

>> Interviewer: Renee, would you please tell us your full name?

>> Kolender: Renee F. Kolender.

>> Interviewer: What does the F stand for?

>> Kolender: Fox.

>> Interviewer: And where were you born?

>> Kolender: I was born in Poland, a small town, the name of Kozienice, in 1922.

>> Interviewer: Where is that near?

>> Kolender: It's about 90 kilometers from Warsaw.

>> Interviewer: What was your life like in your little town before the war and growing up?

>> Kolender: I had a good childhood. I was never a teenager. I had two other brothers, and my mother's family lived in the same town. I was the oldest grandchild on both sides and spoiled rotten!

>> Interviewer: And what did your father do?

>> Kolender: My father was a certified public accountant, and he worked in a bank. There was one bank in town, and that's where he worked.

>> Interviewer: What was it like going to school in that town?

>> Kolender: I didn't know any better, and now I see the difference. There were school seven -- six days a week. Saturday, I didn't go, but I had to make up my work Saturday. As a child, it was pretty good.

>> Interviewer: Well, what happened when the war broke out?

>> Kolender: End of schooling, end of everything. We had to move from our apartment to -- we lived at our grandparents' because their house was in the part where the ghetto was going to be formed at the time, and apartments were very --

>> Interviewer: Was the ghetto going to be formed in that town?

>> Kolender: Yes, in the town. They brought a lot of people from smaller towns all around, so apartments were impossible to get. But we were lucky. Like I said, we stayed with my grandparents and...lived from day to day. There was no jobs. Nobody could work. Food was scarce. A lot of people that came to town were very poor. There was no...there was no time to just sit to eat, sit down to dinner or anything. There was always somebody at the door crying. Children were the first victims.

>> Interviewer: Renee, before the ghetto, what kind of a Jewish life did you have there, and was there any anti-Semitism that you were aware of at that time and growing up?

>> Kolender: There was anti -- Poland always had anti-Semitism.

>> Interviewer: But did you experience any as a child?

>> Kolender: A little bit in school. In school, you were really at the mercy of the teacher because the grading system --

>> Interviewer: You went to school with everybody?

>> Kolender: Yes. The grading system the teacher gave you, it wasn't like here that if you do two or three wrongs, it's deducted. If the teacher liked you, you did okay. My teacher happened to like me. I spoke good Polish. And I was happy in school. I --

>> Interviewer: Did you have Christian friends?

>> Kolender: Yeah, I had Christian friends, mostly not, but I had a lot of friends. Not close friends, but we played with them.

>> Interviewer: All right, continue with what happened when the war broke out.

>> Kolender: Well, in September, September 1, 1939, the day of my birthday, it started. We really didn't think that it's gonna be as bad as it was because a lot of German Jews came in from Germany when they sent them out from Germany a year earlier, and they were telling stories, and we didn't believe it. We said, well, they were rich Jews, and it took away, but what does he want with somebody -- Polish Jews were considered by German poors, very poor. We were not rich. We were middle class, so what are they gonna do with us? They're not gonna hurt us. Little did we know.

>> Interviewer: And what did they do with you?

>> Kolender: The first thing, they used to come to the -- it was called in Germany *Judenrat*, which means a Jewish committee. And they told the committee what they want, the Germans. The SS came. He said, "well, in ten days, I need so many thousands of *zlotys*," which is like an American dollar. That's money. And then they picked up young -- first, they started with young men, picked 'em up on the streets and took 'em to work for labor. And

then we had to go to work. First, we went in the morning. They picked us up in the morning and rode us back at night.

>> Interviewer: Now, were you still living in your house, or were you --

>> Kolender: In my grandparents' house. And then we stayed there. They closed the gate. There was like a curfew. You couldn't get out. From the ghetto, you couldn't get out, period. But even in the ghetto, there was a curfew.

>> Interviewer: About how many people were in the ghetto? Do you know?

>> Kolender: I really don't know. It was a small town. But as small as the town was, they rode in from smaller little towns people into the ghetto in Charles -- in Kozienice. I say Charleston, which is my home now! I've lived there most of my life.

And then one day, they arrested a few young people, which they call intelligentsia. And it came back to us -- somebody sent a note and said they'd asked them about my father and my father should get out of town because they're gonna arrest him. So my father and I went to Warsaw. My mother's sister lived in Warsaw. At the time, she still lived in her own apartment, but they gave us, I think, a month -- no, about three weeks, to get out of the apartment because they're gonna form a ghetto too. We went out with my aunt one afternoon, and we rented a house in the section that the ghetto was gonna be, and we came back and couldn't get back in the house. So whatever we had on, that was ours, and that was it.

>> Interviewer: Was your mother and your brothers with you?

>> Kolender: No, my mother and my brothers stayed at home. Only I went with my father. And we had to move to the ghetto, the Warsaw ghetto. But the Warsaw ghetto wasn't, at the time -- it wasn't closed yet. In other words, you could go in and out by 7:00 or 5. I don't remember the time you had to be back. Then they said -- I think it was November. I don't remember. They said they're gonna close the Warsaw ghetto. So my father and I came back home. And we stayed with the rest of the family till '41. Living conditions -- I won't say we starved. But whatever we had, we sold, and we lived.

>> Interviewer: What did you actually do in the ghetto? Did you work?

>> Kolender: Nothing. There was a committee, a committee formed to help the poor. I was the rich. With the poor and the poor children, parents couldn't feed 'em. The translation of the organization was "drop of milk," and we used to make -- every day, there was a crowd of us. Twice a day, we went to the office, and we mixed formula and gave it to the poor children. And it wasn't enough. The children were eating from the trash. If you see it now in a picture -- it sounds horrible, but it's true. They were eating the peelings, potato peelings, onion peelings, anything they could get.

>> Interviewer: How did you get food in the ghetto?

>> Kolender: You know, I thought about it; I don't remem -- you know, we used to, in the fall, usually every year, you used to buy enough potatoes to last you for the year and put it in cellars, vegetables and things like this, and that's what you lived on.

>> Interviewer: Where did you get money to buy the food?

>> Kolender: Well, the food at the time, we had already bought. It was before September. See, the war started in September. So we had some food. Bread or something, we sold -- my father had a golden watch, so we sold the golden watch. He had a piece of silver, so he sold the silver. Polacks, Polish people, bought it.

>> Interviewer: How long did you stay in that ghetto?

>> Kolender: Till -- I think it must have been September or October '41.

>> Interviewer: And then what happened in '41?

>> Kolender: Well, they took us to camp. First, they took us to the same camp that I worked digging ditches. They took the whole families. So my brother was born -- was about four, five years old. We left him with a Polish family, and for every day, we gave them one day a piece of silver, one day a piece of jewelry, different things which we had at home, and then we went to work. The men worked in one place, and the women in the other one.

And one afternoon, we came back, and all the men were taken away to a camp somewhere. My brother and my father were taken away, and my younger brother was already with us in the camp because the lady told us that he wouldn't eat and he's going to die if we don't take him. So we took him, and he was with us in the camp. Luckily, he was with my mother. My mother wasn't working yet. She was just in the camp. And my father hid him in the fields, and the child and another child, two children, came back that night. They walked, walked, and they finally found the place and came back.

>> Interviewer: And how long were you in that camp?

>> Kolender: Just a few months. And from then, they took us to Skarzysko, which was a camp that worked -- ammunition factory. And I finally got a job that it took me -- I could have made the bullet that they killed my father with. I was working ammunition factory, and my mother stayed in the barracks and cleaned the barracks. That's the only way she could survive. She couldn't work in the factory.

>> Interviewer: And how long were you in that camp?

>> Kolender: I think it must have been '43. When the Russians started pushing from the other side and started coming into Poland, they moved us, and they took us to Czestochowa. They transferred the whole factory to Czestochowa. And I was there till liberation, January '45.

>> Interviewer: Tell me a little about what life was like in the camp.

>> Kolender: I don't know where to start. You had to look presentable. At the time, we didn't have any clothes except what we wore. But you had to have your hair combed. You had to put a little bit lipstick on. Because if you didn't look good, if you looked bad, you looked tired, that was the end of you. In the morning when you came out and they kept counting how many people, how many people, they'd look at your face, and if you didn't look good, out you go. And behind the barracks, there were a lot of trees there. I remember you used to hear a lot of guns going off, and we never saw 'em again.

Now, when you went to work, you had to look good, right? But if you looked a little bit too good, there was a German who liked you, and he called you out. And that was the other end of it, because there was such a thing as *Rassenschande*, which means you don't mix German race with the Jewish race. So once you were mixed, that was the end of you.

>> Interviewer: You say you had to look good. How did you get clothes and lipstick in the camps?

>> Kolender: I worked in a factory. There was very precision work. I had to wear white gloves to do it, and I had to measure the thing that I was making with a certain instrument. And that instrument you had to put crayon on to see how it fits, if it wraps or it doesn't. So the gloves were made with sacks, 'cause they changed the gloves every day. I made little collar out of the gloves and combed my hair and put the crayon on my mouth instead of lipstick.

>> Interviewer: And your mother stayed --

>> Kolender: My mother cleaned the barracks. So she had an extra plate of soup -- an extra can of soup, so she saved me some.

>> Interviewer: What did your brother do at this time?

>> Kolender: He was with her in the barracks. That's the only way she could save him. He couldn't have been out any other way.

>> Interviewer: How old was he at that time?

>> Kolender: He was born in '35. About six years, seven -- no, about seven years. They made him -- they send him with different messages here and there. There were two little boys, and they survived I don't know how. I keep a lot -- I think about it a lot. I don't know.

>> Interviewer: What happened to your father and your other brother?

>> Kolender: They were in that other camp, and they picked them up. One day, they were picking up people, like every tenth

person or so. They picked up my father, and they picked up my brother. They picked up, I think, about 150 people, and they took a machine gun and just sprayed it like that and told the people to bury them. When they picked my father's body up, my brother was underneath him. I don't know if he fainted. I don't know if my father pushed him and fell on top of him. But he was alive. And he was in that camp till the end, and somebody was telling me, when the Germans were pushing, they took the people with them. But some of 'em were so weak that if you couldn't keep up, that was it. They shoot him. It was somebody who said that he saw him two days before they were liberated.

>> Interviewer: So he did not survive?

>> Kolender: He did not survive.

>> Interviewer: Now, did your mother and brother survive?

>> Kolender: No, my mother died...November '44. I was liberated in January of '45.

>> Interviewer: Just a few months before.

>> Kolender: Just a few months before.

>> Interviewer: But your brother survived?

>> Kolender: My brother survived.

>> Interviewer: Don't you have a picture of him?

>> Kolender: Yes, I do. Here, he was about 11 years old.

>> Interviewer: That was at the end of the war?

>> Kolender: That was at the end of the war.

>> Interviewer: What do you remember about the liberation?

>> Kolender: It was very sad. The whole day, there were bombs falling. The Americans were bombing. And the Germans opened up the...hospitals. They let everybody out. They opened up the...magazines that have food and they gave 'em. And they said we all going. And I knew that, if I go and take my brother, they'll take him right away from me. So I dressed him like a girl. I hid him during the day, and then we went to the barracks.

And the police -- they had a lot of Jewish policemen too. They had a lot of Jews do their dirty work for them too. The policemen came in and kept saying in German, "Get out; get out," and then in Polish said, "Don't move; stay." And I knew they're gonna kill us; they're gonna kill us here, or they're gonna kill us there. We didn't know where they're going. And they're gonna take Michael away from me, so I said, "Well, I'm not going anywhere." I sat. I sat in the barracks. For a few hours, it was very quiet, and then all of a sudden, the Jewish police came in with guns. Before, they didn't have any guns. And he said, "They're all gone."

So we came out of the barracks. We were so trained to go -- so trained to be pushed around that we went in eight, a row of eight, and we went and we went, and we come to the end of the camp, and there's a German there. He says, "Where you going?" I said, "We don't know." We look around. There was no Germans with us. We were going by ourselves. And he got up, and he run away. So then right after the barracks there, there was a colony where the Germans lived. We went up there. There was dinner on the table and nobody there. They ran.

And then next day, we didn't see anybody. We didn't know where to go. We didn't know what to do. Polish militia came in, and he

said, "Get out of here," because they might have set off -- they're gonna probably put bombs or something to destroy the camp. So we went out, and there was nowhere to go: no friendly soul, no friendly Poles, nobody. We got in an empty house. The house was bombed while we were there. We went out, and it was getting cold, and we passed by -- we saw, on the railroad, trains with a lot of meat. And we took a blanket because we were cold. We had nothing else.

>> Interviewer: When you say "we," are you talking about you and your brother?

>> Kolender: Yes, and the brother and a few other people from camp. And we found an empty house, and we stayed there for a few days. We didn't see any Russians or nobody. The Russians came in next day. And we stayed there for a couple of weeks, and then we went home because we said -- my parents and my grandparents used to say that, after World War I, people couldn't find each other for such a long time; if anybody survives, come home. So we went home.

>> Interviewer: How did you get home?

>> Kolender: That's another story. We went on a train, on a cattle train, but I was used to that because that's the way they were transporting us from one camp and the other.

>> Interviewer: You didn't have to pay? You just got on?

>> Kolender: There was no paying then. That was right after the war. There were Russian transports and other stuff going, so -- and it was cold and snowing and freezing. And we came home and said, why did we survive? There's nothing to come home -- there's nobody. There's no food. There's nowhere to live.

Finally, we got into the house that we used to live -- my parents used to live. And we moved in into the kitchen because it was one room and we could warm. I went to the old house and toted some boards so I could heat this house. And we stayed there for --

>> Interviewer: The house was empty?

>> Kolender: Yeah, this house was empty because the Germans were using it for an office. So we just used the kitchen to keep warm. Then, just a few weeks later, the story started all over again. They started -- too many Jews back. They start killing Jews in the small towns.

>> Interviewer: Who started?

>> Kolender: Some Polacks. In a little town not far where we were, there were people who I was in camp with. Two sisters survived and then got killed. So somebody said we have to go. By that time, we already got some food because the United Jewish Appeal was helping and sending some food for us. We had no clothes. We had -- it wasn't easy. Whoever found something that was hidden at home shared it with somebody. Everything we had -- I found a few pictures. Everything else was taken.

And so we went to -- let's go to a bigger city. So a friend of ours had somebody who lived in Lodz, so we went there. And I was in the American -- I think it was the American zone. No, that was later. Excuse me. That was Russian, and the Russians started to put everybody to work. We stayed in Lodz for a few months, and then we decided we're gonna go back to Germany because they had displaced persons camp. We didn't have anybody, and we had nothing to eat. To live there was unbearable. Every corner, everyplace you went reminded you for somebody. And my little brother said to me one time, "It's just as bad here as in the camp." The only thing different, that you didn't have to work.

And...we hitchhiked, and we came to Lodz. And then some other friends came from Lodz; they said, "We're gonna go to Germany."

So we went to Stuttgart. And Stuttgart was an American zone. And...one day, somebody came in that said he came from France and France already had the mail, post office working; if I'll write a letter to somebody, wherever I want to, he'll mail it for me. So I wrote a letter to my uncle in Charleston. And he started working on it, and we came here.

>> Interviewer: And that's how you came to Charleston.

>> Kolender: That's how I came to Charleston.

>> Interviewer: What year did you come?

>> Kolender: '47.

>> Interviewer: What did you do when you got to Charleston?

>> Kolender: When I came to Charleston, my brother was 11 years old. In a year, he became bar mitzvah. I worked -- my uncle had a music store.

>> Interviewer: Who did you live with?

>> Kolender: I lived with my aunt and uncle for about six or seven months, and then they rented an apartment for me. And I started working -- my brother went to school, and I went to private lessons, and then I started working in the store. But I was in the country about six -- like the eighth month, I started working in the store. And I worked there till I got married. That was '47, and I got married in '53.

>> Interviewer: You met your husband in Charleston?

>> Kolender: Yes, mm-hmm.

>> Interviewer: How many children do you have?

>> Kolender: I have three. We educated the children. They're all professionals. I have two children married. I have two grandchildren. They're the love of my life. And...life seems to...straighten itself out. Not always, and I never forget, and I always, always think about it.

>> Interviewer: How did you adjust to living in the United States, in Charleston? Did you find it difficult?

>> Kolender: Yes. I'll tell you one difficult. Like, in Charleston, there are people who came to the United States like right after World War I, and they thought that Poland, or any other country they came from, is still like it was when they left. And it's not so. We maybe didn't have, at the time, like washing machine and dryers and dishwashers, but at the time, they didn't have that much of it here either. One lady took me in the evening for a walk and was showing me the neon lights. I saw neon lights in Poland. Was reading some books, and I don't even remember who the writer was, and they said, "Oh, this was written in Polish too?" I said, "No, it wasn't written in Polish; it was translated to Polish." I think it was Pearl Buck. Yeah, "The Good Earth" at the time was very popular. They said, "You read it? You didn't read English." I said, "They write books in different languages too." And when we came to the States, we were different than the people who came after World War I. Of course people here were different then too.

>> Interviewer: Can we go back for just a minute to when you were growing up? About how many Jews lived in your little town? Do you have any idea?

>> Kolender: No, I really don't, but it was a nice Jewish place.

>> Interviewer: Did many of them survive, that you know of?

>> Kolender: Yeah, I'm in touch with them. They have an organization. We meet once a year or twice a year.

>> Interviewer: They're here in the United States?

>> Kolender: In the United States.

>> Interviewer: How many are in the organization?

>> Kolender: I'm not that much in touch with them because it's mostly New York. Now they've switched to Miami because a lot of 'em moved to Miami. I don't know. There's some people that remember me, but I don't remember them. I just know the people that I grew up with, and I'm having a time of my life when I see 'em. I saw 'em two years ago. This year, they didn't have it on account of the war. But I was in Miami two years ago and met with them, and I have some very good friends that I'm in touch in Washington and in New York. Two of my children live in Washington, so, as a matter of fact, I'm going there next week.

>> Interviewer: You have brought some pictures with you. Would you like to show me some of them?

>> Kolender: Sure. These are my parents. I showed you the picture of my brother, didn't I? Yeah, I showed it before.

>> Interviewer: You told me what your father did, and I've forgotten. What did your father do before the war?

>> Kolender: A certified public accountant. This is a picture of that organization that was feeding the poor children.

>> Interviewer: That was in the ghetto?

>> Kolender: That was in the ghetto, yeah. This is my brother, the one I lost. And this is the one where we worked digging ditches. I don't know what they did just before.

>> Interviewer: That was in one of the camps?

>> Kolender: Yes. And this was very beginning of the ghetto, when we could still be around, and we were young, and we tried to forget.

>> Interviewer: Did many of those people survive in that group?

>> Kolender: In this group, I think three. This one...one, two...five out of this one.

>> Interviewer: How did you get these pictures? Did you have a camera --

>> Kolender: Before --

>> Interviewer: -- in the camp?

>> Kolender: That's not in camp.

>> Interviewer: Oh, those were in the ghetto?

>> Kolender: Those are before, the ghetto. No, I don't have any pictures from the camp. Oh, this one here, the first one, that was just, you know, we went to work and come back, and I don't even remember who took it.

>> Interviewer: That was when you were living at home?

>> Kolender: Yeah, I was living at home first. No, we were lucky if we had bread in the camp.

>> Interviewer: Is there anything else that you would like to tell us? Do you think about the experience often?

>> Kolender: I do, and a lot of times when I think about it, it seems like a -- like I dreamt, like it never happened, because I was always telling my mother in camp that she didn't bring me up right. Like I said, I was spoiled, and -- but she should have brought me up tougher. And she said she didn't know that was gonna happen. And she was really the one that kept my morale up, 'cause I kept saying that -- I really didn't want to live. The humiliation, how they acted, the food, watching the people, people that you knew all your life and you really didn't know 'em, because the circumstances bring out in a person certain things that you would never know about them. Hunger was one of the -- and the dehumanization. You were not human. They made something out of you like they should step on you and smash you, which you were nothing.

I used to work -- I had a very precision job. This is really one of the things that saved me. I was not a very strong person. I mean physically. And if I had to work 14, 15 hours or in the places where the people turned yellow because they were working in the factory where they made the gas, I wouldn't have lived through it. But they picked me to do a job -- I was very lucky -- that you had to have a lot of education before to do it. It was very precision, and you couldn't work more than eight hours a day. And normally, everybody worked 14, 16, whatever they could get out of you. I worked from 7:00 in the morning till 3:00. Then the other shift was from 3:00 to 11, and there was a third shift from 11 to 7. They used to change around. And I think that's what kept me alive.

>> Interviewer: What did you do from 3 to -- 3:00 in the afternoon? Did you have to do anything else in the camp?

>> Kolender: You had to sleep. You had to sleep. You were hungry. And you had to wash your hair. You didn't have any hot water, so you washed your hair with cold coffee. You washed it because, if your hair were not clean, they cut your hair off. You had to come out -- when 7:00 to work, you didn't go out 7:00; you went out over the 5:00 because they had to keep on counting and counting and counting. And then one was in the bathroom, and she wasn't there; you had to count again. You could stay in the snow for hours if one person was missing.

You had to clean your barracks. You didn't have to make beds because you didn't sleep in beds. They have like bunk beds, but it like -- it wasn't -- I guess call it bunk beds. Three rows of boards. That's why I would never have -- my children begged for bunk beds when they were little. I would never have a bunk bed in my house.

>> Interviewer: What was the food like? What did they serve you?

>> Kolender: You had coffee made out of -- I don't know what it was made of, but it was warm. And if you wanted to wash your hair, you didn't drink the coffee. You had to save the coffee. Then you had soup. You know, I -- if I walk into a house and they cook turnip, I wouldn't walk in there. I'll turn right around and leave, 'cause they used to give us some dried turnip cooked in water and then a slice of bread, which people were killing each other for a slice of bread, because they give a slice a bread, a small loaf of bread, let's say, to ten people. How can you slice ten slices exactly, and I mean exactly to the crumb, alike? And maybe once a week, a little pat of margarine. That was it.

>> Interviewer: That was at lunch and at --

>> Kolender: That was lunch, dinner, and breakfast!

>> Interviewer: All three meals were the same?

>> Kolender: All -- yeah. I think -- I don't remember. I think breakfast and lunch, they did soup twice a day. So it was... I remember my mother saved some of her soup for me when I was on night shift to come back, and somebody got ahold of it, and come back and I was hungry like I don't know what. I had nothing.

>> Interviewer: You said before that people that you knew acted in ways that you would never have expected. Could you describe that a little bit?

>> Kolender: Well...when it comes to survival, there are no rules. Those were people who -- parents with children -- I mean, grown children. Of course, there were no small children except my brother. There's some -- there was some instinct in the people to survive, and they'll do anything to survive. There was no line that they wouldn't cross to survive.

>> Interviewer: Like what?

>> Kolender: Like steal somebody's food. I saw things that I would never say because I don't want people who were involved in it -- and some of the people are living and know about it. Some of 'em -- those people were nice people, intelligent people, people who loved you, but when it came to food, or even a piece of straw or a piece of rug that you covered yourself with, all went. And when I think back now, I can understand it, 'cause everybody wanted to live. We didn't think we'll ever -- I never thought that I'll ever, ever live through it.

>> Interviewer: How did the guards in the camp treat you?

>> Kolender: The German guards?

>> Interviewer: Mm-hmm.

>> Kolender: We have one man who was watching us at night when we were working, and he was like in enclosed glass office and watching us. That one man -- there were four of us working at one table -- sometimes brought us four little sandwiches. The German eat sandwiches that are that thin. And he didn't want to be caught either. He wasn't allowed to do that either. He left it at the end of the table, and then he was sitting in the office watching if we divided it. But people like this, you could count on the fingers. There was a woman there, she and her husband, that was -- she wouldn't do it! She was going around and hitting, beating people. There were some of 'em that have a little human blood, and there were very, very few.

>> Interviewer: Was there much physical abuse?

>> Kolender: Yes, there was beating. But I didn't cry. I cried later, but not there. See --

>> Interviewer: Was there a great deal of fear?

>> Kolender: Fear? Horrible. The only time we were happy is where we had to go in the shelter when they were bombing. That's where we were singing. They were petrified, but we had nothing to lose. Anything, dead -- anything would be better than what we really had.

>> Interviewer: You said you used the coffee to wash your hair. Where did you bathe, and where did you use bathroom facilities?

>> Kolender: Bathroom facilities...had a very long building, and it had a floor, and it had maybe 40, 50 holes in the floor. At night, you couldn't get out, 'cause they'll shoot you. But those were the bathroom facilities. Now, in one camp, we had a washroom. We didn't bathe there. We just could brush your teeth

or wash your face and wash around. They took us to a shower, I think, once a month.

And if you got sick, that was another trouble. I got typhoid fever, but I was afraid to go to the hospital because the hospital, they used to come in and kill you. So I was going to work with it the whole time, with very high fever. Luckily, I survived.

>> Interviewer: So you never saw a doctor?

>> Kolender: No, I wasn't gonna go to the hospital. I went in one time, and I was there, I think, two days, and my mother heard that the Germans are coming to the hospital to check out, so she got me out. We were very strong. [chuckling] I was very, very strong. The strongest I've ever been, I think, with my health is in camp. But, um...

>> Interviewer: What happened to your mother? You say she died a few months before the war was over.

>> Kolender: My mother got sick, and she went to the doctor, and he told her she needs an operation. An operation there, you know, you had no chance. And I really don't know what it was. She was very sick on Yom Kippur, the last Yom Kippur, I remember. And...then they put her in the hospital, and she died.

>> Interviewer: In the hospital?

>> Kolender: I don't know if she died or what they did to her. I don't know. But she's buried in a common grave in Czestochowa. I went there when I was there.

>> Interviewer: You mentioned Yom Kippur. Did the people in the camp observe Yom Kippur, or try to?

>> Kolender: We...

>> Interviewer: Did you try to keep any kind of Jewishness among yourselves?

>> Kolender: Yeah. They didn't let us forget it. You couldn't forget it. A lot of people lost faith when they came out. A lot of 'em. But I didn't. I -- you know, in the Jewish religion, you don't ask questions nobody's gonna answer you. Why did they take the most -- the first ones to go were the religious rabbis and the religious Jews. They were the first ones to go. Or children? What did children ever do? What did I do? I was born Jewish, but that's all I did. I didn't do anything wrong to anybody. But...I don't know.

When my mother died, one of the Germans told me I could go with him on the truck with the body to the cemetery. So on this picture -- this picture I had with me. This is a picture of my parents, but on the back of the picture, when I came to the cemetery, I counted the steps from the gate, if I ever wanted to go back, so I can find the grave. But when I went back -- it was written with a pencil; you can't read it. Instead of 196 steps, I made 96 steps and couldn't find the place. So finally, the guide asked me what I'm looking for, and I told him, so he took me to the common grave that they buried all of 'em from the camp over there, because they had no crematorium over there in Czestochowa, so they buried them.

>> Interviewer: You went back?

>> Kolender: I went back. We were in Poland three years ago. I took my children.

>> Interviewer: Where did you go when you went back?

>> Kolender: First, we went to Auschwitz and to Birkenau. Then we went to -- I didn't go to the camp that I was in. I didn't want to go. But I went to the cemetery over there. And it was very hard to get in because it was a restricted area. They had some kind of factory there, and we had to give up our passports, which I didn't like, to be able to go in, and we got there.

>> Interviewer: Were there any monuments or anything?

>> Kolender: Monument?

>> Interviewer: No indicate --

>> Kolender: There were some old monuments.

>> Interviewer: -- I mean, any indication?

>> Kolender: No. You know, most of the cemeteries in Poland are kept up by an American committee. There's a committee that does it. We went to my husband's hometown, and their cemetery is kept up. In my hometown, it's kept up too.

>> Interviewer: Did you go back to your house, the town where you lived?

>> Kolender: There was no house. The house that we lived before was torn down, and there was another building. And the house we stayed in the ghetto, my grandparents' house, I couldn't find it! I knew the number, but they the changed numbers, and there was like a -- the house ended here, and there was like a small alley going down there. They built in between. And I had sprained my ankle. That morning, I went to the Warsaw ghetto, to the memorial, and I sprained my ankle, and we had rented cars to go to town. And by the time I got there, my leg was like that, so I couldn't walk that much. We want to go back. We want to go back to the place where my father was killed.

>> Interviewer: Is there anything else that you would like to tell us that you can think of?

>> Kolender: No. I just hope that...it should never, ever happen again, because it's impossible to describe it. I myself can't describe it. I myself don't believe it that I went through it. And I get very upset with the stories that it never happened, that Jews made it up. There were Americans who liberated. The Americans who saw it, what happened to them? They made it up too? I just pray to God that it'll never, ever, never -- I don't care where and when or what people. Things like this should never be allowed to happen.

>> Interviewer: Thank you very much.

>> Kolender: You're welcome.

00:55:33