HOLOCAUST TESTIMONY

OF

K.R. ANONYMOUS

Transcript of Audiotaped Interview

Interviewer: Ellen Rofman
Date: October 1, 1985

Holocaust Oral History Archive
Gratz College
Melrose Park, PA 19027

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KR - Anonymous [interviewee]
ER - Ellen Rofman [interviewer]
Date: October 1, 1985

Tape one, side one:

ER: This is Ellen Rofman on October 1, interviewing K.R. from Israel. Can you please tell me where you were born, when, and a little bit about your family?

KR: I was born in Poland, in Tarnopol, on March 31. I know I was the second one. I had an older sister, three and a half years older. What would you like to hear more?

ER: Well, tell me a little bit about your family. What was your father's occupation?

KR: You see, I remember the stories of World War I and my father was telling the stories to my sister, three and a half years older, was born during World War I in the basement. The mother didn't have milk, you know, to feed her. You know, it was a terrible time. So, he was running through the fire, through the shooting, over the streets, to get some milk for her, and I just remember that. It must be terrible to have this kind of suffering in life. Then she died in World War II, so it's like she lived between two wars, and that's really very sad. I had a younger brother, five years younger, and nobody from my family is alive. When I left home he was maybe 12 or so.

ER: What did your father do for a living?

KR: My father was in business.

ER: What kind of business?

KR: As far as I can remember, he was in—not cloth, but materials, a manufacturer.

ER: A manufacturer of fabrics?

KR: Fabrics. Not a manufacturer, just a store of fabrics. This was the first one that I can remember. After, he changed; he probably wasn't successful and he changed for—what you make bread from...

ER: Wheat?

KR: Yes, wheat. So, he had all the villages, he was buying the wheat and selling it.

ER: Why did he change businesses? Did he change because of the war?

KR: I think he wasn't successful. That's what I think; I'm not sure.

ER: You didn't mention the year you were born. You mentioned you were born March 31.

KR: 1922.

ER: 1922. Can you tell me what your life was like before the war or before your life was changed by the Nazi victories in Europe? Was your family a middle-class family?

KR: Yes, middle-class, not rich. My parents lived during World War I in Vienna and they met in Vienna and they married there. A lot of culture from Vienna was around our house and they were very positive about the Kaiser, Franz Joseph. This was the leader of Austria-Hungary. They were talking a lot about him and his picture was in the house. This is the culture that I remember in our house.

ER: Where did you go to school?

KR: They wanted us, the kids, to have good Polish language, so they never talked to us neither in German, neither in Yiddish. Between themselves, they talked German and Yiddish and with us, only Polish. I went to Polish public school; the same with my sister, my older sister went.

ER: Did you go to any religious school?

KR: No, but I went to a Hebrew public school in the afternoon. It's like Sunday school here, but this was really five days' afternoon school, like from 4 to 7, or so.

ER: Now, did your family experience any antisemitism at all in Poland before the Hitler period?

KR: Yes. Especially, you know, the last years, like '38, this was already obvious. Then I was in high school. I was in a commercial high school. Yes, the last years I remember, like from '37 maybe, there were very obvious signs. Maybe it was hidden before or I was too little to—no, it was even before, because I remember like on the holidays, like now, the Jewish kids were not going to school and this was an issue. On Saturdays, the school was open. I was going to school on Saturday, but not writing. This was an issue. Like when we came after the holidays, our places were taken, I was in the first row so it was kind of—it could be—yes, I remember another story. It was kind of not that open antisemitism, but more mentality of antisemitism. And I'll tell you a story that shows that it's not only them; it's also how we felt, you know. Like I remember in high school, a Polish girl—would you like to make it shorter so I don't have to go into it.

ER: No.

KR: You know, it seems [unclear] I remember this. A Polish girl, she was very popular—this was in teenage years and she put on her soles, she wrote initials "B"—big "B" with chalk and "Z" and she was walking and making all the signs of "BZ." And she was really laughing—it was fun; and what I picked up just automatically, not only me, the Jewish girls: "B" is in Polish for *Bij*, a capital for B, and Z, is for *zyda*. "*Bij zyda*" means, "Beat the Jew." That's what we understood, automatically.

ER: Do you think that's what she meant?

KR: And then we complained to the teacher after the recess, and she was crying. Then what it really was—this was the initials of the boy that she liked.

ER: So, you're saying that you were looking for the antisemitism?

KR: Right, yes. But in '38, it was already very obvious. The Endecy[1] movement was very strong and they were having *Mishmarot* you know. There were things, you know, voluntarily, before the doors of the Jewish shops, and not allowing the Polish people to go in and buy. Or at the universities, you know, the Jewish students were not allowed to go in. They had standing places and also limited rations. They had to stand in the class. I was too little for that, but I remember the stories.

ER: What happened to your father's business, after Germany invaded Poland?

KR: I wasn't around. I was when the Russians invaded our part. You know, the Germans invaded the west part of Poland and I was on the east side of Poland. I remember when the Russian tanks came in. [unclear] Then, my father was working with the director of a bakery. He was really—he wasn't among the rich at this time, so he didn't have any troubles, because he was employed in the bakery business before the Russians came.

ER: Did he lose his job?

KR: No, just the opposite. I mean, he worked in a bakery and when the Russians came he continued, but he also was director of the bakery, I think so.

ER: Was he called up to serve in the army?

KR: I don't think so, no. I don't know what he did. I just remember the stories that when he was a boy, the obligatory education law had started and he should go to the Polish school. His father wouldn't let him because he had to learn in a *heder*—Jewish, and not to go to a Polish school. So he had to bribe—he bribed the authorities in order not to take his son into the public school. But my father learned autodidactically and he had a wonderful writing. He wrote Polish and he read Polish and he was really—everything that he knew, he knew by himself because he didn't go to Polish school.

ER: So, you're saying that your life in Poland before the Russian invasion was really—it was okay.

KR: It was more personal stuff, because my mother was very sick, and she died when the Russians were—so I will not go into this history, but it took years. My father really couldn't take too much time for business stuff because he had to look after three children, and he tried his best so he could continue studying and do everything.

ER: Were there many Jews living in your town, in Tarnopol?

KR: Yes I can't tell how many, but like Tarnopol was a city of three groups and all three were in schools: Polish, Ukrainian and Jewish. So, my friends would be all three of them. I had good friends, Polish.

ER: Of all nationalities?

KR: Especially with the Polish, one Ukrainian. I can't remember exactly.

ER: Was there a highly organized Jewish community in Tarnopol?

[1]Endecy – followers of the far-right National Democratic movement in Poland.

KR: Yes, I think so. I know there was a lady, like today you would call her a social worker, a volunteer, that would go every Friday and coming to houses, to our house too, to get products for the Shabbat, for the poor people that needed it, and never telling names so we didn't know for whom it goes. This is something that I really remember because it impressed me greatly—this kind of giving without names. The giver doesn't know whom he gives to.

ER: Was there a *kehillah* in your town?

KR: I'm sure there was, and my father would go to the synagogue and all this stuff. I was too young to pay attention to this.

ER: What happened to you and your family during the weeks following the invasion by Russia?

KR: It was a relief that the Germans didn't come to us. Then, we started, you know, to adjust ourselves to the new situation. It was a shock that the Polish government didn't stay for a week or so and we adjusted. It was only—at this time, I was in *Hanoar Hatzioni*, before the war.

ER: What is *Hanoar Hatzioni*?

KR: It's a general Zionist, you know, like Gordonia. Maybe you know Gordonia. Anyway, it was *Hanoar Hatzioni*. This is what shocked me after I finished high school, not a long time, but when the Russians came, all the Zionistic movements disappeared because the Russians saw them as political enemies and I had a very small group of friends, like 8 or 10, that we decided that we're not going to disappear and we started a conspiracy. I was very active in this. For example, the head of the *Hanoar Hatzioni* in our eyes, he was an older man. He might be 33, who knows, maybe 34 at the most, so when we saw him on the street, we were greeting him, "*Khazak V'amatz*[2]," and he was just not looking in our direction. He was so afraid and we couldn't stand it that he was such a chicken, you know. So we organized ourselves for Zionistic work, just the 7 or 10, I can't remember exactly. This whole conspiracy stuff with the aim of going to Palestine...

ER: Were you able to continue having your meetings or did somebody report you?

KR: No. We were really a high conspiracy. Nobody reported us. Maybe it's also good luck. Then we decided to go to L'vov. L'vov was the biggest city in this region. Maybe you know it as Lemberg. Lemberg is in the German language. There was an agricultural school, so we decided to go to this agricultural school as a way of leaving home and organized ourselves to go through the Romanian border illegally, past the border, and go to Palestine. We were 17 and we tried, so—

ER: How did your parents—was your mother still alive?

KR: My mother was not alive.

[2]*Khazak V'amatz*- have strength and courage (Hebrew).

ER: How did your father feel about this?

KR: My father didn't know about it. This was conspiracy also. He knew that we went to learn at this school and he wouldn't think about agriculture for me, but this was what I wanted and he let me. He didn't know also our plans. We decided, my boyfriend and myself, his name was Isaac Hirshhorn and myself. We were the first to cross the border.

ER: So, you left home without telling your father?

KR: To the school.

ER: To the school.

KR: But from that school, on vacation, it was like around October and there were festivities in Russia, you know. This is the revolution and the schools are off, and it's all the same time when we have the holidays. So on the time off, we went to the border—we went before to find out and then we tried, the two of us, to pass. We were the first two and we hoped to succeed and let the others know and then in groups of two, they will pass also the Russian-Romanians border.

ER: What year was this that you went?

KR: This was in October, 1940. We were caught on the border by the villagers.

ER: Were these Romanians?

KR: No, no.

ER: Russians?

KR: Ukrainians. They put us on a carriage and it was 12 kilometers to the city, to the first town, and they brought us to the police. What I remember vividly, all the way, the 12 kilometers, it was a carriage with a horse so it took time. We sang the Zionistic Hebrew songs.

ER: You were very brave?

KR: You know, stupid and brave sometimes. I mean naive and brave. It wasn't brave like—it was naive and brave, but that's what we did.

ER: So, what happened when you got to the police station?

KR: We were arrested and then separated, of course. So, I was with the women. This was a real shock, you know, I was 17-1/2 or so. It was together with the criminals. Most of them were whores and women that hid the thieves. There was one Jewish girl that she was in love with a Polish boy and she married him. She left her home for 17 months. So, there was two Jewish girls, me and her, but she was a very different person. There were there about 14 or 15 [unclear: 40 or 50?] people, no bed. So, this was a shock.

ER: How long were you in that prison?

KR: Then we were sentenced. We had decided if we would be caught, we would tell that we had vacation, of the October Festivities, and we went just to the woods because at this border, there's a lot of thick woods and we just wanted to be together, and that's what we said. We got a sentence of a year for each of us.

ER: How did they treat you? I mean, did they harm you in any way?

KR: Like everybody. I mean you become a number but nothing like under the Germans. It's not written on your hands. Every morning, we were sent up in a line and to say your name or number, I can't remember. You see, it's really not a pleasant thing but today, okay, it was very hard at that time because I didn't have any perspective. Today I can compare it with—if I compare it with what the German jails were, so it was really a heaven but at this time, comparing to my life before, it was a terrible shock. This was really the first time that I met people that I never met before, Polish language that I never used, and I became like a lawyer because I was literate. I remember writing letters to—I don't know the expression, you have a sentence and you wanted to...

ER: To ask for a pardon?

KR: For a pardon or to the higher court. Like one girl, you know, a Ukrainian girl, that was pregnant and her parents didn't want to accept it and the boy. She wasn't married, so they just didn't let her in and she delivered outside in the snow; it was winter and she killed the baby in some way, I don't remember. So she was sentenced for this. I was very touched with her story and I wrote a letter, you know.

ER: So, you were in prison for a year-and-a-half?

KR: I was in prison—instead of jail, I was less because then we were transported to the camp.

ER: Did they allow you any contact with your father?

KR: I wrote letters and I wrote to my sister and I wrote also to my father and got packages from him until the Germans came to Tarnopol; then we didn't have anymore contact.

ER: Now, after you were transferred, where did they transfer you to?

KR: To this camp in Kupsfer [phonetic] region. It's on the North Pole, like you know, in the summer, there are white nights. This was extremely cold in the winter, very cold, and it was a completely new life, everything was so different.

ER: Can you describe what the conditions were like and what you did there?

KR: The conditions varied. You know, we were in barracks. Many girls in one barrack. But kind of the atmosphere between the prisoners was really good, I would say. You see, there were many politicals there, like queens, old members of the aristocracy, Trotskyites. One of the men who took good care of me, felt like my father, closest friend of Trotsky, Rafael Gregorian Greganiska [phonetic]. I met all kinds of interesting people there. Work, I worked for a time in the woods.

ER: Doing what?

KR: Shoveling snow.

ER: Did they have you working all the time?

KR: What do you mean all the time?

ER: Like a labor camp. I mean or did they...

KR: It was a labor camp but it was a eight hours work, and then they found out that I am a bookkeeper because I finished commercial high school so they took me into the office and bookkeeping and I worked there. It was a completely different story. It was really good at that time. The beginning was very hard when I was working in the outside but you see, it wasn't dehumanizing.

ER: Yes, that's what I was going to ask. And they fed you?

KR: Look, like lunch, what we had is melting snow on the fire so we drank this hot melting snow and a piece of bread that we toasted it on the fire. This was lunch. It wasn't great but everybody was like that so I didn't feel dehumanized. But you see, there were people, this is really—I became very sensitive to human reactions, because they were very—and more men than women, like professors, ex-professors and you know, people will tell you, this was this and this. They lost their dignity and they were externally very neglected and they had this—I mean, the dish, from rustic [unclear] and they would just stand back for additional soup or so, and I just hated looking at those people. These were more like the ones that I know from the people that were in the German camps. They were people that couldn't make it. They were dying from undernourishment. But nothing like that happened to me and to friends. I felt it wasn't that we didn't have as much to eat; it wasn't that—it was the attitude—how you think.

ER: Now, during this time, did you have any contact with your family in Poland?

KR: I had until the Germans invaded Russia, invaded Tarnopol, my city.

ER: And when was that?

KR: This was during the period that I was in the camp. Then, it was a pact between Polish General Sikorski and the Russians to free all the Polish citizens and then I was in this dismal mess in the winter. So, before I finished the whole sentence, period of a year-and-a-half, I was about 10 or 11 months that I was because of that pact.

ER: Okay, now, did you have any idea what was going on in Poland at that time?

KR: There were radios, of course, but nobody believed. We thought it was Russian propaganda.

Tape one, side two:

ER: This is Ellen Rofman interviewing K.R. This is side two. Now, you were saying that you had the radios and what you heard you thought was propaganda.

KR: Mmm hmm [affirmative].

ER: But you really didn't know exactly what was going on.

KR: We knew what was in the newspapers and radios.

ER: Now, where did you go once you were released; what did you do?

KR: I was sent, I supposed to go to a part, a given part of Russia, Saratov. It doesn't matter really what part. So I was sent to this part of Russia. People like me when they were freed, they were supposed to go to a given region.

ER: Did they want you to take on Soviet citizenship?

KR: I really can't remember. I think that I lost my—yes, I mean I never wanted but it was something that I had to take so I had a document, yes.

ER: But you did take Soviet citizenship?

KR: It wasn't a question if I want or I don't, it was just.

ER: You did it.

KR: It was. I did—I didn't have to do anything. I just had it. I didn't have any choice. I think so. On my document, I don't remember how it was called, it was also written that I was released from the jail. So, you know, in the jail, it was such an atmosphere that people were sitting for—10 years was not much, 15 or 20, 25. The norm was such that usually, you know, the first question when people were acquainted would be, "How long do you have to be?" So, the norm was that kind that I was ashamed to say I'm sentenced for a year-and-a-half because it was called children's sentence. But when I was free, I couldn't find work. I mean I found, because everybody works. This was not a problem and all the men were in the army. Many places were needed and I was an accountant, but they looked at my passport—not passport but document that I'm from jail, they didn't want me. So, I had a hard time to find a job. You know, what I most remember and greatly appreciate was the people, just the people. I never was in a situation that I didn't have a place to sleep or something to eat and what I did—really, you know like going in the train. And I didn't—the trains were full, you couldn't just buy a ticket and go; it was all restricted, you couldn't go. Then, the trains were full because the Russians were already—the Germans were already in Russia, you know, it was very hard time. So, we had to wait in the train stations for weeks, and no money, nothing. So, always somebody was around that I could ask, not begging, nothing like that; or like coming to a city, I would sit close in the, in the train to a lady, let's say, and she would ask me where I went and, "Where are you going to be?" I would say, "I don't know." "Come and stay with me," like that.

ER: Did anybody ask you about your religion at this time?

KR: Yes, you see, I— it depends where but when I came to a village close to Saratov, the name is Devochi Gorki, this was a Russian village on the Volga.

ER: Can you spell that village, the name, how would you spell it?

KR: Devochi, devochi Gorki you can spell it.

ER: You can spell it in Russian.

KR: It says the Maiden Hills. This was the name, a very picturesque place along the Volga. So, I found somebody. I was in the line for a meal because many people were displaced. So we could get hot soup, and I saw somebody in front of me with a nose, a Jewish nose, so I was asking, and he said, "Come to our village, to the *kolkhoz*. They will take you; they need bookkeepers." So, I came to that *kolkhoz*.

ER: What's *kolkhoz*?

KR: *Kolkhoz* is the way that—it's not private villages. It's common villages. So, this is called *kolkhoz*. Then he took me to work but no salary because *kolkhoz* is like a cooperative.

ER: Like a *kibbutz*?

KR: No, it's like a cooperative, an agricultural cooperative. *Kibbutz* is voluntary and *kolkhoz* is not voluntary; you know, you just have to do it. So they don't get money because they get, once a year when they are ready, whatever is—like for people like me that have to live from something, I got every day bread and rice and flour and sugar, you know products, but not money, and they wrote me down an address and said, "Go to this place and you will stay with them." No money paid, just like that. It was like 6:00 p.m. in the winter, I came to the house. A girl opens the door and it was dark, no electricity, and it was cold. She was—there were ovens that you know, huge ovens, that you sleep on the ovens. You put the blankets on the ovens. She was on the oven. It was dark. I said to her that they sent me to stay with them. She said, "Okay, my mother is not home and my grandmother is not home; men were not available. So, come to me, lay down here, warm up and wait." I was a complete stranger and it was dark and she accepted me right on her oven and I warmed up and we started talking. She was 15. Then, she started telling me stories that she heard. You know, she's very afraid, much afraid of Jews because people say they have horns and stuff like this. So I decided I'm not going to scare this girl so—I was 19 and she was 15, so I didn't tell her that I'm Jewish. I decided that I can't do it to her because she would faint, but next day, in the morning, when her mother was around, I told her that I'm Jewish.

ER: What was her reaction?

KR: Okay, you know, we cleared it up. She never saw a Jew.

ER: So, you remained there?

KR: Yes, of course, I remained, but you know, it wasn't a problem but people had all kinds of ideas toward us Jews.

ER: Now, was there anything going on in the part of Russia where you were living when the Germans—I mean, were the Germans advancing?

KR: Yes.

ER: Can you describe what life was like?

KR: After a while, I became head bookkeeper in that place and I had pretty good conditions. I even started university studies by correspondence and it was really good. I mean I had a house with—somebody's house that I lived in, I didn't have to pay, I had food and I didn't have clothes, this was a problem, but not to change like I had two dresses, so always I had to wash my clothes. But I had good conditions, I would say at that time. When the Germans advanced, the Polish citizens, even, I had—it was written that had to be evac-...

ER: Yes, deported.

KR: Deported. So, one day without telling me in advance, I had to be deported and at that time, it was really hard because I was already, I felt home at that place.

ER: You no longer had any contact with your family?

KR: No.

ER: You knew nothing about them?

KR: No, so I had to leave. The lady I had stayed with had baked for me, cookies for the way and everything, but I had to go and we were going east all the time.

ER: Can you describe that deportation, how long you were on the train?

KR: I don't remember how long but it was long. It was going from middle of Russia to the east to Kazakhstan.

ER: Can you spell that?

KR: K-A-Z-A-C-H-S-D-A-N. Kazachsdan [sic] is a state and like you make a state in the United States.

ER: Right, it's a state in Russia?

KR: Yes, it's a state, a huge state. I came to a place called Kustanay; I mean I didn't come voluntarily but they took me.

ER: What were the conditions like on the train?

KR: Look, should I go regularly because now when you mention this, it reminds me of the conditions on the train when we went from the jail to the prison? Those were terrible trains, from the jail to prison. They were locked and we had terrible food like, you know, the soup was so salty, only this was very bad conditions. But this time going by train going east, I wasn't a prisoner anymore so it was different. You can't compare to the trains here.

ER: I understand that.

KR: It was very hard conditions but not as hard as going from jail to...

ER: Were they very crowded?

KR: Yes, very crowded.

ER: Did they stop?

KR: Yes, they had stops. On the stops, we would go out and buy some food, you know, because women would sell stuff; and I could see even people finding each other in this way, like going from the train, you know, and families finding one another.

ER: And they just took people that were Polish citizens?

KR: I know about Polish. Not only Polish, Germans. There were villages close to the place that I was. There was a German colony, an agricultural colony, many colonies, very nicely organized villages with German populations and when they came to one of the villages, they were all empty because the Germans were also transferred east. So, I would say all non-Russians and Polish and Germans and maybe some others too.

ER: Now, can you describe what you did after you arrived, and what your life was like?

KR: It was completely different climate. In the winter, it was winter and it was like in Eilat, you know, everything green and sunny. You know, I never saw a green...

ER: In the winter?

KR: Yes, because it was east in Kazakhstan. The climate was completely different, so we didn't have any snow, warm and nice. We made friendships in the train. I mean I met all kinds of people in the train. It was a long journey and I met a Jewish family. They were two sisters, young women married with their husbands and another brother that lost his wife and they decided—I mean they invited me to go with them. So, I had a family.

ER: Where did you live?

KR: Okay, so first of all, I mean he took care of finding a house and he paid. This was already on different conditions; we had to pay. So, I stayed with them for a while and then I found another solution. I found a boy and we became friends and then I left that pseudo-family and I had another group. I mean it wasn't like you could get an apartment or so. I couldn't even have one room with that boy because he had five more friends staying with him, and a Russian lady with a kid and with a baby and we were all in this one room. These were the conditions, you know, but everybody, I mean not everybody but the people like me, lived like that.

ER: Did you have enough food and clothing?

KR: Clothing, it was, you know, like the markets were full if you had the money. By then, I had money because I worked before I was sent to east. You see, I would like to make a comment. What I feel today when I talk of all this, it's already so many years past and you don't catch the real flavor of what I felt at that time. And now, I'm wiser; I saw more and I have more; so also, I'm realizing because the Russians, I mean the people, I'm not talking about the government, are really so warm and good people that this is the feeling that stays with me, but I had very hard times. I had very hard times but I was not humiliated. I knew—I was starving, I was sick, I had typhus, I was sick. I was hungry to the degree that I was daydreaming about if—because when I was in the prison, the Russians would tell all kinds of stories: During the revolution years

when there was hunger, that the mother would eat even a child, and all this kind of cannibals, you know. So, when I was sick and very hungry, I had para-typhus and I was hospitalized. I was daydreaming if I would eat human flesh and I knew I would. This is a terrible thing. So, it's on one side like I have very warm memories to the people; on the other side, you know, they were very hard times and I didn't have the perspective, because now I'm here so it's over but I never knew that it will be over. I didn't know that the war will stop some day and if it will that I will be allowed to go back. I was alone and I had many hard times.

ER: Did you have any contact with anybody that you had met along the way while you were in Russia, or did you know what was happening in Europe? Did you have any news of any sort?

KR: Just the same, we had the radio. It's one form of radio, it's not stations that you could press buttons. Soviet news official stuff and official newspapers.

ER: Did you believe it, at this point?

KR: I think yes, but I didn't know exactly and I had some hopes maybe—I didn't know the details but when the war—you see, it's so many stories, it's very hard to cover; I had many heartbreaking stories. You see, it's private stuff but also not private, like when I was a bookkeeper in the new place in Kustanay, I got a very good position and I worked and I succeeded. You know, I was very good in work but so my situation again was not—cloth was really a problem because I couldn't buy it. Like I saw one lady, she was a princess in the past and she was also an actress and she had a girl, 10 years old girl. And I saw them walking every day, you know, to school or what, and it was winter. Even in Kustanay, it wasn't snow but it was a time that it was cold, and she was like a beggar. I mean I had two dresses but I was always dressed in one of the two and I had always a pair of shoes.

ER: Did you have a coat?

KR: Yes, I had a coat. I had my nightgowns that I used as dresses. They were perfect. Nobody knew this was a nightgown, but this lady and the girl were just in—how do you call it, nothing, nothing. I couldn't see this and in the place that I worked, there was also work for shoes. So, I decided with a girlfriend that we would buy a pair of shoes and we will watch her, what size her feet are, and I didn't want her to know, to feel bad to give her a gift. And we worked on this, it was a project, you wouldn't believe. So, we knew that she's going from the theater. She worked in a theater, unbelievable, and she didn't have a pair of shoes—I don't remember, no, she didn't work in the theater. She was an actress but she worked some place else. So, I stood in the street night-time, it was 10:00 or 11:00, I don't know, and I waited for her because I knew she will pass, and I had this package and I said, "This is for you," and I disappeared. We were so happy that we had the shoes for her and for her girl, and she never knew who gave it to her.

ER: Did you see her afterwards wearing the shoes?

KR: I can't remember, I really don't remember, because things happened like a coat. When I got a coat, a new coat that a tailor made for me, you know, it was very unusual. I had a kind of feeling it's too good. It's like a kind of prejudice; if it's good, it should be bad, so I went in the new coat home with the feeling it can't be like that good, and then was the bad thing waiting for me. I came home, I even didn't have the time to have dinner and the policemen came and said, "Go with me," no reason, I didn't know anything. So, I decided when you go with the policemen, you don't know if you are coming back, so I said to my girlfriend, "I'm not going to take this coat." So I left the new coat and put on the old one and went with them. This was the coat—questions that, you know.

ER: Did you come back?

KR: I came back but I didn't know that I would come back because this is the NKVD.

ER: Was it a holiday?

KR: No, a regular day, I came from work—at night. They asked me all kinds of questions. They wanted me to work for them as a spy and to tell them things about my friends that I lived with and other friends, Polish, you know. And I don't know if it's a game, not a hero, I don't know, at this time. I had very confused ideas. I couldn't make my mind up if Russia is good or bad ideologically, because I saw very much of the good side, you know, and I was treated like everybody else, like the Russians. And I saw very much of the bad side. And I was in a dilemma, do I believe in this and all this, you know? At that time, it was like three years of the indoctrination by radio and everything; it works on an adolescent, you know.

ER: Sure.

KR: So, I was confused and here comes, they want me to work for them against my friends from my home.

ER: So, what did you do?

KR: What I did, and I don't know their laws. I didn't know the laws; so they gave me a paper and he dictated to me what to write and I had the feeling I want to know if 'till the end—I didn't have any hope of coming back from this place but I felt terrible: how could he be so—and I had to work, you know— hypocritical? I wanted to learn from my experience, so I wrote down every word and he dictated to me a letter that I agree to do this and this and this. I wanted to know this and when I finished the whole page, he said, "Sign up." I put my pen down and I said, "I'm not signing up." It's unbelievable and I started crying and you know, if I still remember the scene, I wasn't crying because I will be in jail again, because I didn't have any hope that I will not. I mean I knew I will be in jail and it was—I had already myself experienced three years ago. I was upset that they treat people like this. I was really so disappointed, this is what I was crying for. Also, some specific ideas about the coat, you know, all kinds of stuff came in. I was sure

that he was going to put me in jail. I didn't know that the law doesn't allow this. I mean they could press me to sign but if I don't sign, they were not allowed.

ER: They weren't allowed to do anything.

KR: So, they threatened me. I said, "That's it," so here I am. They brought me back home at 2:00 a.m. and said that they will call me again.

ER: Did they ever call you again?

KR: No, but I was so afraid. I was afraid to tell my girlfriend because, you know, this is how people become paranoid. I was afraid and like the feeling is that walls have ears, it was the expression, very common, and I didn't know what to tell her and what not to tell her, but I decided I'm not going to tell her what it was about because she would be afraid; it would do something for our friendship, so it was lonely [unclear]. So, I had a hard time to go back to this normal life because I was afraid that they would call me again, and then he told both my friend and myself, what could it be? And we came to a conclusion on the Yom Kippur night; we became sentimental. You know, we were not observing, not me. At the time, I was with a girlfriend; she's now also in Israel. But on Yom Kippur eve, we went to a synagogue, wanted to listen to the *shofar* and everything. We were outside because the synagogue was full of people. We were standing outside and a young man came along; he was also from Poland, a Jew, and you know, we were two girls and he started to go with us and talk to us, so it was fine, and we talked and then he took us home and like it should be, you know, in the good times. And we were very sentimental. We told him everything and then I got letters from him, love letters, like every other day. Every other day, I got a love letter from him that he wants to meet me. I wasn't interested in him. So, but after this, we both decided, my girlfriend and me, that he must have been working for them [unclear] put me on the list. It's possible. So, what I decided is to escape from that place because I didn't want to risk anymore. So, first of all, I was a chief accountant, you know, so just to run away, it's, you know...

Tape two, side one:

ER: This is Ellen Rofman, October 1, interviewing K.R. This is tape two, side one.

KR: So, I had a responsible position in bookkeeping. So, I put everything in order so there was no problems, no professional problems. I decided to escape. I didn't tell my girlfriend because I had this funny feeling that nobody should know. And people were not allowed just to buy tickets and to go by train. You needed to have a document. A document could be that somebody sent you professionally or what. So, I was in a position to write myself a letter that I'm sent professionally to the main city in Kazakhstan. So, I had the document that I'm sent professionally to the main city of Alma-Ata, and I went.

ER: What is the name of that city?

KR: Alma-Ata, the Father of Apples, this is the name of the city. It was a very nice, big city in Kazakhstan. So, I decided to go to that city. The keys I left, to work, you know; everything was fixed and I did not—and to my girlfriend, I just left a letter that I had to go, you know why and nothing else. So, I started a new life in a new place.

ER: And you had no trouble on the train because you had the papers?

KR: I had an official note; I was in a very, very important position there.

ER: How far away was this city?

KR: Very far. I can't say how much but it was a very big trip.

ER: Now, did you need money to get on that train?

KR: I had money, I worked, you know. I had a position that I worked and I had money. At that time, I really had everything that was available. I even had the coat that I told you about. So, I went to a new city and I was very afraid they would still go after me, but I had my document. If they would look after me, it was in the same state. I didn't pass the state: in the same state, only different in the name. So, I looked for—yes, I found a place to live. Again, on the train, I met somebody and she told me, "Okay, stay with me." Always, things like this. I never knew what I will be. And I never slept in a park or on the street. Then, I watched in the newspapers for a job and what I liked in a place, a position to be an inspector on accounting that I had to be sent to different places, very far, so I wouldn't sit in one place. It would be not so easy to find me. Now you can see one of the reasons that I don't want my name on because maybe if I go, I don't want to—you know, I have many things.

ER: You're still paranoid after all these years? But I understand.

KR: Because I want to go there. In that city, Tarnopol is in Russia part today, not in the Polish part, and I would like some day to go there, maybe with the sons and children who I have. So, I don't want to have this on my way.

ER: Was life normal there in this city, this new city that you went to?

KR: A big city. Yes, pretty normal, far from the front between the war.

ER: Yes. Jewish people, were they having—was there any special treatment or they were just treated like everyone else?

KR: Just like everybody.

ER: Did you have any feeling that maybe you would have a future in the Soviet Union, that you would stay there?

KR: No, I didn't want to because I had no family anymore; I didn't want to. But, you see, I saw in every place that I came, I saw Jews in the black market; I didn't like it. You see, something that bothers me even today, why should—? Okay, that's how it was. Always, you know, they want to find Jews and to make connections. It was called black market because the market was black and you find everything, and I never did stuff like that.

ER: Yes, you had a trade, you had a profession.

KR: And this was a profession that I didn't want. I wrote poetry. I wanted to go for humanistic direction but my parents decided that I should go to a commercial high school because this is more profitable.

ER: Were you ever approached by anybody to join the Polish Army under General Andreas?

KR: Anders. No, but I wanted, I volunteered—this again I didn't remember this. I wanted to go to the army. Did I tell you this? They never asked me but I wanted so much to go to the army.

ER: How long did you stay in this new village? What happened there?

KR: It's not a village.

ER: This city?

KR: It's bigger than Philadelphia, believe it or not. This was the biggest city in the whole state—Alma-Ata—I'm not sure but, you know.

ER: How long did you remain there?

KR: So I got the job that I was going on inspections, inspecting the bookkeeping in all kinds of places, so I was always gone for a month and coming back and they never found me. I was never bothered again but I was afraid it might happen. So, I really had a good time.

ER: So, were you there until the end of the war?

KR: Yes, but I didn't have the patience to wait for the war to end, until they would allow me to go back home to my place. I wasn't sure if this will work. So again, I decided that I had to go to do it my way. So, again, I escaped, you see? I didn't wait. Now, I know that the Polish citizens were sent back, had the right to go back but I didn't know.

ER: This was in 1945, after the war?

KR: Yes.

ER: You stayed in this city until 1945?

KR: Yes, but I didn't wait. I didn't know what will happen. So, I decided I had to go to Tarnopol and see what happened there. So, I told my boss. By then, I had a very good position and they liked my work, so I said I want to go back, take a vacation, leave of absence for a month, that I want to stay here, come back, that I want some news that my younger brother is alive. This was just a story, and that I would like to go to my city to see what happened to the family and to bring my brother and come back. I would like a month leave of absence. He gave it to me. So, again, I had a letter, I'm allowed to go to Tarnopol, and it's far, it's more than from here to California. You know, the whole continent. So, I had all legal now that I'm on leave of absence and I'm allowed to go to Tarnopol. Then, I started my new journey to Tarnopol.

ER: How long did it take you to get there?

KR: I don't remember how long but it took long, many weeks.

ER: By this time you saw a lot of people going back and forth on the trains.

KR: Yes. This was always the situation but especially that time. So, I came, I came to Tarnopol and I came to Poland [unclear]. It's again a story, where do I sleep, it was winter. So, I met some body in the train and he said you know, when we were coming to—the train was coming to L'vov, at 10:00 at night, and I didn't know anybody there so he said, "We have a place; you can stay with us overnight. And then we will see." So, I had an address. Like 10 or 15 people were sleeping in this place. So I stayed overnight. In the morning, he gave me an address of a Ukrainian girl and against all these fears about Ukrainians, this was just one girl. He knew her before the war and maybe they were in love, I don't know. He said, "She lives, she has a house here. He has her address. Just tell her that I sent you." So, I went and she seemed like a queen.

ER: Was this back in Tarnopol?

KR: In L'vov, before I went to Tarnopol. You see, maybe this was a Jewish apartment that they maybe…

ER: Had taken over.

KR: Maybe, I don't know. I just know that I spent with them, I spoke with them, I ate with them. I started, you know, working for my—it's all kinds of legal procedures to go back to Poland. So, I couldn't use my papers anymore because my papers said that I am just on leave of absence from Alma-Ata and I had to go back. So, these papers, I just threw away; I mean they weren't of use anymore. So it was a long procedure and I had to wait and I stayed in that house for a month or so. No money, I didn't pay; nobody asked me to pay but I had another problem because I didn't want to have my share in the antisemitism. I mean I told them lies that I'm coming back and I never came back. So I wanted to clear up this subject. So [unclear] it was very important to me to be fair with them. Fair doesn't mean to say the truth but just not to think that I'm an [unclear] because I was so sure of my own good reasons, I just didn't want to contribute to possible antisemitism because I had cheated them. I went to Tarnopol. It's not so far away, maybe 70-80 kilometers, maybe more, to find out finally—I stayed in

L'vov but I went to Tarnopol to see what happened. I couldn't see anything. It was just nothing.

ER: The whole city?

KR: The whole city. I remember Tarnopol as a big city when I was a girl and when it's destroyed, it's a nothing, you see. This city passed three times from German hands to Russian, back and forth. It was completely destroyed, almost completely. I couldn't find my way from the train station. I remember the streets but there were no streets, no parks, no nothing.

ER: Did you meet anybody that recognized you or you recognized?

KR: I found finally my street and my house. It was half destroyed. I remember a balcony, half destroyed, just the bottom of it, and I went to the place where our apartment was and I stood in the corridor, in front of the door, and I cried and I couldn't walk in. I just couldn't. So, Russian soldiers lived there. One of the Russians went out and asked me why I was crying, so I said—so he invited me in and I couldn't go, I didn't go in. Then, I walked around for a few days and I found in the cold, a Ukrainian lady that was a—she was the wash-lady. She was doing the laundry. They had no washing machines. It was the day of the laundry. So, I recognized her.

ER: Did she recognize you?

KR: Yes, and she told me the details, more or less: what place the Russians took the Jews— that the Germans took the Jews and my father and my brother with them and they had a common grave in a common place. It was the suburbs of Tarnopol. This was it. And she told me also another name of another Polish girl. Her parents were the janitors in our house. So I went to her. She was a prostitute at that time. She told me all the details. So, this was my journey to Tarnopol.

ER: Did you stay in Tarnopol after that?

KR: No.

ER: You left.

KR: There was no place to stay. I even didn't go into my apartment. You know, I left a diary. Because this movement, I told you, the Zionist movement, we were writing a very important diary of our ideas and things. I wish I would have that diary but I couldn't go in.

ER: Where did you go after that?

KR: Then, in Tarnopol, I have to finish this story that I told you that I cheated, you know. So, I sat down in a place and I wrote a letter that I came to Tarnopol and I described how the city looked and I couldn't find anything. I wrote down the real part of it and then I added that I can't take it anymore. [KR gets emotional]

ER: Stop. [turns off tape momentarily]

KR: I wrote in the letter that I am going to commit suicide, and I sent the letter, and I [unclear] because I did the right thing. Because, you see, I didn't have to care. I was far away from them so I really—I did it only to have the feeling that I might write it

[unclear] not to put a blame or a shame on me being Jewish. I was in the proper mood because everything was true. The only lie was that I didn't decide to commit suicide. So, I sent this letter if they would write to Tarnopol.

ER: So, you went back to L'vov.

KR: Yes, to the Ukrainian family. There was another little town that my father's sister lived and my sister lived with them when she wrote to me and sent me the package.

ER: When you were in jail?

KR: Yes, so this was—the town was Skala[3].

ER: Skala.

KR: On the Brutz [phonetic] River. I wanted to go there and to find out what happened to them, but all those places were very dangerous because of the Ukrainians.

ER: There were pogroms?

KR: Yes, so I didn't go. But, you see, you know a lot about Ukrainians and still I stayed with a Ukrainian family that I didn't know before.

ER: They didn't know that you were Jewish?

KR: Oh, yes, of course, I said that I am Jewish.

ER: In the letter or before when you were staying with them?

KR: The Ukrainian family? The letter I sent to the work that I worked.

ER: You sent the letter to work?

KR: The letter I sent to the work that they gave me leave of absence.

ER: I thought you sent the letter to the Ukrainians.

KR: No, I came back to the Ukrainians to live until I was finished with the document that I had to go to Poland. I wanted to go back to Poland. So, I went back to the Ukrainians and the letter was far away to Kazakhstan.

ER: I understand. And the Ukrainians did know that you were a Jew?

KR: Yes, from the first moment. I never hid that. The only thing that I told you, the only example that I hid for a day that I was Jewish was that girl of 15 that I didn't want her to know. I didn't want to confuse her too much. Otherwise I always said that I am Jewish.

ER: You went back and how long did it take for you to get your paperwork together and return to Poland?

KR: Maybe two months. I really don't remember.

ER: And you stayed with the Ukrainians?

KR: Yes. It wasn't easy because I didn't have any papers because I had to destroy my papers, the legal ones, from that place that sent me; so again, I am here without papers. I had to give an explanation where I was and I didn't want to say that I was in Russia for the four years because I was afraid that they are not going to give me

[3]Skala - possibly Skala-Podol'skaya (Russian) also known as Skała [Polish], and Skała nad Zbruczem which is a town on the River Zbrucz. (jewishgen.org)

Polish citizenship. So again, I started—I had to make up a story, but I don't remember the story. But I couldn't use my papers so I destroyed all my papers.

ER: What part of Poland did you return to?

KR: I returned to Lodz and I went to the Jewish community. I asked if there was a *Hashomer Hatzair*. In spite of the fact that in the past I was in *Hanoar Hatzioni* and not *Hashomer Hatzair*. But that's what I decided. This was more accommodations at that time. You know the differences?

ER: I don't know the differences, no.

KR: *Hashomer Hatzair* was Socialistic, Zionistic. At that time, that's what it was. I remember my dilemmas, you know, about Russia, what was good, what was bad, what will I tell. I remember one newspaperman, a Jewish Polish man, was in prison, in a Russian prison, for 10 years and I discussed with him this problem. He was much older. He was very intelligent. He said, I remember, "Look, Russia is like a fire. Fire can destroy you, burn you, and fire gives life. So this is Russia." And this I took with me. This was Russia for me. That's the reason for fire, for good and bad.

ER: Now, how long did you stay in Lodz?

KR: I started a new life in a *kibbutz*.

ER: In Lodz?

KR: Yes, they were *kibbutzim* on the way to Israel. This is a whole new story. Maybe you're not interested. At one of the borders, I met Shmuel and you know, I was with the youth. I was a counselor on the way and teacher, I mean I worked with the young people. So, from then on, I was in the *Hashomer Hatzair* youth movement and I went to a course for counselors.

ER: You were about 24 at this time, 23-24?

KR: Yes, and from then on, it took another two years. So I was sent to different places in Poland to organize a new *kibbutz*. We were going to the trains, picking up the young people coming from Russia, the youths, educate them. I was organizing, you know.

ER: While you were organizing, were there groups that were being sent to Palestine at this time?

KR: Yes.

ER: They were getting in or were they being snuck in?

KR: Snuck in, of course. We were going through borders, all illegally and all borders. Each border had a different story.

ER: Yes, and you eventually came to Israel in 19-...

KR: I came with a group. I was a leader of the group from Germany. In Poland, I was in three or four places that the *Hashomer Hatzair* Zionist movement sent me because I was the leader of groups. So, from one place to another.

ER: When did you marry Shmuel?

KR: We met. Then in Germany, I was again organizing young people to—it wasn't Israel, it was Palestine. And on the border, this certain group, and this was something very unusual because from that place, there was a camp. I went with a group of young people and on our way crossing from Austria to Italy, I met Shmuel. I was with the group; he was alone at that time. Then, we started together from Italy. We were in a young children's house. Young children that survived. They were children that were hidden in the monasteries and with Polish families. So, a lot of work was going on. We came to the ship that we also intended to go illegally and we would go to Cyprus. When we were on the sea in this ship—it wasn't a ship, it was a shell, you know—a ship of shell, the State of Israel was announced and we were on this ship. We had a big party on the ship and our ship was called the State of Israel.

ER: Yes.

KR: And we came right to Tel Aviv and so the British left the day before.

ER: And where were your children born?

KR: In Israel.

ER: How many children do you have?

KR: Two, two sons.

ER: Well, I want to thank you very much for this interview. As I mentioned, I think you know it's very important that we have it and we appreciate it. Thank you. We are going to continue this tape with a few remarks from K.R.

KR: Okay, stories of interest, and we could write books with our stories, you know, just talking reminds me of a lot more. But I would like to say is just a general remark. I found myself, like I'm thinking now being all right, I think, "How come that I am alive?" I mean, if I the right to escaped not because I predicted that the Germans are going to come to Tarnopol, but that right was not to sit here, to go to Palestine and that right took me to the prison. Like you never know what's good or what's bad. I feel I'm a real survivor but it wasn't intentionally that I was going, you know, to go away and leave my father and my family, stuff like this. It was like a right for survival now knowing. It's like I feel I am a survivor all the way around but never...

Tape two, side two:

ER: This is Ellen Rofman, tape two, side four.

KR: I feel like from my experience, languages and races divide people and politics and cause and all stuff. Like I didn't look for it but just life took me to all kinds of places with all kinds of people like the Kazaks in Kazakhstan which are much closer to the Arabs, I would say, in their habits and things and the Russians and the Ukrainians and now the Americans; all the mixture in Israel and Germans and all kinds. I feel people is one thing and power struggle of the political regime is another thing and I met a lot of very humanistic people all around the world—in Italy, in Russia, the Ukrainians, the lady and her husband. So, it's like I feel what I learned from life, I'm not going to sort out people according to missionary or religion or whatever. I try to live like this in Israel, which is hard. I feel that I don't know how but I feel like if I survived, there must be a reason, a purpose for that. I mean I'm not talking about God's will and stuff. I don't know what it is but it's like a goal. This would be my goal but I don't know how to go around. We had this Holocaust and we know it. It could be again in every place. I know nobody likes to hear this. It doesn't have to be by Germans, it could be by the nuclear, you know; it could be anywhere, any place. Sometimes, I feel impatient. I feel like I live my life, I love my kids and my husband and I had a professional career. Everything is okay but I would like to have my voice heard, but I'm not a politician and my voice, I don't know in what way could I contribute to my goal in life because my survival came through only because people were human, even, you know, just to finish a story in the prison. A man who killed somebody, he was a Russian, he was sentenced for 25 years. I met him in that camp where only women with children. But when a woman was pregnant, she was sent to another place because the child was considered free, but not the woman. But they didn't want the couple to be together. So, they sent the woman and the child to another place. So, you had usually women with children without men. This man had a woman with four kids, his four kids. He managed always to find a way to accompany her to the places they sent her. I worked with him and he was a lovely man. But he didn't have the [unusual] to stop, you know; he was already close to the 25 years and at work, he was, you know, angry with somebody for something and he killed another man. So, he is going to spent all his life in jail. But he had the other human side to him. Maybe this gave me the idea to work with people, to learn psychology and do what I do and work with all kinds of people that I can easily, from this insight, the human thoughts in a human being. This is something that came to me that I treasure very much from my experience. That's what I wanted to say.

ER: Okay, thank you very much.