the chances of being caught would be smaller. Kolmer's group went in the direction of the advancing Soviet army, hiding in order to not be discovered by SS units and also not be taken for German soldiers in hiding by Soviet units. After days of going hungry Kolmer was very weak, but they were lucky. His little group met a young Soviet soldier who correctly identified them as escaped prisoners, was friendly and gave them a glass of cherry compote. The three then joined a Soviet convoy and returned to the Friedland camp on May 10 or 11.

They stayed there for a short while and then continued, again with a Soviet convoy, to a town in Czechoslovakia, Police Metuji, close to the town/monastery of Broumov. There volunteers were recruited to drive to Broumov in order to guard the main buildings in that town. Kolmer volunteered, but was rejected because he was too weak. He was lucky again; all the volunteers were killed by SS troops hiding in the surrounding forests and not respecting, or not having heard about the surrender signed on May 7 and 8 in Reims and Berlin. After a couple of days he got onto a train leaving in the direction of Prague, but this train was held up on the way by SS and Hungarian troops. The place it was held up was called "Chozai" (spelling uncertain). A confrontation was expected and again volunteers were recruited. Kolmer volunteered, but was again turned down. He says that a good number of British and other ex-POWs were around to engage in the ensuing fight which took place at the train station. Kolmer experienced that fight hiding under a bench, where he was discovered by a Hungarian soldier who saw him, intended to kill him with his bayonet, but was shot and killed only a few meters away. Kolmer picked up the metal bowl that Hungarian soldier dropped as he fell and died; it still is in Kolmer's possession.

He then travelled to Prague on an armored train. In Prague he first went to meet up with fellow scouts. He had been a life-long boy scout. He goes on to say that he had married while he was a prisoner in Theresienstadt and now met his wife in Prague, as they had agreed they would, in the home of his family's cook, who was like his second mother. His wife and he were lucky to immediately find an apartment. Later, as two children arrived, they changed apartments in the same building. He now (2018) still lived in the apartment they moved into in 1954.

His mother had died in Theresienstadt. Many elderly people died in Theresienstadt. They were buried in mass graves, later they were cremated. His wife and also his grandmother remained in Theresienstadt and survived.

Kolmer then recounts that his wife knew what was happening in Auschwitz because he had written her from there after he had been taken there. He arrived by train at Auschwitz II – Birkenau in October 1944 and was beaten out of the railcar. Right away he saw prisoners stretching out their hands through a fence asking for bread. One prisoner told him that he arrived in the best camp, - but it had only one way out and he pointed to the chimneys of the gas chambers, which emitted the smoke and ashes of the murdered and cremated prisoners. Of the 1500 prisoners who had been transferred from Theresienstadt on that transport 1250 were immediately selected by Mengele to go to the gas chambers. Only then did Kolmer fully comprehend where he was. - All this information about Auschwitz he had written to his wife when he worked in a factory there producing parts for airplanes. The factory was part of the Hermann Göhring Werke. When working in that factory he heard people talking in Czech on the other side of a fence, so he pushed that letter, addressed to his wife in Theresienstadt, through the fence. Miraculously the letter arrived. Kolmer never really learned how that happened, but he suspects that it had been transmitted by Czech gendarmerie officers who, in their majority, opposed the Nazi occupation.

Kolmer points out that right after the war people in his environment were mainly focusing on the serious day to day problems everybody had to deal with. People did not want to hear about concentration camps right after the war. He and his wife had to focus primarily on their livelihood; they had nothing and were hungry. They decided that she should earn some money and he would study since he had completed high school. It was hard to focus on studies after the horrors he had experienced in concentration camps, but he enrolled in mathematics, physics and descriptive geometry. He finished studies after 4 and a half years, continued his academic career and became Professor in 1982. They had two children, one committed suicide and later his wife also died.

When information on the Holocaust started to be brought up publicly, Kolmer had no problem participating in that discussion. Right after the war he joined an organization of former prisoners, partisans, people who had participated in the Prague uprising etc., but his engagement in international organizations really started after the 1989 changes. Right after those changes the Theresienstadt Initiative was launched and he was part of that from the start. Then he took part in an organization bringing together all former concentration camp prisoners. He furthermore was part of the International Auschwitz Committee, which brought together organizations from many countries. He is a Vice President of that Committee. Before the 1989 changes in Czechia the Holocaust was discussed only to the extent that communists were imprisoned. That changed after 1989.

Kolmer discusses Viktor Frankl's book about the significance of helping others. He met Frankl and emphasizes that he learned a lot about himself by reading this book. He furthermore emphasizes how important it is for him to visit schools and talk to students. He has done that in more than 100 German and about 20 Czech schools.

Kolmer then discussed the Holocaust Restitution Payment negotiations, which lasted two years and took place partly in Germany, partly in the US. In this context Kolmer was frequently present in the German press and on TV. Stuart Eizenstat, US Ambassador and Carter advisor, played a significant role in these negotiations; they became friends. At these restitution negotiations the German government first offered paying 1 Billion Deutschmarks. Over time this amount was increased through negotiations to 10 Billion Deutschmarks and Eizenstat, as well as the Czech delegation, were satisfied with that result. The relationship with the German Minister Scheuble were positive in these negotiations.

Asked about the current political situation in Europe he says that he is nervous about the situation in Hungary, where the trends go against liberal democracy.

In closing he says that seeing the long lines of prisoners led to the gas chambers in Auschwitz is etched in his memory. He is unable to transmit these memories to others. Nevertheless, he feels, as long as survivors live, they must transmit these stories.