

Transcript:

William Klein

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Interviewer: Well, I'll tell you what we're going to do to make this easy. We're going to talk a little bit about pre-war Czechoslovakia, growing up in Czechoslovakia, right. We're going to talk a little bit about what happened – I mean, a little bit about – I know you're a camp survivor of several camps.

William Klein: Yes. We went to – as a matter of fact, the first stop was before the Auschwitz territory. And one "kapo" – you know what a "kapo" is? Okay. So when he stopped me and he asked me the first thing, he said, "Do you want to live?" I said, "You must be smart or stupid." I think it's stupid. I said, "Why do you ask me a stupid question?" He said, "Answer me: yes or no?" And I said, "Yes, sure. I want to live." So then he told me, "The first thing you do is volunteer to get out of here." He said, "That's your life. Take it or leave it."

Interviewer: Tell me a little bit about growing up in Czechoslovakia.

William Klein: In Czechoslovakia, I was eight years old, I went to school since – [unintelligible] do you know what a [unintelligible] is? Okay, then. Because many people don't – even though Jewish, they don't know what a [unintelligible] means. I come from a very Orthodox family. I have the picture before the war started and when the war started. I had the family all together in one picture. I had a brother in the Russian Army. One was a paratrooper. There was one in the Czechoslovakian Army. One was in Yugoslavia, a partisan. It was eight brothers and three sisters.

Interviewer: So you were one of twelve? You are one of twelve children?

William Klein: No, eleven – eight brothers and three sisters.

Interviewer: Okay.

William Klein: Naturally, my parents are counted too but they didn't go too far because they were close to 100 years old. So didn't...

Interviewer: Your parents were close to 100? And this was in what year? Do you recall?

William Klein: 1938.

Interviewer: Okay. 1938.

William Klein: My oldest brother was born in 1911.

Interviewer: Were you the youngest?

William Klein: The youngest was my—let me see now—was it a sister, was it a brother? I think it was a brother. The youngest was a brother. The oldest one, my sister, she was born in 1912, then one in 1913, then after that it just...

Interviewer: And you were born in what year?

William Klein: 1924.

Interviewer: 1924. So in 1939, you were 14, 15?

William Klein: I was 14 years old in 1939. No, 1939 would be only – yes, 11 years old. 1924...

Interviewer: You were born in 1924?

William Klein: Yes.

Interviewer: Okay. Tell me a little bit about what you recall in 1939.

William Klein: In 1939, during then I was working in a candy factory. I was eight years old.

Interviewer: Okay.

William Klein: And then they took us to the street and cleaned the street and the hardest that the German Army occupied, we cleared, and they should live in there. That time we didn't think it was so bad. We heard rumors about the ghettos. So my brother was taken to the – my brother was gone to the service, taken. And it was no service. I recall it, I don't know, it was so long ago and my memory, like I said, you can tell me something, if I turn away, I don't know, what did I say to you.

Interviewer: That's okay. We were talking about the candy factory.

William Klein: The candy factory I was working. There was a Jewish man who owned it but he had a Gentile man that he bought it from him. So that's where I was working. When the camp was created, ghetto, one day they called in everybody else is going to go live in one place. That's what they called the "ghetto." So when it was all over, we were told we're going to go walking toward another camp. But they didn't tell us, maybe in Warsaw or anything else.

Interviewer: Okay, Mr. Klein, help me understand, 1939 was when you were working in a candy factory? At the time that the war broke out.

William Klein: Till 1938.

Interviewer: The Kristallnacht.

William Klein: They kept me a couple of days because they wanted to finish it. But then I used to go back and get candy, chocolate, and so on and they gave it to me free because, after all, I grew up next door to the factory.

Interviewer: Where were you when the war broke out?

William Klein: When the war broke out I was in Uzhhorod – have you ever heard about Ungvar, the Carpathian Mountains?

Interviewer: Okay.

William Klein: You heard about it?

Interviewer: No. Not yet.

William Klein: It's very famous. We had universities in Hebrew, gymnasium in Hebrew – Jewish, which were at that time. We had to join them.

Interviewer: Okay. Where were your brothers and sisters at this time?

William Klein: Brothers, they were in the camp, in the ghetto.

Interviewer: And this was in the Warsaw ghetto?

William Klein: No. That was the Czechoslovakian ghetto. But it was not a ghetto "ghetto". It was just – even before the war there were ghettos. So we were just like that. We were working and helping others fixing their houses for the Germans and who else they told us to do. And then, naturally, when we started the walk to Poland, we went on a train. When we wanted to go the washroom, only in the morning it stopped – [coughs] excuse me – in the morning they stopped, we entered the washroom on a field - women or children or whatever that - at the same time, all the healthy ones took the dead bodies and threw it out from the car. Now there was one thing bad about it. When you put your foot up, it was okay, but you couldn't put it back the same place because – here in Tennessee, I can't think of the name of the camp where they actually advertise your – they did take because they took me and ask for it because I was already one time taking pictures and a story about my early history just like you said. But I don't know what happened. But they said it's so hard to think about it because the beating what you got – you know, the head was the first thing that they did, bayonet, and this is bayonet. But I never worry about it because I was with the – they are just people and I had a younger brother with me and brother-in-law. You're going to die if you go into the camp because everybody else who came in and was stationed in Auschwitz or Birkenau. Then from there we went to Krakow and from Krakow went to Warsaw, back to Warsaw. All the camps – my mind is not like it used to be because of all the operations that I had and the memory is confusing - front or back or is it today or tomorrow or yesterday. I can't tell. That's why the university called me and wanted me to speak. I told them, I said, "I can't." That's because of the operation and the – what do you call it? They put you to sleep.

Interviewer: Anesthetic?

William Klein: Anesthetic. Yes. You see, it had been so many times, I didn't know what's what. But I tell people what they did and then they said that that's what it created. And many people now I meet have the same problem of the operation, anesthetic, and memory or – so many things. See, I take every morning about ten pills, then I take at night ten, twelve pills then doing in-between one or two or three pills. You know that I never took a pill. I never had – pain did not exist as far as I was concerned. I don't care how bad it was. I was a soccer player, professional.

Interviewer: Mr. Klein, tell me about the ghetto.

William Klein: The ghetto was okay. It's just you live with people that you know - your family and your next-door neighbor and so on.

Interviewer: What do you remember most about the ghetto?

William Klein: The ghetto was not bad. You are talking about ghetto – that camp - that's a different story.

Interviewer: You were on a clean-up crew in the Warsaw uprising?

William Klein: Yeah.

Interviewer: Tell me about that.

William Klein: We were going from house to house. And the Germans used to say, "Take this one here. Clean it up and put it on a train." They were taking them back to Germany. But as far as the camp that we were, they did not beat us so much as when we went out to work. Like, for instance, in the morning, you see, you wake 3:00, 4:00 up and walk. I don't know how many kilometers. And the SS guard used to direct us where to go and what to do and food, you were lucky, if they were pushing the – like a pushcart. If you were in that position where they stop and you have food. If you were-- tough luck, you didn't get nothing if you didn't stay at the place where the food will stop. But you never knew where he's going to stop. It's what they told him to do. That's what you did.

Interviewer: Now you were in Auschwitz?

William Klein: I was in Auschwitz.

Interviewer: You were in Dachau?

William Klein: And Dachau. Now Dachau is in Bavaria. And the other one, like Auschwitz, that's in Poland.

Interviewer: You were in the Death March? You were in the Death March?

William Klein: Yes, we were in the Death March. Let's see now. The Death March was from Warsaw Ghetto going back to Germany.

Interviewer: Tell me about that.

William Klein: I had a rabbi, an old rabbi, and I was scared. I put my hand on him. And the German guard came over to me and hit me with the side. And he said, "You want to go there or you want to go there?" "There" means the Death Camp—that not just working there, killing you. So I decided that I am not going to have nobody but my brother and my brother-in-law. So why? Let me put it this way, I was physically very strong when I was young. I could pick 300 pounds up from the ground. Now later on, I wasn't that good. Because there you had to be shown that you are strong, that you are not bothered, you got even food. Oh, yes, I didn't say the – when I was in Warsaw ghetto cleaning up, I found 2,000 twenty dollar gold pieces. And naturally, I went first thing to a German guard. I said, "How much would it cost me a loaf of bread or maybe two loaves of bread?" He said, "What you got?" I said, "I don't have nothing but they'd ask me to ask you." So they said, "Okay, give me 20 dollar gold pieces. I'll give you a

loaf of bread.” And I paid a loaf of bread. And you know what people told me? I was crazy. Because I said 20 dollar gold piece – and I said, “Why am I crazy?” They said for the simple reason you know that it doesn’t work. Twenty dollars of gold piece, you have been – you know how much it’s worth that time? I went to another camp and I bought ten loaves of bread. But you couldn’t say how much the other one pay. You just said what you wanted. And when the Germans came in, they said, “Empty.” All you had is the shirt that you brought from home and the pants if you had a pants or a piece of cloth. Naturally, the people in the camp didn’t have it because they didn’t work—all of us in the same building. But the Jewish people had a lot of money. I had – how much was it? They had 200,000 dollars. But you know they didn’t take paper dollars? They couldn’t do nothing with it. But gold pieces, that’s credited for the simple reason, they said gold pieces you can always change it over to any kind of money or any kind of food.

Interviewer: Tell me about Auschwitz.

William Klein: Now, Auschwitz I couldn’t tell you that because they didn’t take me in to the chimneys or the oven. But they showed us. Like, for instance, when we’re getting to the camp, it was the building – there is Mr. Green, his parents were in the camp. He was born outside of the camp. How are you doing?

Male: Pretty good. How are you doing?

William Klein: Do you want him over there?

Interviewer: That’s okay. Make yourself comfortable. I’ll be right with you. Get some water or coffee or anything.

William Klein: His parents were good friends of mine. They were in the camp.

Interviewer: Tell me about liberation.

William Klein: The liberation was...

Interviewer: You were in Auschwitz?

William Klein: I was in Germany that time.

Interviewer: You were in Germany.

William Klein: First, we were made from Poland, Warsaw ghetto, all the way to Germany.

Interviewer: Just after the march?

William Klein: After death march. And we had to just follow what they said. Like, for instance, a guard came over to me and he told me to let the rabbi go. I didn’t tell him he’s a rabbi because maybe that was – it could have been a first-class killing. But anyway, that’s what happened. We worked and we had water. They told us to go underwater to take a bath and so on. Now it was good water it was. Three minutes under the water. Three minutes and you go on down the road. But I figured this way they tell me which way to go -- I’d better not go because that’s their way of doing it. But I had no problem other than a few-- hit, stamp, cut, and all that. As long as they did not shoot you right then and there, you

were safe. Now I went to the camp and asked them which way to go in the water because you didn't have water while you work. There was no water unless you stayed behind and you find a little ditch. I don't care if it was dirty, stinky or whatever it is, it was water. A lot of people say, "I would rather die." I said, "The others died. I'm alive." I said, "You see me?" They said, "Yes. I see you." I said, "Now where is your friend? Where is your family?" They said, "I don't know." I said, "Because you were stupid question and then a stupid answer. You'd rather die than give him dollars or twenty gold pieces."

Interviewer: Tell me about your family.

William Klein: My family here to this country.

Interviewer: Your family in Czechoslovakia, who survived?

William Klein: None. There's two of them – one, two – two of them died one day to the other. What I mean by that is they came in and they were taking people and put them in a – I would call it a "closet." So naturally when they stayed there, we tried to get away. They did not kill at that time because they know that the army was very close - Polish Army, American Army, and Germany. So when it came up to that, it never – what was it you were asking me?

Interviewer: About your family. Your siblings.

William Klein: My family was not there. It was only two of my brothers and one of my sisters. They went to women and young one. But actually to come out from there, there was only one brother and one brother-in-law. All the rest was gone. Now they did not kill them because we didn't see them. It's just they went to a different direction. Now if he was a mother like my sister, had two children, she didn't live. They got in to Auschwitz, they went to there - and they used to say, "That's the shower." And the shower was gas. And the next building was naturally the oven. Have you seen pictures with the dead bodies? To the – what do they call that on the street...

Interviewer: Gutter?

William Klein: Huh?

Interviewer: A gutter.

William Klein: A gutter is one thing and that's what I was saved. I got into the gutter. I told my brother when I got in, he said you fall back the same way as I did and then come and I'll wait for you.

Interviewer: Is this after the march?

William Klein: Yeah. That was before the march.

Interviewer: Before the march.

William Klein: Yeah.

Interviewer: So were you captured after? Were you found in the gutter?

William Klein: No. They didn't find. We just come out from there. We got into a farmer's house and the farmer was very, very good. He gave us food. We spoke good German being so close to Germany. So we

spoke to them and he said, "Wait." They went up and they brought some clothes and food. The food was very - clothes didn't bother us. They would say, "Were you naked?" And I said, "Naked and half-naked." But it didn't bother me because when you're dead, you're dead. But we had a very, very good – what I call – treatment from the farmer. He was telling us that the German Army has already left, it's all controlled by the American Army. I was liberated by a captain. He came over and I didn't understand English. But he spoke a little German. I speak Hungarian. I speak Polish. I speak Czech, Russian. But I didn't speak their language, what they did. American, English was out of my reach. It's not that...

Interviewer: Where did you go after liberation? Did you come to America or did you go to a DP camp?

William Klein: Okay. Now listen to this. This is where it started. I still remember. I got over to the officer and I asked him to let me go back to Czechoslovakia. He said, "Okay. Go ahead." They put me on the top of the train. That was two days. I swallow when I talk about it. It was just like you're gonna – people say, "What are you swallowing?" He says, "Not swallowing." It is something that comes up to you and it just...

Interviewer: It's okay.

William Klein: You know what I mean.

Interviewer: Sure.

William Klein: So we went. I got to Czechoslovakia. When I was in Prague, I asked the officer, "Look, I had a brother in the Czechoslovakian Army. You know where he is?" And he said, "What's his name?" So I told him, "Herman Klein." He said, "I think I did, is he a captain?" I said, "Yes. He was a staff captain." He said, "Oh, he is down in Slovakia." You see, the upper place is Czech and then there is Polish and then further down, Hungarian. The [unintelligible 29:10], is the Czech. So we got on a train and my brother asked him, "Did you find anybody – so on and so on." My god, there's a hundreds of thousand people go through here – millions." They lost 6 million people. I know many of them don't believe in it but that's what they did. They lost 6 million people.

Interviewer: What do you say to those people?

William Klein: Huh?

Interviewer: What do you say to those people?

William Klein: No. He said he didn't know nothing. But anyway I said, "Let me go back to the Uzhhorod," which is in Czech. Uzhgorod is in Russian or if Hungarian, it's Ungvar. Ungvar is very popular and very, very well-known because, like I said, universities – Hebrew, in Czech, and even Hungarian. Anyway, he said to me, "You want to go home?" I said, "Yes." "Where do you want to go?" I told him to Carpathian. This is the Carpathian area. I want to go back to Uzhgorod or is it Ungvar, which way you want. We said "Ungvar" because I don't speak Czech.

Interviewer: What brought you to America?

William Klein: Huh?

Interviewer: What brought you to America?

William Klein: I had what you call “family” already—my uncle, two uncles and two aunts, cousins-- about 50.

Interviewer: Where did you come to first? Did you come straight to Tennessee?

William Klein: No. Chicago.

Interviewer: Chicago. And how long have you lived in Tennessee?

William Klein: Well, in Tennessee, we came here in '53 or '55.

Interviewer: What do you feel about living in Tennessee?

William Klein: Oh, my wife is from Tennessee.

Interviewer: Your wife's from Chattanooga, right?

William Klein: Chattanooga.

Interviewer: Did you come straight here?

William Klein: Yes. No. We lived in another place and, like I said – oh, I can't think of the place—but we go and also it wasn't Tennessee– from Chicago to Tennessee. I married my wife in Chicago. I had a cleaning store and being a tailor and a candymaker. It's funny about it. I could live just to be close to the people and – like my wife, she came to me in my store and she wants to fix a dress. I fixed her dress and she said, “You know, I never had a suit like that fitting so good.” I said, “You never had a tailor either.” So you had somewhere – somebody's just know how to dribble around with a needle. Do you know how to sew?

Interviewer: No. [Laughter]

William Klein: So she came in and she said to me, “I will pay you when I can.” Have you heard about it? [Laughter] People say, “Did she pay us?” I said, “No. She promised me she will.” And we married now 47 years.

Interviewer: Has she paid you? [Laughter]

William Klein: In a way she paid. But a lot of people – but anyway, we got into Czechoslovakia down to Ungvar and went to the police department. I asked him if he knows where were my sisters, I heard that they are here. He said, “You know, there are two sisters here.” I took my two sisters. He said, “No, you cannot. But if you give me your coat,” it was leather. He said, “Then you can have them.” I said, “Here, you can have it.” And I take them in and – I don't know what. Naturally, then we started to go up to Budapest in which I had an uncle and aunt and cousins. People say wherever you went you had somebody. I said, “Yes, I had a big family,” and we came all handy. Naturally, when I was through then, they told me that if I want to go where—I said, “I want to go to Budapest.” So I went to Budapest. When I got to Budapest that was the same thing – “Give me your coat. Give me this. Give me that.” They have money. There's no use to ask because I just came from Poland and I'm the same way as here, a stranger. I never forget. But still always they wanted to give me my sisters back but if I give whatever I had –

clothes, pants, leather. I gave it away. I had my brother. He had some too. And we gave it away. We took my two sisters and that's when my cousins from Hungary decided that they're going to go with us. But they didn't go. They just went to the border and stopped. They said they were afraid to go. They don't know where to go. I said, "Let's go to Germany." We got to Germany. That's where the displaced persons you heard about it.

Male: Sure.

William Klein: When we got to the border, they asked us where we want to go. I said, "I don't know where but I heard Dachau." Before we got to Dachau, we had to go to München – Munich – and so I sat down and I asked him, "Where can we go?" He said, "In camp, you get everything that you need." Then we got clothes. We got food. We got an apartment. Then my other brothers were coming in and my other sisters coming in. Then we stayed there till my brother, my younger brother decided he wants to go to France. And he was so good, he liked it over there. I said, "I don't have a friend. I haven't got nobody there and I don't want to go there." So he signed up and they took him and they put him on a boat to go to America. I think he was about three years, three or four years, ahead of me. We came here. That was the greatest thing for us. When I came to Tennessee, they asked for undertakers. And I told them that I knew about it because I used to stay up with my father and we would bury. But then I did also prepare the body. For 27 years, I was head of the chevra kadisha. And then I was teaching other people about the chevra kadisha. A lot of people say, "How come you were so young when they took you? How can you do all those things?" I said, "You see, you looking at him and I'm looking at Him. [looks up]" There's a difference. I was very religious. I'm still religious. I used to go to the shul even though I was in business. Seven days, I went seven days to shul. There's not too many people go seven days to shul. And then after that, kids got married. I got married. Kids got married. And my brothers, they all got married. We are – what is it now – my sister had died. She was two, three years ahead of me. See, I was a lover boy. Because I was single and I wasn't in a hurry. But then I decided I'm getting older. I got married. Would you know what's funny thing about it, by just talking about it, and I have to swallow the thought about it, whatever happened, and people will say, "How come you do that? That doesn't bother you?" I said, "No. Maybe it doesn't bother you but I have a big family. There were 13 of us. My brother had three children. My sister had two children. My other brother had two children." And the family, it was growing back. Now our family—cousin, over there—are close to 50. But I gave whenever they ask me—I used to go out and speak for the organization. I have stickers from the University. Also from the – what they call it – museum.

Interviewer: The Holocaust Museum?

William Klein: Yeah. I'm a member of the Holocaust Museum. So that's about – now I'm a cripple. If I walk sometimes I lose my balance. I used to be an athlete, a tough guy. I wasn't afraid of anything. Pain – pain, I don't know. I have it but it doesn't bother me. Why should I worry about – it's going to be there whether you like it or not including when you're taking the pills. It still hurts. Anything else?

Interviewer: You were wonderful, Mr. Klein. I appreciate you're taking the time to come out and talk to us.

William Klein: There's a part of me, I can't forget about it. But except I don't speak like I used to.

Interviewer: No, you did wonderful.

William Klein: Because of the accident.