

HOLOCAUST TESTIMONY

OF

Genya Kinegal

Transcript of Audiotaped Interview

Interviewer: Sylvia Brockmon

Date: June 5, 1987

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Holocaust Oral History Archive

Gratz College

Melrose Park, PA 19027

GK - Genya Kinegal¹ [interviewee]

SB - Sylvia Brockmon [interviewer]

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Tape one, side one:

SB: I am interviewing Genya Yetz Kinegal for the Gratz College Oral History [Archive]. I will speak in Yiddish and Genya will answer in Yiddish.² Tell me when and where you were born, and something about your whole family, and what kind of life you had there.

GK: I was born in Poland, Skole, Galicia, December 24, 1925. Our family consisted of my parents, and I had a younger brother, and the mother of my mother, and her older brother, who was not married. It was a small town that we lived in, the whole family together, in our own home (house). It was a good life.

SB: A comfortable, respectable, well-ordered life.

GK: Yes.

SB: And what kind of work did your father do?

GK: My father and my mother had a business of remnants of cloth, and my mother had helped my father.

SB: You must speak louder, please. Your family lived in Poland—was there antisemitism there? Did you suffer from it?

GK: With us the majority of residents were Ukrainians. They are even worse anti-Semites than the Poles, because they are an evil people, since they don't have their own state. If life is difficult for a person, he treats others even worse.

SB: Your family, were they members of any organizations, or a synagogue, before the Nazis came to your village?

GK: In such a small village, Jewish life, all activities centers around the synagogue. On *Shabbos* everybody got together, we made *kiddush* [blessing over wine], and one went from house to house, participated in celebrations and the opposite, because this was the only cultural area of expression in Jewish life. This preserved our ethnicity, our Judaism.

SB: Were there men in your family who were in the Polish Army?

GK: I think yes, but I don't really remember for sure. It was compulsory.

SB: It was compulsory; they were drafted.

GK: Absolutely.

¹This is the interviewee's signature as signed on the release form. Her middle name is Yetz and her maiden name was Goldfisher.

²This interview was conducted in Haifa, Israel, in Yiddish and later translated by the interviewer, Sylvia Brockmon. The transcript is based on the translation.

SB: Tell me about your life in Poland, from 1939 on, before the Nazi occupation.

GK: 1939, when the war broke out, first, the Germans came in. It was unexpected, so swift. The Poles were so unprepared for war that it took no time at all and the Nazis took over. But later there was a pact with the Russians and this part of Poland was taken over by the Russians. From 1939 until 1941 we already had the Russians in our area.

SB: How many Jews lived in your village?

GK: Three thousand.

SB: Three thousand Jews. And was there an organized Jewish leadership over the Jewish community?

GK: There was indeed such an organized community.

SB: And all the Jews in this community, you say that life centered around the synagogue.

GK: Around the synagogue, but there were also Zionist organizations. The young people were more to the "left."

SB: And Zionist?

GK: And Zionist.

SB: Zionist and Left. And it is your opinion that they were sincerely interested in your feelings, and what was going on in the *shtetl*, and wanted to help. The people, the *kehillah*, the town leadership we're talking about, the administration, the leadership.

GK: I believe, yes.

SB: What happened to your family, immediately after the German occupation of your *shtetl*?

GK: In our town, the Germans didn't remain very long. In 1939, the Russians came in. And we were overjoyed, because it would be better than the Germans. For us, the children, it was better. We continued going to school. But for the adults, everything was nationalized; not like the Nazis, but they undermined us, even though they did it a little more elegantly.

SB: During this period, how did your Polish neighbors react to you? Did they help out in any way or not?

GK: During the Russian period, it wasn't necessary. It wasn't needed, because the Russians didn't slaughter us, as the Germans did. They just wanted to convert us economically and culturally to their way.

SB: To their communist way. When were you sent to a ghetto?

GK: Not directly to a ghetto, because in 1941, when the Russians retreated, a very large number of our Jews went along with them to Russia to escape from the Nazis. And my father thought that he could save me, with forged papers, Aryan, and I went along with another woman to—[unclear], and there we took on the identity of Poles who were running away from the Germans, in order not to be sent to Germany for forced labor. And we rented a room with a family, and as long as our money lasted, they permitted us to

remain. And later, we were not aware whether or when our parents were deported, or killed, and our money ran out, so we were forced to leave.

SB: And what happened then, after you had no more money?

GK: The Germans captured us, and I was sent to the Ghetto Przysucha, until '41, no until '42, and then we were transported to a concentration camp.

SB: How many people were with you together in the ghetto, from your village?

GK: None, no one.

SB: You were there, alone. When you were in the ghetto were you permitted to leave the ghetto, to go to work outside?

GK: No.

SB: Just to work in the ghetto. And when did they lock in the ghetto, do you know?

GK: They transported us in October '42 to Plaszow and Krakow, and this was not a ghetto, but a forced labor camp.

SB: In the forced labor camp—in the ghetto, and forced labor camp, were there many people from other villages?

GK: Yes, a lot of Jews.

SB: Just Jews, or Jews and Gentiles, too?

GK: They were separated. Jews separate, and Gentiles separate.

SB: When the ghetto was locked in, could you talk with other peoples? Could you get out, and talk to other people, or were you sent directly to the camps?

GK: Direct. We swiftly were put into cattle cars. We were packed in, and we, we hadn't any freedoms whatever.

SB: When you were in the ghetto, what kind of work did you do?

GK: In the ghetto we did tailoring. And in Plaszow also.

SB: In your village, are you aware what the *Judenrat*, the Jewish leadership was doing? Or in the ghetto, what about the leadership, what was its work?

GK: I was aware that there was a *Judenrat*. I was not there. I heard what other people said about it. The *Judenrat* saw that there was a not much help they could effect under the Germans. And if they didn't cooperate, they were all shot.

SB: At the time that you were in the ghetto, and in concentration camp, did you hear any news about what was going on in the world, and what was going around your area and how the war was progressing?

GK: We didn't hear any news. Everything was by word of mouth, what was heard. The only news was if we heard bombing, we rejoiced.

SB: Did you hear, or were you ware, that in the camp there might have been partisans, who were working underground to help organize against the Nazis? How did you feel about that?

GK: I was not aware of that. I did not spend that much time in the ghetto. I was too young to be "taken with it."

SB: But did you hear that it was going on?

GK: Everything was “heard,” but the hope was so great, that you hoped and believed that something could be done against the Germans.

SB: I want to ask you about the Poles who collaborated with the Germans, and what kind of slaughter they perpetrated against the Jews.

GK: They were the servants of the Nazis. The lowest, dirtiest menial work was given to them and they performed it better than the Germans themselves.

SB: Perhaps you’ve heard about other Poles who hid Jews, who wanted to help them.

GK: I personally didn’t know any, but there was talk about it, so it was heard that there were churches who did take Jewish children.

SB: But you personally...

GK: No.

SB: Had no involvement with them. You worked in a forced labor camp. Can you tell me, what were the conditions under which you had to work?

GK: There were various kinds of work camps. We began in Krakow-Plaszow. There we worked to fill the large orders. We sewed uniforms for the S.S. The S.S. were our guards. We ate very small rations. We slept in barracks, one bed on top of another. Up until that time we wore our own clothing, but we had to wear the yellow star, the *Magen David*.

SB: When did they send you to a concentration camp? To which camp did they send you?

GK: From ‘42 to ‘43 in Plaszow-Krakov. From ‘43 we were sent to Skarzysko-Kamienne, which was also in Poland. There, there was a munitions factory. We worked on very, very large machines that made specific launchers for grenades that caused huge explosions. The machines were three times the size of us workers. And we had to take out, to clean and take out the-- [does not say what]. Here we still could wear our own, whatever we had, with yellow patches.

SB: Where was your family, at the time you were sent to the camps?

GK: I don’t know.

SB: After the forced labor camps, where were you sent?

GK: In August ‘44 we were loaded again onto cattle cars, large train cars, and then they sent us to Leipzig. That already was in Germany. Leipzig was affiliated with Buchenwald. In Buchenwald there were only men. In Leipzig there were only women. There, again, we worked in a munitions factory. Here were given the uniforms with the stripes.

SB: How long were you in Buchenwald, or the women’s camp?

GK: Until March 1945.

SB: In Buchenwald, and in the women’s camp, were there any people there who organized to rebel, to do anything against the Nazis?

GK: No. The only thing that we did, so we would not lose our courage and hope, was to celebrate any Jewish holiday, and Friday-Saturday, so as not to forget, to be together. But, there to organize, it wasn't done.

SB: You didn't know about that. Even if it did take place, you were not aware of it.

GK: No.

SB: And during this period, did you believe in God, or in some ideology like Zionism or Socialism? Or some hope that all this will end?

GK: Yes, we sang and we made up songs about that, that in the future, it will be better, and at Passover we read the *Haggadah*, and that everything should be remembered. Yes, there was always hope. Without that you couldn't live.

SB: And did you believe that there was a God then?

GK: Not so much. We did ask where He was.

SB: And ideology, such as Zionism or Socialism, did you believe in that, or not?

GK: No. Very little. Those who were with me were very young. We were dragged out, torn out of everything right in the middle. I think that the Germans consciously undermined, and exhausted us, so that the people wouldn't have any strength to think of anything from day to day, except the little piece of bread, and little bit of soup, and those who smoked, about rolling a cigarette. There were no ideals; there was no future. We did not know to what. The daily war to stay alive took all of our energy. There was no energy left for anything else, for there wasn't food either.

SB: Were there times when you suffered so, that you considered escaping from the camps?

GK: Many times, many times. But it wasn't possible. Especially if you saw what happened to others. For the tiniest infraction, a person was taken out, beaten severely and forced to stay out in the snow barefoot [unclear] both to teach and to show all what they can do to, and with, us.

SB: Someone that you know did escape, and get away from the camp?

GK: I really don't know.

SB: You didn't hear of anything or anyone?

GK: The camps were so extremely guarded, with electric surveillance and dogs, with S.S. people. And everything was so far away from the city. And around the camp you couldn't see any living things. There wasn't any great hope that one could get out.

SB: Could you tell me, if there were any small children in the camp? And how did the people handle these children? Or even in the ghetto, what do you remember what went on with the children?

GK: From the ghetto, I don't remember. But in one camp, we hid one woman who was pregnant. And she gave birth to the baby there. And they took the baby away from her. And after that they made all the women stand naked outside, to make sure that no one was pregnant and no baby should be born there. Aside from that, there were no

children in the camp.

SB: From 1942-1945 did you have any contact with any member of your family, or any friends or people from your village?

GK: No one, they seem to have vanished from the world.

SB: And when was the first time that you heard that Jews were murdered in the hundreds of thousands, how they began to kill them in the streets.

GK: In March 1945, they drove us out of the camp. We did not know that the war was coming to an end, that the Germans had lost the war, but they knew it. So they forced us out of the camp, because they themselves wanted to run away. And then, we started to go by foot, wherever our eyes led us in groups, without food and without clothes. And wherever we went, nobody wanted to help us. We ate from the garbage cans, whatever they threw out. Until we arrived at a camp where the Americans had already arrived. And the Americans began to bring food to us. And with the Americans there were also Jews. There was also a Jewish officer among the Americans. I personally asked him to find an aunt of mine who lived in Chicago. He was a lawyer from Chicago, and he did it. And here we began to recuperate and to eat. And we overate, and some got sick and a good many died. You just can't—and over a period of time they helped us, the Americans, to get to a German deserted place, and there we got organized, not many, but a small group, and there we lived, and all the time the Americans helped us, and supported us.

SB: How long did you live there?

GK: From October, 1945. And they issued us certificates, and we became “legal.”

SB: Were you aware of the *selectsia* [selections] in the camps, where they chose who shall live, and who shall die?

GK: We ourselves lived through this.

SB: Describe for me, exactly how it was done.

GK: Everybody was put “on display.” Whenever a new group arrived, as they descended from the train, the camp was so arranged that it was set right where you descended from the trains, and it came right to the camp, and the people were taken right out of the cars of the train, and they were put in lines, and there the Gestapo was already there, and “right, left, right, left,” and that was the beginning. And who was left to live, the fate was accidental.

SB: And in your opinion, they chose to let you live, was because you were young, and you could work.

GK: Accidental, totally by chance, younger than I, taller than I, and healthier, and we were not as we are today. We weighed 25 kilo [80 lbs.], 18, 17 years old. Nothing. All was accidental, by chance. Naturally, old people and children were immediately taken away. But in the middle, who was left to live, and who not, there was no sense, no ideology, just chance.

SB: During the time that you were in the camps, if ever you were sick, did they

help you out, with a doctor?

GK: Never. You were afraid to say you were sick. We helped each other. If so we became sick, he/she had no right to live.

SB: During the stay in the camps, did the Germans also kill non-Jews, or both, or did they take vengeance just on the Jews?

GK: We were not with any others. We were just Jews.

SB: Just Jews.

GK: Where we were.

SB: And how did the *Kapos* go on with you, the Jews who helped out the Germans?

GK: Differently. I believe that we have no right to judge them guilty, because that was the tactic of the Germans, to make beasts out of people, and that's what they did. And anyone who takes the right to blame them should, God forbid, be put into their place. It is forbidden to condemn them.

SB: Can you, how did the Germans interact with the *Kapos* who helped them? Did they act differently with them than the other Jews?

GK: They had it a little better, but they weren't loved by the Germans. They were used. But if they displeased them somewhat, they killed them as well as us.

SB: Just like that? What was the daily routine in the camps, and how much food was rationed?

GK: We lived in a camp where in one room there were 60 girls, women. Three, four bunk beds, wooden, one above the other, without mattresses. We worked 12 hours a day or night shift—it was a factory, ammunitions—working 24 hours a day. Work was 12 hours a day, or 12 hours a night shift, and food was one small piece of bread and some soup—water.

SB: Once a day? How many people, in your opinion, were in the camp, in the whole camp?

GK: That's hard to say.

SB: You said that there were 60 in a barrack, and how many barracks?

GK: But there was a munitions factory that provided ammunition for the German military. Thousands, but they were constantly changing because so many died, and they were replaced.

SB: And you say that there were no children there?

GK: They would not let them in.

SB: Do you remember whether there were any religious activities?

GK: It was carried on, so as to be able to hang on to something. It was known when a holiday was coming, so all got together and we sang, and we were close, and everybody told how life was before, so as not to lose our humanity, because they made beasts out of us there.

SB: During the time that these religious observances were taking place, did the

Germans interfere?

GK: It was always arranged so that they would not know, because in the barracks the lights had to be out very early. So everything was done, and very quietly, so they wouldn't know.

SB: In the camp were there any person or persons who were courageous, heroic, in whom you believed, that they could help you, make life a little easier for you? Did you have such feelings?

GK: I don't remember.

SB: What sustained you that you will overcome, so that you could live from day to day?

GK: In such a great mass of people, naturally people tend to form small groups. We were four, five that got together, and supported each other, and helped each other. If one was very hungry, so every one gave a little of the rations. If one was sick, one had a wound, we covered it up, so the Germans wouldn't know, because they didn't need sick people. Always small groups stuck together.

SB: So one helped the other, and so gave hope to live this day and another day, and another. And during the times when you thought about your home, how things were before with your family, did you think about this all the time?

GK: This was our hope, that we would survive, and we'd have family, and we'd live again. That hope sustained us; there was nothing else.

SB: Who liberated you from the camps, and when were you freed?

GK: After, in March, when the Germans chased us out of the camp, so we wandered about, until we came to a place near Buchenwald. So we just collapsed, we had no strength left to go on. There the American military found us. That was the 5th of May, 1945, and they liberated us.

SB: How did you recuperate physically? Was it with the Americans who liberated you in their area set-up?

GK: There we worked a little, and the Americans provided everything—food, clothing. And so gradually we recuperated, and got to be ourselves again.

SB: Where did you live, were there cottages?

GK: There was a large house and lots of rooms, and we lived there.

SB: About how many were you?

GK: About 30, 40 people, and we came together to this land.

SB: After you were liberated, did you find any member of your family alive?

GK: Not one.

SB: Tell me about the members of your family, you had...

GK: I had one brother. After liberation, I knew that my brother was among the partisans in the forest, and that he was alive, that he had survived. At that time I was already living in Palestine, there was no Jewish state then. I had been given this information by my friends and acquaintances. I wrote to them to tell me where he was, and his address, that I

want to make contact, that I will come and bring him here. And they responded that he came back to town to see if any family members survived, and the Ukrainians shot him and [sighs and loses her voice]...

SB: And about your parents?

GK: Nothing. I know nothing. When they were taken, where they perished, nothing. I know nothing.

SB: You had said that for a while you were sent, that you were living with Poles. From what location did they send you the money?

GK: From Skole.

SB: From Skole. And when they were deported, and where they were killed, you know nothing.

GK: Nothing.

SB: And others from your family, aunts, others?

GK: Nothing.

SB: All, all were killed.

GK: All, all.

SB: And you waited, you said that not long after the Americans liberated, that there were some of you, a group had organized to go to Palestine. With whom were you involved? You did not have the means, how was it worked out?

GK: The Americans. In the American Army there were a few Jews. And they took us...

SB: Organized you?

GK: Organized, and provided us with certificates, from the English Administration; at that time there were no others, no state, and that's how we arrived in Palestine legally on a boat to Palestine.

SB: After you arrived, you wanted to find out about your family, if there were survivors. Did any one help you to get some information?

GK: Since we came here legally, first they brought us to Atlit, where it was a center for new immigrants. And our names were recorded in their newspaper. And here in Palestine lived a distant cousin of mine, and he read my name, because it was written, who I was, and from where came. And they came to Atlit to look for me. And that's how I found out what kind of catastrophe and destruction had taken place.

SB: You told me before that until today you are still suffering both psychologically and physically. Can you describe for me how you still are suffering the effects of such an ordeal?

GK: When I hear such a person as Demjanuk, or when I see the Germans raising their heads again, and denying the Holocaust, that we made it all up. How can they say that? It's so obvious, all the historical proof is still there. It just drives me crazy. When I see Kurt Waldheim, when Kadafi says he should get the prize; why you could just burst.

SB: You were married a short while after you arrived here.

GK: Two years after I came.

SB: Two years later. Again, how are you reacting? Can you sleep at night?

GK: There are always these horrible dreams. There are times when you visualize it all. After a whole part of our life is missing. When you think of it, you dream of it, and evil dreams, you can't stop them [weeping]. You can't sleep, you feel your screams.

SB: Now do you have friends who also lived through the horrors of the camps? Do you want to be with these friends, or...

GK: No.

SB: Tell me why you don't want to be with such friends.

GK: You can't always be living in the past that was ugly. If life had been pleasant, and life brought us to this. We don't live in the same city; we don't see each other often. We have contact, but the day to day contact friendships are with people you see nearby.

SB: You have told your children about your life in the camps?

GK: Yes.

SB: And how do they feel about it?

GK: The older they get the better they feel about it. Young children cannot understand it. But when they themselves get to be parents, they begin to understand more.

SB: And is it your opinion that such children in Israel will not permit such a thing to happen again?

GK: They won't permit that. They have been reared differently, and left here is different. Who here would allow themselves to accept such things? Even if they would lose their lives, they wouldn't let themselves to be led to death, like a sheep.

SB: And I ask you, and I must ask you this question, it is said that even in marriage, in relationship with a husband, the experiences that you lived through, have an effect on a marriage.

GK: I agree, I agree. We were not like all other people; because life was not normal, what is called "normal." Today a lot is not normal. But the people at that time understood it that way. Definitely.

SB: People have told me that those people who survived the camps, when they came back to Europe, or even in Israel, that the general population looked upon them as if they were not normal people, that they were to be...

GK: It's not a matter of feeling. That's how it was. Firstly, we arrived, and five years had been axed out of our lives. And these years are missing in our lives. Secondly, we were like wild ones, wild. What makes a *mensch*? What gives him strength, self-confidence? His family. Who helps a person? His family. But if you come like a wild animal, all alone, concerned only with yourself, you react differently. It takes a period of time until one can make somewhat of a *mensch* of yourself. I remember that there were things that I forgot. I forgot how you eat—the manners. I forgot how you act with people. You were like a dog, who lived from day to day only for a bit of bread. And these five

years had to be retrieved. They had to be caught up with. This is the time when the person, these were the most beautiful years, when you are able to learn, when you can observe things. They took it all away from us.

SB: And did your cousins pressure you to get married, urge you to “start living”?

GK: Yes, they did. I could not understand. This was all so distant from me. They were living a “normal life”—in material terms. When we first arrived in the country, we were not given benefits, like today, the new immigrants. We didn’t get anything. If you were working, then you had things. So certainly I earned. The cousins, the aunt, they all wanted to help me to get married. [ends suddenly]³

³Ms. Kinegal helped organize Kibbutz Afakim. The interview ends before they discuss this.