

## Transcript:

Jacob Kilstein

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Jacob Kilstein: Let me tell you something about this project. We started it 60 years ago. We looked like fools. People didn't show up. Well, a few people showed up to the synagogue. It was not much to it. Now, 60 years later, people are waking up and the most prominent people are the officers. Well, I don't want to say anymore. But the government is in it. The officers of the synagogues are on top. If you ask me if we are acquainted with it, we are really acquainted. We went through it and we had the pain for 60 years. We lost everybody. We lost everybody to the ovens, in many ways, painfully. So, we knew well the story, painfully. My wife can tell you the same thing. She was born in the time when they were killing the people. This was in Auschwitz before the war.

Interviewer: Tell me about growing up in Poland.

Jacob Kilstein: Hmm?

Interviewer: Tell me about growing up in Poland.

Jacob Kilstein: How many people got killed?

Female: No.

Interviewer: No, growing up before the war. Tell me a little bit about life in Poland in the 20s and 30s, early 30s, before Hitler came to power in '33. Tell me a little bit about it.

Jacob Kilstein: Well, it was a Polish government. They called themselves a Polish republic. He said stop.

Interviewer: Excuse me, sir.

Male: Leonid has two women out there that he says they must photograph. I think we have missed them so we can do the rest later but... but...

Interviewer: Okay.

Male: I don't know how to...I can do them pretty quickly, but I don't want to cut into this but I think...

Interviewer: Sir, would you mind if we waited just a couple of minutes.

Woman: Okay, go do what you want. I have time.

Interviewer: I can do that.

Woman: Which is fine. We can talk again.

Interviewer: Okay, I'm sorry about that. We're going to go back and talk a little bit about prewar in Poland.

Jacob Kilstein: Yeah.

Interviewer: Tell me a little bit about where you grew up.

Jacob Kilstein: Well, I was born in Piotrkow. I don't know...this was the name of the town. I don't know what you want to know about it. I would say as far as I'm concerned, we grew up in a Jewish atmosphere. And we were very happy there. As far as antisemitism, there was plenty of it over there. Poland, in general, was an antisemitic country. Of course, Germany was even before, but in the latest years,

they caught from Germany quite a bit. And they were ready to do anything even worse than Germany did. What Germany did, Poland was ready to do. Well, I don't know what you want to know about our life in Poland. What do you want to know?

Interviewer: Tell me about what you remember when Hitler came to power in '33. Did you notice...what did you--

Jacob Kilstein: When Hitler came--

Interviewer: Right. Did you notice your neighbors changing, teachers, people that you normally work with on a pleasant level?

Jacob Kilstein: Well, let me tell you something. We didn't have radio but the neighbors, some of the neighbors had the radio. We heard them speak like animals. Well, I'm sad to express it but the way he sounded sounded horrible. We never talked. He never dared to do whatever he told to do. But he did. Nobody thought of that. And when they did, even when they sent people out, people didn't know where they're going. It was done in a hidden way and they were good in hiding in those things. I am sad to talk about it. It hurts me. It hurts me to talk about it. It hurts anybody who went through to go through and go back and talk about it. It hurts very, very much. It hurts me much worse – this is what I told you a while ago, – after 60 years to wake up and go back to those things and ask questions. Those people who never thought about it, they're asking questions and they are on top of it. I don't mind for them to be on top, but they're asking us questions where we couldn't ask the questions 60 years ago because we knew it. We went through it. We saw it. And life has been of us because we have lost everybody. Take me for instance. I lost everybody in my family. I lost my father, I lost my mother, I lost my brother, I lost my sister. I was left for myself. Of course, some of the people died, this was before the war, but we lost everybody.

Interviewer: Tell me when you lost your family.

Jacob Kilstein: Hmm?

Interviewer: Was...did you lose your family in the ghetto or in selection?

Jacob Kilstein: No, in the ghetto I had my mother. I had my sister, and I had my brother. They all went during the war. They took--

Interviewer: Was your father selected for camp?

Jacob Kilstein: They took them away for the goodness – I don't want to say it. And..

Interviewer: You were how old at that time?

Jacob Kilstein: In the--

Interviewer: When you lost your family.

Jacob Kilstein: After...after I lost them?

Interviewer: When you lost your family in the ghetto, do you remember how old you were?

Jacob Kilstein: No, I didn't lose them in the ghetto.

Interviewer: Oh.

Jacob Kilstein: I lost them in the camps.

Interviewer: In the camp. Do you remember how old you were?

Jacob Kilstein: Well, I was already in my 30s, I think. I was in my 30s and when I was liberated, I was in my...either 36 or 37, you know.

Interviewer: Uh-huh.

Jacob Kilstein: It was a horrible thing to live through by yourself with nobody, no family, nobody to turn to. After I was liberated, the only one who gave us a little hand was Jewish welfare and the welfare of goodness of people, you know. They helped us come in here to the United States, you know.

Interviewer: You put here your strongest memory of the ghetto was a spinal injury.

Jacob Kilstein: Oh. With my spine. I hate going through that.

Interviewer: You don't have to talk about that.

Jacob Kilstein: But this was...this was a vital killing. I was working in the...there was a Huta, a huta. This is a factory. There was a huta [unintelligible 0:08:32]. This is a factory where they made glass and there was huta. There is a factory of wood, two hutas. And I worked in the factory where they made the glass. And I couldn't hold on anymore. I couldn't work. I was weak. In the evening, I said to my brother, "I want you to know I cannot make it." And he said, "What are you going to do?" I said, "We had one man who is running the whole show. This is the man, the chief of police, a Jewish fellow. I'm going to talk to him." He said, "You're going to talk to him?" I said, "To the killing, either he helps me or he kills me right on the spot." He went with me and I went to him. And I said, "I came to you to ask a favor." He said, "What's the favor?" And I told him my condition. "I would like for you to change my span of work." Instead of the huta [unintelligible 0:09:55] where they made the glass, the heat over there is in several thousands. You couldn't hold it. It was so hot. "Take me back to where they made the wood, and I'd be able to handle it better." He said that, "You cannot do that." He said, "I can give you only 2 weeks of vacation." I said, "Will this help me?" And he said, well...he called in the doctor. The doctor said, "I'm not going to give you anything because you're running any temperature." But anyway, there was a little discussion with them, a little fight. He gave me the 2 weeks. Well, it didn't help me. The only thing it did is that is that it made me hold this. When I carried those things, I put those handles in the front and the back. I carried it like that for a few days. And then, finally, the men who were [unintelligible 0:11:15] threw it away. As they threw it away, it broke my spine. I fell down because we were digging a deep ditch because they wanted to make an airfield on the ground. And I fell down deep in the ground. It was water and mud. The captain of the SS came down. He knocked anything out of me. He really thought I'm putting on a good show. Anyway, they put me on a holder and carried me to the hospital. I was in that hospital for 9 months, stretched out stiff. Well, this was a death sentence. This was horrible. Well, I thought then I'm gone. Nobody could come into the hospital. My brother couldn't come in. Nobody in the world. There was one man

in that hospital, in that same room, the same condition I was. He couldn't move. The doctor gave him a shot and he was revived for 24 hours and then he came back just like he was. Well, after 9 months somehow, with great joy of the nurses, men and women, they let me go. I was free. I couldn't make a step even that high. Nothing. Well I was free for about a week or two and I said to my brother, "You know what? As soon as they announced that there is an opening for a new camp, let's get away from here. I'm scared to be here. I'm afraid they may catch me doing something wrong. Since I came out of the hospital in this kind of condition, I'm scared to be around. Anyway, I don't know if I--

Interviewer: This was when you were in the ghetto.

Jacob Kilstein: Hmm?

Interviewer: This was when you were in the ghetto?

Jacob Kilstein: This is the first ghetto I went in. This was the ghetto Blizyn. Yeah. Well, this was not a ghetto. This was a camp and that camp; this was a killing camp also. They killed people. They hung them up and we had to go by and look at them for nothing. It didn't mean anything. Well, I don't know really what this means, retelling people that. Will they get better? Will people learn from that? I doubt it.

Interviewer: Why do you think he sent you to a hospital and didn't kill you?

Jacob Kilstein: Why?

Interviewer: Why do you think?

Jacob Kilstein: Why did they keep secrets all the way? Why did they do that?

Interviewer: Why did you keep what? I'm sorry.

Jacob Kilstein: Huh?

Interviewer: You said you kept something. Did you say secrets?

Woman: No. What do you mean?

Interviewer: I didn't hear what you said. You said why kept something all the way. Did you hear it, Sandy?

Sandy: Yeah. Well he...you asked him why they didn't kill him.

Interviewer: Why they didn't kill him.

Sandy: And he said, "Why were they keeping secrets?"

Interviewer: Oh, keeping secrets.

Jacob Kilstein: What, what, what?

Interviewer: I don't know if you said secrets or cigarettes. I couldn't make the distinction?

Jacob Kilstein: What did you say?

Interviewer: I understand now. I'm sorry. I didn't hear what you said. But I understand now.

Sandy: I asked him that question before. Repeat it why they didn't kill him.

Interviewer: I had a question. Why, when you were injured, did they sent you to the hospital and--

Jacob Kilstein: Yeah.

Interviewer: --didn't just kill you. Do you have any idea why they did that?

Jacob Kilstein: No.

Interviewer: No? Okay.

Jacob Kilstein: No, I didn't have an idea because they kept so many people in that hospital. But you know what? After I left that hospital, SS came in and killed everybody who was sick in that hospital, killed everybody. Why did they do that all the time and not killing me then? Why didn't they kill me? I don't know.

Interviewer: Were you a religious man when you went to camp?

Jacob Kilstein: Yeah.

Interviewer: You were raised Orthodox observant?

Jacob Kilstein: Yeah, I was. I was.

Interviewer: Tell me--

Jacob Kilstein: I was and I was and I went through it and I still am.

Interviewer: How...that's my question. We've talked to some survivors who say that their faith stayed strong through their time in the camp, that their faith, their religion stayed strong in the camp. We've also talked to some who abandoned God and said, they will never go back. What is it about your faith that kept you praying and kept you believing in the most horrific conditions?



Jacob Kilstein: I wouldn't get into that conversation. This is a highly discussed conversation and some people think this way, some people think the other way. It's a highly told discussion. It's more to it, yes or no. I am in the way of religion. I was and I am. I wouldn't speak the other way. I wouldn't take part in it. One thing, I never knock those people who were in the camps and they didn't go back to religion because they had something in their mind, in their thoughts against it and I would keep quiet and not say anything. I wouldn't insult them, no. I would appreciate if you...see I took a pill this morning.

Interviewer: Tell me about the transfer to Auschwitz. You said that you had come out of the hospital.

Jacob Kilstein: Well, I was in Blizyn...I was in Blizyn more than a year. If I'm not mistaken, we were in a tailoring department where we made the coats, green on one side and white on the other side. This was for the front on the Russian side for the soldiers and there was some cotton wadding in the middle. Anyway, this is the way we worked. It was in the winter, in the summer. It's possible we were there a little longer. But then, came a new leader of the SS, a tall man and everybody was scared. Who knows what he was able to do. Well, we talked among ourselves and everybody said, "He's going to be a good man. Who knows?" But all of a sudden, they put us on trains. We didn't know where this thing will go. On the way, we learned we were on our way to Auschwitz.

Interviewer: What did that mean to you then?

Jacob Kilstein: It didn't mean anything.

Interviewer: You had no idea of what--

Jacob Kilstein: It didn't mean anything because I went with my brother. I didn't have the family anymore. And I went with my brother to Auschwitz. Where he was, he was not on the same, what do you call... Anyway, he was on the same train but I couldn't find him. I knew he was there but getting off in Auschwitz, I could see him. You couldn't get over and just see somebody but you find somebody. Over there, you have about 2 weeks isolated because they were scared some kind of sickness may catch them. Ai ai ai, they knew how to play the game. Anyway, after 2 weeks, we were given grade A. That means we can go out and work and we went out to

work. We went out to work about 12 or 15 miles out of the camp. And an orchestra, a beautiful orchestra played 5 o'clock in the morning and they kept us almost naked, sitting around waiting for the orchestra to get through with the playing and we went out to work way down about 15 to 16 miles and worked. Let me tell you, when we worked in Auschwitz about 15 maybe 18 miles away, we could see from the chimney the smoke. You know, the smoke was people's flesh and you could smell the flesh. You could smell from the smoke in Auschwitz. If people tell you they didn't know, they're liars. Don't believe them. We never believed it because we were in it. We could flesh it. We could smell it. We were there about 15 or 18 miles away. How could anybody deny it? The Polish people deny it, then they still deny it. Well, this is the way it was. Anyway, we were in Auschwitz for quite a while. I don't know if it was a year, maybe less than a year, maybe not quite a year. One day, they took us to work, took me to work. And my brother, he had boots – he had the top but the bottom he lost – and they called him to work early in the morning to catch fish, clean the lead from the greenery and all that stuff. When I came home in the evening, he was gone and 70,000 people were gone. Where they went, nobody knew. I said, "What?" Well, we didn't go to work anymore in Auschwitz but 2 more weeks. They put us in trains and took us...you see, before coming to Auschwitz, we stopped in two camps, Sachsenhausen and there was another camp with one name, two camps and we stopped there too. There was one camp, Sachsenhausen, and there was another camp.

Interviewer: Dachau?

Jacob Kilstein: Hmm?

Interviewer: Dachau?

Jacob Kilstein: No, Dachau was the last. Dachau, this was the last.

Interviewer: Blizyn, Auschwitz, Dachau.

Jacob Kilstein: No, Auschwitz was before. Sachsenhausen, this was before Auschwitz. Anyway-

Interviewer: Blizyn?

Jacob Kilstein: Huh?

Male: Blizyn, Blizyn was the first.

Jacob Kilstein: I don't think--

Interviewer: Yeah you've only...you got four listed here.

Jacob Kilstein: Huh?

Interviewer: You've got Blyzin, Sachsenhausen, Auschwitz and Dachau.

Jacob Kilstein: Yeah. Maybe, maybe we didn't put that down.

Interviewer: We'll get an opportunity.

Jacob Kilstein: Anyway...

Interviewer: Okay.

Jacob Kilstein: Where was I now?

Interviewer: Talking to me about the transport to another camp.

Jacob Kilstein: Well now, when we leave Auschwitz and we come to another camp, and this was a long trip. We are coming to a camp way deep in Germany, cold getting out of it, of the train. Now, getting off the train in the camps was not just getting out. They came with whips and they whipped you over the head and ordered you to get out. "Quick, quick, quick, quick!" They knocked you over the head and they

let you out...in order to get out quick. I don't know. Maybe they were in a hurry to have that train quick. Who knows what they want. Nobody asked for any question. Anyway, we came out of the train and they were loading people who were there working. They looked like skeletons. They looked terrible. A bunch of people like us but they kept them in...who knows what kind of conditions they had. We didn't even ask. We were scared to ask. They kept us... Well, I don't want to even talk about it because that camp was out of this world. I don't want to even say anything because it was more than you can express, more than you can explain. You weren't supposed to wash yourself. You weren't supposed to wash your shirt. You weren't supposed to wash anything you wear for months and months, maybe 6 or 8 months just to wear it. You were full of lice. Everybody was full of it. When we had that little time, we sat down and killed them like that [mimes crushing lice between his fingers]. It was horrible. Well, anyway, this was the worst place. I remember when I was relieved and they took me to the hospital and I was in my bed and then laying in my bed, I heard President Roosevelt died. Well, people didn't know if he was good or if he was bad, but we heard the man died. Anyway, I don't know what more else I can tell you. If you have any more questions, go ahead and ask me. Maybe I talked too much.

Interviewer:

No, you didn't talk too much at all.