

Transcription of conversation between Karen Kedmey and Jerry Jacobs, on Monday, July 20, 2009, Café Greco, New York City (lightly edited by Karen Kedmey)

KK: Why did you decide to start talking about it [the Holocaust] at age 50?

JJ: I think that, when I got to be 50, I think that I decided that I'm getting old, and that life the way I knew it from before would go downhill from 50.

KK: For you, personally?

JJ: Yeah, I'm only talking about myself.

And something must have been there that made me feel that I need to tell people the story about the Holocaust. And also maybe because at that time there were some people who denied the Holocaust. In Los Angeles there was one person. And that made me angry. And there was some form of anti-Semitism showing itself in Skokie, Illinois. And, probably, just that. Because, before 50, I only had maybe one or two people that I would hang out with that were Holocaust survivors that I knew from – not from the Holocaust, itself – but from here, in this country. So, that probably would be the only reason that I would know why.

KK: So this was in the 1960s?

JJ: This was in the 1970s.

KK: And who did you start talking to about it?

JJ: Oh, I normally start talking to anybody who will listen. And I was involved in music at the same time, anyway, because I was on the board of the Brooklyn Philharmonic. I think I got on it about 35 years ago, so that would be about in the early 1970s. So I talked about it. And then something happened that made me organize the Interfaith Committee of Remembrance (ICOR), which was that my friend, my friend who I know from here, he came from the same town that I came from, and he knew my brothers, and he invited me to come to C.W. Post to listen to a concert about Holocaust children by a composer that I did not then know. And I went, and I was very, very impressed. And that was Ronald Stettinger's "Kadish for Terezin," which talks about, stories about, the children of Terezin – the huge chorus, the chorus of children. And after I heard it, we went to the green room, and I spoke to him, and I told him that I was very moved, and that I would like to produce that in New York. And that was the only thought that I had – that I would like to hear this concert again in New York City. And that started the Interfaith Committee of Remembrance (ICOR). We started, we became good friends, Ronald Stettinger, and his wife, who was a pianist of classical music. And we met a number of times in my office, and I went to hear her on various occasions, went with Ronald. And, eventually, in 1986, we decided we were ready to establish ICOR and both start working on the first "Concert of Remembrance," which happened two or three years later, which premiered his piece in New York City. That's how it, sort of, [recording unclear here].

KK: So would you say that your founding of ICOR was really you getting to a period in your life where you were really going to start talking about your experiences? That [ICOR] was a part of that?

JJ: Absolutely. Absolutely. Suddenly being with the Holocaust people, being with people who were open about the Holocaust, and who are discussing the Holocaust in a variety of terms, made it a lot easier for me to talk about my own experiences.

KK: How are you able to talk about it?

JJ: Most of the conversations that I have with people are in general terms. If you notice, I don't delve into any one particular situation, nor do I delve into any one place that I was in. I am very general in talking about the five and a half years that I spent. I'm not happy about that, because I really would like to expand on that, and there are so many things that I could still talk about. But, I think I force myself to talk about the Holocaust, just like I force myself to ask people for money when it comes to concerts. And I say to myself, at all times, because I've never asked for money for myself in my life, that I'm not asking for myself, but I'm asking for a cause.

KK: So by keeping your story more general, and less personal, you're able to tell it?

JJ: Probably right. Probably right. Because if I, for instance, I realize, that Auschwitz, one day in Auschwitz, for somebody like me who went through, it's probably enough of a conversation for ten or twenty-four hours. I'm not sure that I would want to come back to anything that happened there because I don't think that I could – maybe I can't handle it – maybe I could, but I know that I don't want to go through it. And as far as the number, which is part of that, and I know that you are always very curious about that. At first, when I came to this country, when I had my kids, or other people who didn't know what that was, and that was normal, I would tell them, even my kids, I would tell them that this was my personal phone number. That was going on for a number of years. I was not necessarily proud, but I was glad that I survived, and I think, somehow, in my feelings, decided that even though they put the number on me and thought that they were going to eradicate my background, my name, my everything else –

KK: Your identity –

JJ: My identity – they weren't able to do that. And I never thought about removing it. I know that there were some people, in the beginning, like in the 40s or 50s, when I came to this country, who tried to remove it, successfully or otherwise, but I have never even given it a thought – that was just not on my horizon. And, even now, I use the number, and, I don't know why I picked the number when I got the computer, which is not more than ten years ago or less, I don't know, it just came out of nowhere. I know no specific thoughts to have that –

KK: It just came to you when you were trying to figure out what your e-mail address should be –

JJ: Yeah, what my e-mail address would be – something that they wanted me to remember and that would have been, even without thinking about it, I would be able to find what I am. So, that was that thought.

KK: Has it just become so much a part of your skin? Does it sometimes startle you to see it on your arm? Do you not even notice it anymore?

JJ: No, I do notice it. I feel it every day. But, when I do notice it, I'm probably happy to see it, because that takes me back to my youth and my younger years and shows me that I have come a long way from the time of concentration camp and Holocaust. I know a lot of the Holocaust survivors feel disrespected by having the number on them. And I know that a lot of my feelings were violated when they did that to me. So I'm glad that I can go around and not feel ashamed that I have it. I think that feeling that brings other people to want to have it removed is not necessarily in my lexicon.

KK: Do you find that when you're with people, do they sometimes, like, if they don't know that you are a survivor of the Holocaust, do they sometimes notice it and are startled? Or do you think it's just so subtle people don't notice it?

JJ: There are occasions when I see them being startled by looking at and seeing the number. Because, I mean, I certainly don't advertise that. Most of the people that I get together with now would know that I'm a Holocaust survivor. I'm sort of known to be a part of the Holocaust, so called, "Movement." So, no, I'm not startled, I'm not startled at all. I'm glad when somebody asks me what it is. I'm glad if I can explain that there was something going on, even though it's sixty, sixty-five, seventy years ago, that we would need to remember. Now, when I first want to educate people to the horrors of the Holocaust so that the kids, and the children, and the grandchildren, and from there on, because I see, more and more, I see that my own family, that some of them are totally uninterested. And, not only are they not interested, they are totally uneducated to what happened in the five and a half years of the war, and what could happen here. Let's not forget that these things happen fairly quickly. In Germany, it started in 1933, even though there were movements before. But it started in '33. By 1939, there were full-blown anti-Semitic movements when they thought to eradicate the Jewish people. So it certainly didn't take a long time. When you get somebody, in America, with our Democratic system, it may very well happen again.

KK: That, actually, is exactly what I wanted to ask you about. I mean, I read your interview, carefully, that Danielle Famine did with you, and you use the phrase, "the illogical portion of life." I understand what you mean by that. And, so that's just it. I mean, you have an experience of a level of illogic and the obliteration of all human rationality and reason that most people don't have, and I wonder how that affects your trust in the systems that human beings create, like Democracy in America. Do you believe in these systems? How fragile do you think they are?

JJ: I think that they are fragile because we could see ourselves, in the last three years, things have happened that created a totally different tone, even here. And that, all of a sudden, from being a majority Republican straight country, we would have now turned around and became a majority Democratic country. So these things go up and down with the whim and the feeling of the people. How are they changing their minds depends on what's being done by the government. So you really need to be on guard because you never can tell when somebody will come on who will try to induce people to do things that would not be in the country's best interest that would create problems for some races. Even now you see between Hispanics, between blacks – the Jews are now maybe being left out for a little while – because now they have, in the last six months they have, somebody that they can target as a race person. They do that, too. I know a lot of my friends, so to speak, claim that they are Democratic, but are very much against the President, and I know that one of the reasons for that is race. So if we allow that to be expanded, in very ideal forms, then this country would be on fragile ground. This is not guaranteed to be the outcome of our life.

KK: You talk about how it was so unthinkable that the Germans, who had created some of the most incredible high culture in Europe were capable of flipping completely and doing something, I mean, there's not really words to describe – and so, I guess, how does that make you feel about human nature? Human beings?

JJ: It shows you that have to be on guard. You can't let your guard down and decide that human nature is going to take care of things and that everybody is good-natured. Most of the Jews who lived in the ghetto in the beginning couldn't fathom that people, who had all this culture and all these musical geniuses and poetic geniuses, etc. –

KK: Right, that they couldn't imagine –

JJ: Could not imagine. Even when we saw what was going on, the Germans and [recording unclear here]. People had got to the ghetto after the selections, which brought the Germans to individual people to bring them downstairs, put them in line, and so on, selected people who they threw – literally threw – on trucks who were never seen after that, ordinary men, who would throw infants away from mothers. So, it probably took a number of days, of time, probably a year or so, for them even to decide and realize that they are probably doing it. But everybody had hope that they would be able to survive that. And, unfortunately, most of them did not, and when they died, they died under cruel fashion. Just fifteen years ago or so, I went with my wife to Poland, and we went to a concentration camp, and the Germans, of course, kept a meticulous book of names and ages, birth date and their name, and this was at Maidonek, which is a small concentration camp, where they gassed the people, so you've got to consider that an extermination camp as well. And they had lists of people – age 20, 25, 21, 30 – all died of the same thing: heart attack, heart - , heart failure, heart disease, heart disease. So, the deceit and the individual intervention by Germans, of all races, creeds, ages, was something that nobody, not only anticipated, would have believed. It took us until Auschwitz, August

1944, when we got to Auschwitz, and we got out of the cattle cars, we knew what was happening. Until then, we thought we know, but we hoped that we were wrong.

KK: I feel like it's some inbuilt mechanism that human beings have, like just biological: hope and – almost like you go into shock, or something, and you can't possibly –

And how did you feel at that moment when you – and stop me if I'm getting too –

JJ: No, no, it's okay. To sit in a place like this, okay, and have a nice lunch, dinner, or so, it's difficult – it's difficult to go back, emotionally, mentally, physically to times and places that are, like, unbelievable to even me. Like I said to myself – how did I – well, I mean, I was a kid, so I had no control over myself, my parents had me. And I feel terribly about how they had to feel by having to relinquish their authority over kids to the higher echelons of German power. And I can just – I still feel, when kids were taken away from mothers, and they were separated from mothers, mothers were separated from children, how that affected the world, and the people. And even now, but it didn't make any difference, that's what's happening.

KK: I mean, for me to sit here with you, and to listen to your story, to have read the oral history, to have read so many memoirs by various survivors, from Primo Levi to Ka-Tzetnik, to – oh, just so many –

JJ: Did you know that Ka-Tzetnik – what it means – did you know about that –

KK: Yeah, I learned that when I bought the book. My mom told me, I think.

JJ: Now, you know, let's switch around for a second. I have a large number of books dealing, of course, with the Holocaust. A lot of the books are written by Holocaust survivors, another portion is written by English biographers, primarily, who are [recording unclear here]. So that if you ever decide you wanted to read more, I'm more than happy to lend it to you.

KK: Thank you, thank you.

JJ: In fact, it's part of what I like to do to anybody. I have a couple of friends who are avid readers, and they take books from me. See, I used to be, when I was a kid – six, seven, eight – I would read one, two, three books a week. Polish books, of course, not English books, but of English authors. From Robinson Crusoe to Tom Minx to whatever else that I could pick up, Tom Sawyer. See, the other thing that I'm not happy with, which is one of many things, is the fact that I only have three years of education. And I know that I would have done a lot better, a lot more if I was able to continue that under normal conditions.

KK: You were ten when the –

JJ: When the war started, I was ten. I finished school in May of '39, since then never went back to school.

KK: Never went back to school!

JJ: Never went back to school.

KK: You are completely self-taught.

JJ: Okay right. No, I shouldn't say that. I spent, like, six weeks, on Essex Street, because I was down in the East Village, when I first came to this country in 1947, I got, like, six weeks of education in the English language in a night school. That was it. So I'm not happy about what I did or what I didn't do. Unbeknownst to me, there are people who came, even later than I did, when I came it would be '48, '49, and were able to get, there were programs [recording unclear here].

KK: For survivors of the Holocaust?

JJ: Mhm. I have friends now who are very involved in the Holocaust, Holocaust survivors, one of them is the chairman of a very prominent organization, one of them is the treasurer of the Claims Conference, and they got their education in Atlanta, Georgia, high school, college, law school, etc.

KK: Why didn't you end up in any of those education programs?

JJ: Okay, because when I didn't know about them to begin with, and I came here, I was seventeen, and needed to make a living. And started out, I think I got five dollars from my uncle who was here, that's my mother's brother, who came here in the early 30s or whatever, so I started looking for a job, and I got the job, and never even –

First of all, a) I didn't know that there was any kind of educational program, and second b) was that I had to make a living, and live. I had nobody who would support me.

KK: But you've done, and I'm assuming this because you talk about your houses and your philanthropic foundation, you've done well for yourself, no?

JJ: Yes, absolutely. Oh, absolutely, I'm not complaining at all.

KK: No, I'm not saying you are. It's just incredible – you just worked your way to success.

JJ: The hard way. The hard way. There was nothing that I got from anybody. Family or otherwise, I never got anything. So whatever I did – whatever I did came from myself. Of course, I'm proud and happy. I'm also proud that I was here in America, one of the places that I considered when I was a kid. And, as a matter of fact, before the war, there was a saying in Poland, because, I think the Americans were dropping food – there was a

drought sometime in the 20s – all throughout Europe, and the saying in Poland was that “in America, the streets are paved with gold.” And I think people took that literally. I certainly took that literally. And when I came here, got off the boat, and my aunt and my uncle were there to greet me, and as I’m walking out of the boat, you know, the first thing I did, I still remember now, is I was walking out of the boat and there are the cobblestone streets, I looked down to see if there was gold. That stayed with me ‘til now.

[Start side B of tape]

KK: The reason that I bring him [Ka-Tzetnik] up is, of course, because his name is, I don’t remember what his name is, but it’s obviously not Ka-Tzetnik. So he writes under the pseudonym Ka-Tzetnik, and then his number, and, for him, I don’t know much about him. I’ve read a little bit, but my understanding is the reason why he wrote under this pseudonym, and, particularly, basically, what the Germans made him, at that time, which was a concentration camp prisoner with the number, taking away his identity, his sense of self, all of those things, his name, is a way to, I guess, bring that to light, and also because he writes about the Holocaust, so maybe it’s a way of saying, this is who I was when it happened to me – I don’t know –

JJ: Is that an autobiography –

KK: He doesn’t write straight autobiography. He writes, kind of, fictionalized autobiographical works. The one that I read is the closest he’s come to writing a straight autobiography, and it’s called, Shivitti: A Vision. And it’s about these psychological treatments he went through in the 70s where he was given LSD, the hallucinogen, as a way of healing him from his traumatic memories of the Holocaust and these nightmares he was having every night. It’s an incredible memoir, it’s very interesting. But, when you told me what your e-mail address was, when you showed me the number on your arm, it led me to question – you know – and the fact that you were swept up in this – in the Holocaust – at a really formative age, I mean, you were ten to seventeen – that’s a kid, that’s a teenager, and when you’re coming into your identity, right, so, I wonder, to what extent do you feel the Holocaust defines who you are, as a person?

JJ: Um, I don’t know, I shouldn’t say that, chances are that because of the Holocaust I had to be affected. Especially since it took time, and a long amount of time, if it was just a week or two or a month or two, that would be one thing, but when it dragged out into five and a half years of my adolescent years it would have to have a huge implication to the rest of my life. Maybe because once I came here, and maybe one of the reasons why I didn’t want to discuss and have anybody whose background was also Holocaust, was that I wanted to be away from that and start my new life. It may have been that, you know, regarding actual thoughts and directions, could have been just by normal living conditions that were here for me. Because, remember, when I came here, and I had, like, five dollars, etc., I had to adjust my living to what it was here. I didn’t know what it was before, nor did I have any inkling, I certainly could not compare it to the Holocaust years or the concentration camp years. But there was nothing that I could compare with other than maybe the first six or seven years of my growing up. [Recording unclear here]

formative happened for me to base it on. Meaning, if somebody's thrown into jail at the time, maybe, he's 25, he knows what to expect and maybe forms a life after that depending on the way he wants to be. For me, it affected me, but I don't think that it affected me in a way that I would feel and progress with my life, because when I came to this country and started developing my mental and physical base, because there was freedom that I could expect – I could do whatever I wanted to do, do something that I wasn't able to do for five and a half years – that was very constricting. So, I don't know how to even answer that. It probably affected me, I'm sure it affected me, but how and where, I'm going to have leave that.

KK: And that leads me to this question, which is, of course you have so many memories that you live with, and I wonder how you live with them.

I mean, you said to Danielle, you said, "most of the memories evaporate, with some exceptions." Have you forgotten a lot?

JJ: I think everybody forgets a lot. Because everybody forgets a lot because they forget a lot, and the other reason is they forget a lot because they want to forget. So there are two combinations of that. I remember some of the smallest details, some of the things that I went through to the nth degree. I don't necessarily remember everything that was going on, nor do I remember whether I took showers in the concentration camp. But when I think about it, there were no showers to take. When I start thinking about it when I talk to people like you, who ask me intimate questions, a lot of the routine, which was enforced in the concentration camp, has been put aside. An awful lot is there, constantly, constantly.

KK: In your mind –

JJ: Oh, absolutely, in my memory, constantly.

KK: Constantly – it's like you just live with it – it's always with you –

JJ: Always there. Always there. So, I mean like, to forget how I came into Auschwitz [recording unclear here] the long standing lines, there were lines at Auschwitz, and at all the other concentration camps, where you stood in line for sometimes anywhere between eight to twelve hours, without any reason or logic – without any food or any – anything – there was no –

KK: Bathroom – no rest – no nothing –

JJ: Nothing. Nothing. Nothing. So I think that we forget. It's just that I spoke fluent German, and I would know that I probably spoke better German than I have in English now. But I can tell you right now, that I can absolutely not communicate anymore in German. I may understand a lot, but I certainly cannot speak German, and I think one of the main reasons for that is that I deliberately suppressed my memory of the German language. Because, I speak even less Polish. And when I go into a Polish restaurant or

when I meet somebody Polish, I can still keep a small conversation with them in Polish, I can understand and make myself understood, so there's got to be absolutely reasons for that.

KK: Even though it's your native language –

Are you an optimistic person would you say?

JJ: Yes. Very.

KK: You are. Did you for a time lose that optimism?

JJ: Even if I lose it, I only lose it for a small amount of time. I think that I continue throughout life to be optimistic, and I feel that maybe that explains [recording unclear here] growing up with hope. I don't know whether hope and optimism are combined and correlated, but they've got to have something to do with each other because when you hope, you hope for the better, you don't hope for the worst. [Recording unclear here]

KK: Always an optimist –

JJ: Always an optimist. Always an aggressive, progressive optimist.

KK: So, when you were in the Holocaust and in concentration camps, what happened to that optimism? Did you still have hope?

JJ: First of all, remember, my age has something to do with it. So, when I went to the ghetto and concentration camp, I was ten, and I was very much under my parents' domain until, at the age of thirteen, I'll never forget what my father told me, of course, that I'm not going to be Bar Mitzvah-ed and so on, and we talked about all that, and I asked him why we don't do something about trying to get out of the ghetto, and do an uprising and get some guns and get, all of that, and he explained to me that we were really separated and segregated in such a manner that nothing, really, none of us could do anything, and I could understand that. And we only had hope, not optimism, hope that the war was going to be over soon because we knew that if it wasn't going to be over soon, we are not going to be surviving. Because you could see, like even in the ghetto, the progression from life to death, I mean it was really quick, fairly quick, it didn't take very much for the things to be death-prone, as opposed to life-prone.

KK: It really is impossible for me to even understand what that time was like and what people like you went through. But also, what's also impossible for me to understand is how you live with an experience like that and go on. You know, I get upset over breaking up with a boyfriend, which happens to everyone, and I'm safe and I'm privileged, and to live with the kind of pain that you've experienced, you know I wonder, how do Holocaust survivors go on, and survive after surviving, in a way?

JJ: I don't want to give an analogy to what you say, but even if you decided to feel or to accept the feelings what you felt like if you, say, got married and the next day you would have been separated, as it happened, permanently, physically, and violently, that would be only one millionth of what was going on, because in addition to that there were so many other factors that you had to consider. From getting up and living, to food, to not being killed on the street for walking on the right way, for not being found in a selection process, I mean, there were so many things, that what people hoped and thought of surviving. They didn't go any further than maybe a day. A day was enough. So, you see, you have time to digest that separation, which you wouldn't have if you were there to begin with. And there would have been so many more important things that you would have had on your mind, and on your body, physically, emotionally, everything else, that you wouldn't even think about it. It would come, maybe at night, when you were going to sleep or something, maybe it would come into your mind, but you couldn't do that, you couldn't do that. Like, I sometimes wonder when I ran away from the last concentration camp, and it was supposed to have been a multiple run-away with my two brothers, my cousin, and another friend, and they stopped. What made me decide at fourteen, fifteen to do that? Not only that, what bothered me, and you'll be the first one to hear this, at that concentration camp, almost all the people – not almost – all the people who ran away would be caught. And we would have to wait in a line for as long as it took them, and sometimes we would stay for twelve hours, before they would catch the guy, and then they would hang him.

KK: Did they always catch –

JJ: Always catch.

KK: Always –

JJ: Always catch. So, I must have been really immaturely stupid to do that by myself with the knowledge that they always caught him. In addition to it, I still feel guilt, because I haven't spoken to my brothers about that, they had to probably wait, and stand, for I don't know how many hours what happened there, because they didn't catch me. So, you see, I live with that.

KK: I understand what you're saying about when you're in it – it's survival – you just need to survive. But now, after, after it's over, you're here, did you then start to think about it or did you just –

JJ: The thoughts are there all the time. The thoughts are there all the time. So now here when we now come in, and you have to worry about what pair of pants to wear, whether your shoes are shined, and the color of your socks, whatever, the important things in life, it blocks out, and you push, you push the Holocaust and the bad things in your memory back, away, instead of occupying and filling with things that are mundane and happy and whatever else needs to be.

KK: Did you have to train yourself to do that – or you just did it automatically?

JJ: I think it probably came by itself, because I certainly wouldn't know how to train myself.

KK: Does it come out in dreams – do you have dreams about –

JJ: Sometimes. Sometimes. Nightmares.

KK: Nightmares – that's exactly what I mean – nightmares.

And, again, if I'm being too personal, please stop me. Did you ever seek help for – like, psychological help –

JJ: No.

KK: No. Never.

JJ: I tried looking for help for a personal item, nothing to do with the Holocaust.

KK: You've got to be the toughest person I know –

JJ: That's what some people tell me.

KK: Yeah – I mean – by far. By far.

So, I also wanted to ask you about when you ran away – when you escaped – what thoughts were going through your head?

JJ: That was a different group of thoughts. That was strictly survival. Because I was outside, I had freedom, but I still had, when I started, when I ran away I had my stripes, my concentration camp stripes, my wooden shoes, so that was difficult, but not impossible, in the beginning, and I remember spending the first few days, and so on, in haystacks, slept there, ate from the ground, would have been melons, potatoes, not cooked, raw, carrots, whatever, whatever was there that was edible.

KK: It's probably the most – is it the most you had eaten in months, would you say?

JJ: Once I was free?

KK: Yeah – from the fields –

JJ: Oh, I had enough food to have a party. I mean this is, remember, at the time, because the Germans would, at the war, most of them would go to farmers. Soldiers on either side. Most of the farmers, in that particular place where I was, were Polish. So when I passed by and I heard Polish speaking, I would then stop, not talk about what I'm doing because Polish people in some respects, were very anti-Semitic, so I had to do that. But I

was stealing, shirts and pants and shoes, if I could, and that took a little time before I was able to walk out and go somewhere – when I say go somewhere, go nowhere – but walk somewhere. But that was a totally, oh, that was a great feeling. The only feeling that I would have, it was a constant fear that somebody, some German, would either see me, shoot me, kill me, but at least I was free, so I didn't have any, any of this dictatorial supervision over my body, my mind, my whatever. It felt good. It felt great.

KK: It's incredible. I just, can't – I really can't even imagine. You're just running through fields, you come to farms, you eat what you can –

JJ: Do you remember the story that I have there. That after a few days or so, I'm walking somewhere, and I get very tired. It was summertime, or it was springtime, but it was warm that day, so I sat myself down with my back to a chicken wire fence, and that was an airport for security or something for Germany, and they grabbed me. That was an experience that I would never forget.

[End of conversation]