

United States Holocaust Memorial Museum

Interview with Joel Elkes and Avraham Tory
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PREFACE

The following oral history testimony is the result of a taped interview with Joel Elkes and Avraham Tory, conducted on September 26, 1991 on behalf of the United States Holocaust Memorial Museum. The interview is part of the United States Holocaust Memorial Museum's collection of oral testimonies. Rights to the interview are held by the United States Holocaust Memorial Museum.

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JOEL ELKES and AVRAHAM TORY

September 26, 1991

- E: Avraham, we are here to recollect and to reconnect. To connect the parents, my parents which whom you knew with the parents whom I remember. And I think we should perhaps begin by recalling the way I remember my parents briefly and then give you the opportunity to tell us, all of us, how you saw them and how you experienced them. It is very important, I think, to establish this connection because you are a witness and I am only a witness once or twice removed. I have experienced it through your writings and in my imagination. You actually were there. And our object is in this conversation is to connect what I remember and what I knew with what you saw and you experienced. Does that seem a very good way of going about this discussion?
- T: Anything you say.
- E: Well, I...
- T: You made a very nice introduction and I you. So please start and then I will come in. I'll step at the right moment.
- E: I'll be very brief.
- T: Yes.
- E: I'll be very brief. As you know, we both were in Lithuanian. You're in my employee. I am Kovno. You and I went to Hebrew schools where everything was taught in Hebrew. A unique experience for both of us. My father helped to found in Kovno which is known as the. And I am just going to ramble along a little because it will give you...us both the feeling or give whoever wants to see it, the feeling of our experience, growing up in Lithuanian at the time before World War II. The extraordinary experience of being educated in Hebrew about the world, not just about Judaism. I remember in my school, being taught in Hebrew about Voltaire and Gerter, by the same teacher who taught me also and Hebrew history. The same man was Voltaire on Tuesday's and was on Friday's. And father had a lot to do with that kind of spirit and...and....bringing the school into being. I remember my grandparents, and Sarah Elkes, my father's parents, living in a little steetle in Kovno where my father was born in 1879. I remember who was sitting in a little back of his shop reading the Talmud where he was selling herring and to the peasants, saying, "You want to know something about your father? I'll tell you." When he was 10 he was redheaded and he started reading the Russian encyclopedia, volume one, and simply when on with." That's all I remember. Nobody knew where he got his first education. But what they did know is that he was a from beginning to end. He learned by himself. He was self prepared. He went and studied medicine in Kernicksburg. How the Hell he got (pardon the expression) got into medicine school to this day I do not know, with his qualifications, but he got in. And he studied medicine in Kernicksburg and then tutored Hebrew to make a living, to keep body and soul together and then met "Miriam

Muldune who began his wife, who was his pupil and became his wife. When he returned, he became an officer in the Russian army, and he traveled from there and back again. But one thing I remember of which will keep in...in history books, I think you are going to say about him is this. He told me that in his regiment he was the only Jewish officer.

T: Right.

E: And there were always anti-semitic, anti-semites around and there were anti-semitic remarks made. And he is on record as saying, "In my presence there will be no scurrilous remarks about my people," and getting up and walking out. And...and he...the other officers knew that you do not engage in this kind of conversation in the presence of this man, Elkes. You just don't take him on.

T: This is exactly what he told me while we were in ghetto.

E: He did?

T: About this service in the army, and they called him. They didn't call him. They just...

E: Talked about Judaism.

T: And the Jews should go out, that they don't belong here, so he immediately said, "I will never dine...it was in the... in the dining room...

E: In the mess...the mess room.

T: In the mess room... So he said...he came to his officer, to his superior, and he said, "I will never again step in in this mess room because I don't want to hear such expressions." And...uh...and to the greatest surprise of Dr. Elkes, his superior just ordered as Dr. Elkes said he would want it...it to be. That the word is not only a...a translation into Russian from the word Jew in ...in is much more than this.

E: The human.

T: The humanization.

E: Yes. Yes.

T: Degradation. Jid is this everything bad. Whatever... And he...and he spoke to me about it.

E: And that is...that is really in a sense a of things to come.

T: Yes, of course.

E: Because that really is a...an instance of the world...

T: He told me about me about it in a contact after his very serious and very dangerous conversation with one of the top people of the Gestapo in Kovno.

E: Yes. Yes. That is the connection which I want to make.

T: Exactly.

E: Exactly. Exactly. And then as you remember, he settled in Lithuania and rapidly became the leading physician of the town and the country. He helped to found the Jewish hospital in. He helped to found the Jewish school, a number of other institutions, but he. He refused to serve on committees, councils, anything, of any kind. He was just very much a private person. And in this his wife, Miriam, supported him. And I remember that ours was...myself, my sister, Sarah's, was a quiet life. It was a very private life. Not many parties. Not many...uh...official functions. Nothing of the high life that usually accompanies the desperation of the country. Not at all. Very, very quiet and private and confused. It is important in view of the fact that later on, when you came to mind, he took on such huge...huge public responsibilities.

T: He didn't want it.

E: He didn't want it? Both people were talking at once at this time, and I could not make out their conversation.

T: He...Yes.

E: And then he became a very well known as a physician, very well accepted by the whole diplomatic corps, the Russian and the German ambassador, and the Swedish ambassador and the British ambassador and the American ambassador, they were all his patients.

T: And the Japanese council.

E: And the Japanese council which we will come to in a moment.

T: Yes. Very important.

E: And they became very important too. And he became physician to the Prime Minister and his wife. And I remember one instance which again speaks to the same kind of characteristic. It was Saturday and I answered the telephone and on the telephone was the secretary of the wife of the Prime Minister.

T: ...

E: ...

T: ...

- E: And then she came on the telephone phone and and I passed the telephone to father. And he said....this was a Saturday, Sabbath. And she said, "May I see you." He said, "Yes." Is it urgent?" She said, "It's not very urgent." And he said in his nice, polite quiet way he said, It is my Saturday. Perhaps we can meet tomorrow or the day after? Would that be convenient?" And she said, "Thank you, I will be very glad." He stressed that not only that he was not available, but it is my Saturday and unless it is very urgent, I prefer to see you when I am working and not on my Saturday. This is the kind of reserve and...and respect which he...he treated all his patients, and by contrast I understood something else. Because he was enormously generous in his services, his waiting room was always full of poor people. Poor folks he saw for free, and mixed with...with some of the high society people. They waited in the same waiting room, and there was never any give or take, any...any privileges. He was extraordinary generous with his time. Uh...He made house calls continuously again to poor homes. No compensation. Just because he remembered that patient and that patient and that patient."• So he was...he had this enormous presence about him when he dealt with people who ...of standing and warmth and kindness which emanated from him when he was with patients, any patient, which became legendary and which I am sure Dr. Brauns' father, who was his assistant, commented on.
- E: The Interior Department of the Hospital of which your father was the head.
- T: Yes. Yes. So these are some of the things which...which I recall so vividly about..uh...about Dr. Elkes. The extraordinary sense of presence, generosity, kindness, and also a deep philosophical bent which viewed the Jewish ethic which we lived and breathed as the ethic of man. I can give you an instance. On his desk, there stood a little tablet taken from the grave from a Emmanuel. Emmanuel was buried in, and on his grave there is a little tablet which is known as the... And it recalls the saying of which my father used to repeat to Sarah and me. And it goes translated something like this. "Two things occupy, continue to occupy the mind and fill it with ever growing astonishment and more than mind occupying itself really. One is a the starry sky above me, and the other is the morale law within me." And Elhanan Elkes really lived these...these simple, these two. Day by Day. And in some way he combined them with a deep sense of Jewish identity.
- E: Because these emanates from his education, which he got a very religious education at his time, where was not even schools and not even modern schools. It was a seder so called, and a " which if you didn't comply with what he gave you, also with a bite you know. "
- T: Yes. Yes.
- E: But this is what was the very basic of his Jewish education and it kept him...and he kept it with him all the years until he was the heritage, the Jewish heritage and the Jewish morales.
- T: Yeah.

- E: Jewish morales. Because he always spoke about it in the ghetto with me, even in the council. There is a morale...and...and when I talk about...about your father when he was in the ghetto, I'll come back to it why in the very crucial day before the 28th of October, when the great selection of 10,000 inmates of the ghetto were taken out, he didn't want to comply with the order of the Gestapo that the Jewish Council should order...should not publish...should order all the inmates of the ghetto...then the population of 30,000, to report at the 28th of October at 6 in the morning at the...at the Seventh square. And when the...the opinion of the men of the Jewish committee were, he asked...the chief rabbi, who was a great scholar of all faiths, was a...he was a candidate to be chief rabbi” •then to consult him on this matter. This stems all from his Jewish education which was deep and rooted in his heart and mind.
- T: Yes...I...I really want to...I'm so glad to bring that out in this context...in your context because that again makes...uh...the connection which is the purpose of this conversation. Uh...The other and related aspect. Growing...the same tree growing from a different group is to bring the reality....day to day reality, the day to day reality of Arab's Israel long before because to him the day to day reality and to which he conveyed to us as children, which he conveyed to his school which we took part.
- E: Well, this is why he was one of the 3 trustees of the pioneer farm, the Jewish...there were pioneer farm....the Jewish...there were pioneer movements in the...in the...in Lithuanian, and there were pioneer movements of the so-called social, social Zionists and general Zionists. He didn't care. But they bought a farm from a Lithuanian in order to train...to train their...those pioneers from the Zionist movement in order to bring...to train them in... in agricultural work to be...to be ripe for the...for the life in...pioneer life in Israel.
- T: In days to come. In days to come.
- E: And this was...and he...this was a non-political...it was a general farm of training in English trade.
- T: Preparation.
- E: Yeah. And this is was near a little steetle.
- T: And he and I stayed there and what is more, every Friday there there was a to dinner with us.
- E: Of course.
- T: Every Friday, and he...the the young people came to us and my mother would talk to them. And I remember the vivid, very, very well and the tremendous enthusiasm which he had for this enterprise. You see he, bring brought up in Kovia in a little town. He lived near a farm. He knew what...what a pumpkin, and a...an onion and a potato looked and smelled like. I mean he had done it.

- E: The main purpose. Education....educating a new a generation of Jews who were mostly citizens...of the citizens. They had no profession. They had no linkage to...to the farm, to land, to agriculture. And not only was he the...a trustee...but in a...in a public function, but he was also the physician of all the and they were treated by him...it is...it is..." •free of charge. No question about it. But in serious cases, he used to go there to them and call them on the spot and give to them.
- T: Yes. I remember that. I went with him.
- E: And this, bear in mind, is a physician of...of outstanding qualifications who was the physician of the prime minister of the president of the state, of the ambassadors as you said. But in first place he was the...the physician of the humble, of the popular.
- T: Yes. Yes.
- E: And I want to say another word. I was...it is...there was a near Godless state where no before you
- T: Yes. We had...we had an old apartment.
- E: The old apartment. I was there because my father was ill and I was there. So you could always find a food pack. And not only people with very, as you said, well dressed and people who came very, very poorly. Very poorly.
- T: Yes. Yes.
- E: And I want to say not only Jews.
- T: No. No. No.
- E: Not only Jews.
- T: No. No. He had...
- E: Because his door was open for every needy and for every man or woman who needed and could not afford to pay.
- T: Yes. Yes. Yes. I remember him. And then we are now coming to a time when he consulted the priest of the British Ambassador and he said, "What shall I do for my son?" He said, "Send him to English. I've been to...I graduated my school in...in Lithuanian, Hebrew school. And then for good measure, I went to a German school in Kernicksburg which turned out to be a in 1929, 30, which was already was feeling the tremor of Nazism, and I felt it very much there. I was the only Jew there. And then he went to the French Ambassador and said, "Is there a possibility." And he said, "Yes, of course." And he wrote a letter and that is how I went to England and then where Sarah followed me in

1937. And then he and I corresponded in my throughout the years. I went to the Zionist Congress in

E: In 30...in 39.

T: 39.

E: But it was not a 39 was in...39 was in Geneva. Perhaps you were a Congress before.

T: The congress before. In Basil. I remember it was in Basil.

E: This is a Basil. It was the 20th Congress. I was 20th Congress which was the last Zionist World Congress, before the war.

T: Before the war.

E: At the end...at the end actually, the congress were closed immediately because the declaration, the German declared war against Poland.

T: August 1st. August 1st. Yes.

E: Yeah. August first, in 1939.

T: Well, I saw him the last time in 1938. He had come and visit me in...in the...England and brought...and Sarah accompanied him. Your parents came. And I saw him last time in 1943. And...uh...I still remember....

T: 36?

E: 38. Fine.

T: Uh. ... had just been occupied, and he had consulted the German ambassador whether it's safe for me to travel to Germany. And the German ambassador told him never had our relations between them been better. And that is when I saw him last at the railway station when my mother and I were...my mother and he seen me off. And then, of course, there was recollects again and then the letters stopped. And the letters stopped coming and there was the Russian occupation of Lithuanian where I heard only indirectly of his activities and the ways he was handling the situation toward his family and above of all for his colleagues and himself. And you served with him at that time. You knew...I had already lost contact with him in 1938.

E: But then I started my contact with him. So there is a some continuation, not a...

T: Entirely continuity with him, and this is really what I wanted by way of introduction to you...bring you to the point where you saw him and I only learned about him through you and other friends, but mainly through you and ... So let me ask you now, When the

Russians came and they...and they were, of course, very suspicious of...of...people who were well placed economically and socially and so on, what can you recall of that period?

E: Well, first of all, the fate of your father wouldn't be much better than the fate of those Zionists and well to do Jews in Lithuanian. They would have simply exiled him to Siberia. And in fact they came to do so. They came to do so in the middle....in the middle of the night. So he when they came to take him from his home, he said that he wants to...to see the...the Soviet Ambassador in...in Lithuanian. This was entirely a very, very exceptional case because most of the Jews when they came to took, they didn't speak to them at all because they didn't have to say. They didn't have anything to...to...to...to call upon while Dr. Elkes was the...the private doctor physician of the Soviet Ambassador as well as many other ambassadors, so he told them, "Wait, a minute. I want to talk to...you must wait until the morning." They don't want to wait. So he said, "You...you....if you don't want to wait, let me call them right now." And he called in the middle of the night to the...to the Soviet Ambassador and this is thanks to his innovation, they...they didn't take him and his wife like the houses right on the truck and right you go to the train and this is how he was rescued from the exile to Siberia, which was the fate of thousands of Jews which was supposed to have been my fate too but they didn't like very much the idea of being exiled to Siberia. So...uh...But this is what he told me when we were in the ghetto. But...uh...to... to ...the first encounter of...of me with Dr. Elkes was in the...when the order was published that Jews should be expuls...to the ...should be the expulsion of Jews from Kovno to the ghetto...

E: That was after the...after the....when the German...after the German occupation?

T: After the...the...the Soviet occupation lasted for 1 year.

E: Yes.

T: June 40 to June 41.

E: Yes.

T: I mention this exile because I...I followed you...

E: Yes. Yes.

T: But also you see, Dr. Elkes with me, told me not only about his...his danger...his being almost expelled. The same happened to the former Prime Minister of Lithuanian who was the last prime minister of Lithuania, who was great pride, with great esteem we were the guest of honor in Moscow several months ago.

E: Yes.

T: They tried to get his signature on a ...on a agreement. They call it...in Lithuania. Asked the Soviet Union to be...to be one of the 60th Republics, and he...and he...and he didn't

want to do it. So then when the Soviets occupied Lithuania with military bases, they came in one of those nights where they called upon your father so. They called the prime minister was visited his home and he claimed he was very sick and he cannot...he he...he cannot be move...shouldn't be moved from his bed. And they didn't hear...listen to them, so he said, "Here, call my doctor." So they said, "Who is my doctor?" He said, "Dr. Elkes is my doctor. I cannot move. I'm...If you move...if you take me from the bed, I'll...I'll...I'll die." So the...the...uh...the Secret Police at that time went immediately to the...to your father's home and they took him out from his bed. They said the prime minister, the former prime minister is sick, very sick, and they didn't tell him what for they're taking him. So he said, "Can't it wait until the morning? It's the middle of the night. It's 2 o'clock, 3 o'clock." "No, it's urgent. He's very sick. You must go. And they took him out from his bed and they brought him to the...to the...to the apartment of the prime minister and there Dr. Elkes just... uh...just made it...he gave me a...a picture of this scene that he witnessed. He came into the house. Of course, led by three secret police, and they find the prime...prime minister in pajamas in his bed, and he...and he cries out, "Lord, I am sick. I am going to die." And...and all kinds of...and he jumps like a clown. So...so he went and he says...so when he saw...when the the Prime Minister saw Elkes, he says, "Doctor, rescue me. Rescue me. They want to take me. They want to take me out of my bed. Rescue me. Tell them. Tell them that I'm so sick." So the...the...Dr. Elkes in his very way, calm way, says, Mr. calm down just a minute. I want to check you. And he said to the...the secret police. They didn't move from the room. He said, "If I have to check my patient you cannot stay in the room." So they said, "Under no circumstances. Under no circumstances. We have orders to take him." So Dr. Elkes said, "You cannot take him away. The man is sick. You can see the man is sick. I have to calm him down. You can't...I, as a physician, don't...cannot take that responsibility. If I have to treat him you have to leave the room and I want to have a private checking of the prime minister and not because he's a prime minister but every patient. This is the alfa and the omega of a...of a physician. And I want to tell you to the greatest surprise of himself, they just...he made them respect him. This was the inner strength, morale strength. He speaks to...to...to...to intelligence, secret intelligence. This is the most degraded people you can ever meet under...under the Heavens. And they had no way out but they had to leave the room and leave him. And then he told him, "Look, " you cannot play around with these people. Tell me what...what...what do you feel? What is the...the trouble?" He said, "I just...just don't want to go, and you must help me." "He said, "Be quiet. Speak quietly. Because if they hear that, they'll arrest you. They'll arrest me." To cut a long story short, he...they came in. They couldn't wait so...as long as Dr. Elkes because Dr. Elkes wouldn't invite them at all. So they entered the room and they say...Dr. Elkes said, "The man is sick. Can't it for a couple of days, 2 or 3 days? I'll take care of him and then you'll do with him." "No, we have orders. We must immediately report it to...no he didn't say where or what. He said, "We must immediately take him under arrest." So he said, "I...I, as physician, cannot allow to do this...so because he needs medical care of a physician." So he says, "You come with me...you come...you come with us." So he said, "I cannot go. I am head of the department in the hospital in and patients are waiting for me. I have a whole schedule for the morning, the next day and I cannot just leave the patients along." So he said...and besides... "No, you go with me immediately. "How can I go with you. I...I...I have to get dressed." And they said, "We have...you have to accompany him until

the border with the Soviet Union, with Russia." So he says, "If I have to go I have to get dressed." So they took him back to his apartment and they took a...it was a...

T: Heavy coat?

E: Coat and some...some medicine. I don't know what...

T: And he accompanied the prime minister to the ...

E: No. They took him and the prime minister and they wrapped in the...in the, you know in the...

E: In the blankets.

T: In the blankets and with the pajamas you know, they...they bound him like a...like a rope, you know, you see, like you take a ...a bundle, a bundle of...of clothes or something. They threw him in...in...in their car and Dr. Elkes aside him. And they came to the train and then there was a special a special compartment where it was for the prime minister and Dr. Elkes and he...they said, "Doctor, you are responsible for...for this " that he shouldn't jump out of the...through the window." So he said, "I am...can only take care of him as a physician. I have no idea and I have no tools and ways to safeguard him what you do." So this is your duty actually. You are the security people. You are the main people of security. And...and then this is how he went all the night long until they...they came to the frontier and then they let him off and he could come back."

T: Well that again is...

E: This is what he told me when we were in the ghetto because in the ghetto it was not only a relationship started, of course, when I was...when he was elected of..... But we developed a very, very close personal relationship that I never before experienced in all...in all my young life that time. Because after all Dr. Elkes was a man of over 60 and I was a young man, spokesman, and student whatever it is and what not. And...uh...nevertheless, it...it developed such a relationship that we used to go out in a later time. Also, I should accompany from the...from the offices of the Jewish Committee to his....

T: ...

E: So come back now about to the time when you met him after the Nazi, the first...I mean the first days of the Nazi occupation.

T: Yes.

E: Come back to that.

- T: Well, I made...I made an aborted attempt to...to escape to run way from Kovno, and from Lithuanian. On a bicycle, immediately on the 23rd.
- E: On the 23rd.
- T: On the 22nd...
- E: And then they came.
- T: On the 22nd, the war break out. I was waiting at...at my sister's home for a...for a wagon to take us, and it didn't come until 2:30. This is how I started to make to make my...
- E: That was...that was the historic day on which you started.
- T: In the evening...in the evening, at midnight on the 22nd or the 23rd, I was waiting for...for a wagon to come and pick me up.
- E: And that's when you started to...
- T: And I was so much impressed of the bombardment, of the fire what was all along Kovno and of the first already Lithuanian fascists, going from various parts of the city. So I was overwhelmed and I couldn't help it, but I took the first sheet of paper that was in the steetle and I wrote. I have it with me.
- E: In your brother-in-law's house.
- T: My...my sister's home. My oldest sister, Botcha. My oldest sister Botcha she was to me like...I was the youngest and she was the oldest. She never allowed me...when I studied Kovno University in the law school, she never allowed me to live somewhere else and take a room. I had to live with her. And fortunately was so attached to me we were like brothers. He was...he was not a Zionist at all. He was a left wing. He was from the... This this is not...and that night I started a diary. The diary I wrote 4 pages.
- E: Four pages.
- T: And this was the first entry of the diary.
- E: Which you finished 3 or 4 years later.
- T: And then I couldn't already stop it. So I...I escaped from...from the town and I couldn't go far that. It was 100 kilometers on a bicycle of course. And when I came back it was a terrible thing and then...and then I heard that the house of the chief Rabbi there are gathering the leaders of the Jewish community. And I was always, you know, had a interest in... in...in life of the students in the Youth Movement, sports movement so I went there to listen what's...what's going on. And then...then...uh...then...uh...the Germans, the...the...the Committee, the Jewish Committee was formed to transfer...to

arrange for the transfer of the regular, normal, as far as possible transfer of the Jews from Kovno to the ghetto. And then there was an order in the...in the 1st of August, I think.

T: Yes.

E: There was an order that the Jews should nomination...nominate an Oberjude.

T: Let me track back. You...you met your father then and we will come to the in a moment.

E: Yes. But this was after the... Can I interrupt for 5 minutes. I must go in a certain place where the King goes by foot. (Long Pause.)

E: So we were about...the Germans ordered we...that the Jews nominate a Oberjude, a chief Jew, and we...uh...the...and it should be done in...in a matter of days. So on the 4th of August 1941, uh... the...the activist of the Jewish community in Kovno called an assembly which was the last assembly of the Jewish community in Kovno at the 4th of August 1941 at the school, and the...on the agenda was an election...election of a Oberjude, and this was the most dramatic and the most...uh... the most historic assembly in the history of Jews in Lithuania. Headed the assembly was the veteran community leader, Wolf, and he introduced the people with the situation that it was never such a horrible situation, that Jews are being killed in the streets, they are in masses being dragged from the houses and stores to the...to the prisons or to the forts. Jewish women are being publicly raped in front of their husbands and so far and it is a situation that...uh...we are on brink of perdition, never was such a situation in Kovno, and in this situation, we are called to elect, they say nominate, but we say we will elect, not an Oberjude, not a chief Jew, but the head of the Jewish community and...uh...nobody of the assembly...there were dignitaries, people who were members of the parliament, of the Lithuanian parliament, of heads of the Jewish institutions, long standing community leaders, not one of them wanted to get the nomination of a a Oberjude, because we had already the experience of the day of the Jewish Oberjude, Dr., who was a community leader of standing, of high standing, and he didn't want to fulfill the task to being a tool in the hands of the Germans and he committed suicide. So not one and they still make the assembly.... So then stood up an unknown Rabbi at that time from a... and he stood up and he said everybody wanted Dr. Elkes to be the...to be head of the community. But he didn't want to do it because he said he had no municipal experience. He had no experience. He is a physician all his lifetime, and he would not take the responsibility for leadership of the community which the Germans said it would be a municipality in the ghetto that the Jews would be able to manage the all things. But Dr. Elkes said he has "no...never had the experience of a municipal position. But everything thought that Dr. Elkes would be the most appropriate because of his being the private physician of the German ambassador like of many other ambassadors. And we thought that this relationship, special relationship between Dr. Elkes as the private physical of the American...of the German ambassador would be helpful in perhaps making certain...uh...certain verdicts or certain edicts more...more humane. Of course, it...it turned out as we all know but Dr. Elkes flatly refused to become the...the Oberjude and then said for them you'll be a Oberjude. For us, you will be the respected head of the

Jewish community and you will with God's help we'll all go with you hand in hand. And this . Those who are going in a mission can never be helped, and with God's help we'll go with you. You will lead us and bring us out from the ghetto which is a and to bring us to the home of Israel and the spirit in the...in the whole was such tension and the hopelessness that the people just expected that the deadlock that came should some...come out and then after the speech, the most moving speech of Rabbi everybody was in tears. And then he stood up, Dr. Elkes, and he said, "If you all think that it must be I, I am here. I am here." That means I am the victim. This is exactly the words, this is exactly what we...what we assumed this. And then there was a relief and each one stood up and...and shook hands with Dr. Elkes and greeted him and...and wished him...uh...and then three young lawyers, Dr. and myself, stood up and we went to Dr. Elkes and we told them we are young lawyers and now we place ourself to your disposition, and will be at any time whatever you may think we can do, we will do and will go. We help to you service. And he thanked us very much and he was pale like... like the wall. He was very much moved but he...everybody was sure that he's...here is a man that...uh...placed himself to the...the disposal of the devil actually. And then his deputy was elected, Garfunkel who was a member of the parliament and " • was elected as the chief of the police. Now this was the first meeting with Dr. Elkes. The next day then...from then they...you already used to come to the offices of the commission for the transfer committee, where they transferred the Jews to the ghetto which was in the...in the municipality building 4 or 5 kilometers I say 3 miles away from Dr. Elkes's house and street. And...uh...a day after, one of the three lawyers of us that we volunteered to help, he was killed on the streets while going from his home to...to the and we were...and then there also thousand men were killed in one day in the street of the 6th of August. It is 2 days after the election and also the thing was community did a...also was killed and we...we were very much impressed and under...under...scared of what's going on. So when Dr. Elkes, when he finished the work...the day he worked in the community in the committee for the transfer, I felt I cannot let Dr. Elkes go himself to his home. Because something can happen at the...at the street because the Lithuanian department didn't make any distinction. Dr. Elkes or no Dr. Elkes. A Jew! So I offered him to accompany, to escort him to...to his home. He said, "Under no circumstances. It's dangerous. Go...go to your home." I said, "Dr. Elkes, I am a spokesman and I will escort you to your home. You are now the chairman of the committee. I am one of the secretaries and I am duty bound to accompany you...to accompany you." But he didn't want. I nevertheless escorted him. And I came, you know, I thought if something happens we...I could signal to of something happen that the partisans arrest, they can arrest Dr. Elkes. And luckily we came...we came to the home of Dr. ELkes and there we saw on the sidewalk stood a truck with German Weirmacht officer...officers and soldiers, so Dr. Elkes told me, "Thank you very much. You can go." I said, "No, I want to....I don't like this...this truck. I want to go up and see what is in your...in your apartment." And we went up on the second floor...I think it was the third floor...the second floor, the apartment of your parents and there we saw German high officers are going around the rooms and looking...looking on the...on the paintings in the...in the ...between us the...the vases or crystal and so on and...and Dr. Elkes in his wisdom...I couldn't understand, but later I understood. He went...he went and he says to the officer, " Gentlemen...Officer, You like this painting, take it. You like this one? Please have it. You like this...uh....this set of

porcelain" have it? Take it. And they didn't... he didn't have to say twice. Then he ordered me I should take it and I should bring it down to the truck. So I went up and down...uh...brought the paintings, all kinds. They ...they...they took all the best things out of the apartment, and then...uh...when I went down the last time Dr. Elkes accompanied me and he asked them to let me go home. So they said, "No, I should load the truck and accompany them to their place where the German...at their apartment and I should reload, you know, from the truck to the apartment. And it didn't help Elkes's said he has a wife, he has a family. Let him go. He worked all the day. He's the secretary of the committee. Nothing! Anyhow, I...I went until I brought...I went with the truck with the officers to their apartment, took it off, and I asked them they should give me a certificate that I worked that day for them so I can have a free passage to my home, that the Lithuanian partisans, should not take me under arrest, but they didn't. So anyhow I came safe home and I called immediately. Dr. Elkes said thank you and thank God I'm back home. And your mother was so nervous and she's so upset that because of them I had to be in trouble. Anyhow, this was the first time that I met and I made acquaintance in a certain very systematic special circumstances of that time. " I used to meet him every day in the Council. And then...uh...I used to write the diary and next day I used to give to Dr. Elkes to read it. Now I knew of all these encounters meeting were...there was a...a...and the first time 3 days after we went into the ghetto. Went into the ghetto the 15th of August. On the 18th of October...of August, they ordered that 500 academics, doctors, so they worked for them in the archive. So he said of 500 came 534 and the very same day they took them out of the ghetto and they killed them. Dr. Elkes didn't let one stone unturned, and he went to Jordon who was the of the... He went to the chief of the Gestapo, and he insist that he as chairman of the Jewish Committee must know where are these 534 who didn't come...they took them from the ghetto for archives one day and they didn't come back. And he...for weeks and weeks, he went from one top Gestapo to the other until the came to the chief of the Gestapo, Yeager, and they told him always told him tomorrow, tomorrow and tomorrow never came and until they said that the Jews make the sabotage. They walked with sugar and they put the gasoline in the sugar. That's why they were killed. This was the first encounter, and then there's the second one was in the ghetto. There were two...uh...gynecologists Dr. who was the head of the gynecology department in the ghetto and Dr....uh...Dr. Borshen. Both succeeded in escaping from the ghetto and they found some hiding in the cities. But you know not all the Lithuanians were kin and were...and they were...to cut a long story, so they were...they were the Lithuanians gave them... disclosed them to the Gestapo and they were arrested. And then Dr. Elkes started his...his emergency actions. In all directions as I said before, and then he came to the...to the chief of the Gestapo, Yeager, and they told them they arrested the two Jews, the two doctors, and they arrested also the Lithuanian who gave them refuge. And he went to the chief of Gestapo, and he told them, "These are the two doctors that are mostly needed in the ghetto because there is an order from the Gestapo that...uh...pregnancies should be forbidden. It is forbidden. And they exactly had to act as gynecologists to cut off their...and make abortions. And they are so needed in order to comply with the order of the Gestapo, this is what...what...what he...he convinced the Gestapo because they did it not because they are doctors to...to the good of the inmates of the ghetto because to fulfill the order of Gestapo that forbidden pregnancy. And he says, "I assure you that this was a one-time people in stress." And they said, "Alright, they should go...first of all, they said

Dr. should go. He said, "He himself wouldn't do. There are 30,000 people in the ghetto. They needed too. Alright and said...when they stood up, Yeager, and they thought they're finished with him. So Dr. Elkes said, "No, you are chief. " I have another. I cannot leave you before I ask you also for the release of the Lithuanian. The Lithuanian who was held. He said, "What have you to do with the Lithuanian? You are a Jew? The Lithuanian didn't take any money and he has done it for humanitarian grounds and it would be for us a very permanent " blow, morale blow on the whole Jewish that a Lithuanian who gave refuge to Jewish...to Jews from the ghetto should be arrested or should be humiliated to that because of the Jews. And he influenced the chief of the Gestapo, Yeager, you see, "It is not good. You have him also. Let him out." So the Lithuanian...so the Lithuanian then came to Dr. Elkes and he kissed his hands, said to do so. But the... the...the all the Lithuanians in the city spoke about it that a Jew in the ghetto brought about the release of a Lithuanian who kept...this is most remarkable incident. And another very important day, terrible day, the selection of 10,000 people out of the ghetto on the 28th of October. First of all, Dr. Elkes didn't want the...as I said before, Dr. Elkes didn't want to publish the announcement that Jews...the inmates should report on the on the 28th of October. Because the people will understand that the Jews...the Jewish committee, he is guilty of what may happen that we didn't know what was to happen that day. But nevertheless it must not be...shouldn't be a very good thing. So... uh...then...uh...Dr. Elkes and others decided they shall go and ask the chief rabbi of Kovno and then went Garfunkel...Garfunkel and they went...uh....and myself. And they waked the chief rabbi late in the evening approximately at 10:00 was too late in the evening. There was a curfew in the ghetto. And when we came to...to the ...uh... no, Rabbi the one who asked Dr. Elkes, and he...when we came and and told them what...what this is about and he said, "Should we...in the Jewish Committee...should the Jewish Committee publish this...this order?" And we already elaborated the formulas, saying that the Jewish Committee announces the order of the Gestapo that was given by the Gestapo and not in the name of the committee but nevertheless it was not still...uh...so the Rabbi was awoken. He was an old man, a sick man. He was in bed. He says, "I have to think about it. Come to...next morning." And we...when he came the next morning, he was not yet ready. It was " •, and somebody looked around and... To cut a long story short, in the very end, he came to the conclusion and he said he found that there was...it's too short a time, to cut a long story short, he said, "If a community, a Jewish community is in danger, and there is a possibility that part of the community can be rescued, can be...part of the community and not all the community, the Jewish leadership is bound to do everything in order to rescue the part." And...uh...uh... that's why the order he says in his opinion, the Jewish Committee should...should publish the order, more so that it says clearly that they are publishing the order of Gestapo, that the Jewish...the Jews should report. This was a great thing. And then on the 28th of October at 6:00, there was a march. The march I...I write in my...in my diary in my opinion it was the march, a funeral that they...those the victims are ...are themselves participated in their own funeral. That is how it looked like. In the morning 6:00 it was dark, and Dr. Elkes stood...oh yeah, the stood on some hill and looked around and could see all the scene and with his fingers lifted left, right, left right, Jews were sure that the right is the good sign. So they...they turned to the right and they even sometimes say...say, "Thank you. Thank you deeply for your graciousness." And to the left was the good sign. He stood up and Dr. Elkes stood

and close, not far away from him and when there was a special hardship for a family to be...to be apart...torn apart or some...or for reasons, there was a man like who was a veteran Zionist leader and so on, so he asked this man is needed...we needed a carpenter for the...for the building of the airport and so on, and he could rescue maybe 10, maybe 15, maybe 20, but he stood on his legs. He didn't sit down. We brought him a chair and he didn't sit down. It's a terrible thing that they...why did I have to live up...my...over this, to see this...this sin. And all the day-long from 6:00 in the morning til 7:00 in the evening when everything was gone and 10,000 were taken out of the election, of the selection and...uh... this was a great...the greatness of a man who stood in the hardest day in the ghetto and he tried to do his utmost to ...to ...to rescue whom he could. That was another...

E: I may just ask you. Then he went to the small ghetto to try to rescue a 100 people too, and then he was beaten up.

T: It...at night, people came to his home and said my...my...my wife was taken, my husband was taken, my son was taken. So he didn't...uh...he asked to go to and asked him to get...allow a permission to go into this small part of the ghetto where the 10,000 were...were...were concentrated and this permission to take out very hard cases. And he had the permission and so he went the next morning to that small ghetto. He and ...uh...we escorted him, and myself, but we didn't...we are not allowed to go...to pass the...the small ghetto. Only himself. And then only he went in... in to the mess. They were all already in rows on their way to the Ninth fortress, which is the fortress of death where they are finally executed and when they saw Dr. Elkes one took him by his sleeve. The other one took him by his coat. The other one took him by his...by this head. ” • Rescue us. Rescue us, Dr. Elkes. He had the...the...the list of the people, but then the...the Lithuanian partisans were escorted this groups of 100s. They didn't let him, and they told him that he should leave immediately. It was a...there was a disorder of all the march...was disorder, and they told him that you should get out. Otherwise, they'll take him to the Ninth fortress. But he didn't move. So they gave him...they hit him on the head, and he fell and fainted and gently we run back from the other side of the ghetto and we took him to a closed home ...uh... on the other side, and there he stayed for 2 days because he was beaten all terribly beaten and blood, and it was a terrible situation and to...to...to the great...to the great mourning of 10,000 victims, we had thought that Dr. Elkes got from it should not...should not come up on his feet again and to go on the leadership. Another one was....

E: Yes. Yes. You may want to talk about other conversations to with, particularly with Gerker.

T: Yes. Now when the ghetto was about to be liquidated, Elkes always tried to talk first of all with Giding. There was a General Giding, who was the head of the greatest slave work site, the building of a military airport . Five thousand Jews from the ghetto went day in, day out, 24 hours an day there, and there was a terrible, terrible situation for the people. Slavery where people couldn't stand it, and it was the head of this big enterprise construction was a General Giding, to whom Dr. Elkes went. He...he...he finally...Dr.

Giding respected very high Dr. Elkes and from time to time he used to get to free to release a group. Not only one, a group of people, and he said, "I'll send employees from the Jewish Committee to replace them so they cannot work all the time." And this relationship was also a special relationship with Armond, the German...the German...the German director of the labor exchange in ghetto. He was and he...he was not a Hitler man and he used to speak with Elkes in private. Come to him at home and tell him, "Listen, Dr. Elkes don't do this. Don't do that or they're expecting so, and this was the man that we wrote after the...after the war, let us to the German courts that they should not shoot him. And finally he dared to talk to a chief of the Gestapo or the chief of the or to a chief of any chief of the Germans. And he dared. This was his strength. He said, "I have my 60...over 65 years behind me, and nothing can happen to me. He kept in his small pocket always poison and he said if worse comes to worse, I will not fall in their hands and I'll take...I'll take poison in the last moment." And this is exactly what happened. It could have happened when they took Dr. Elkes to the 9th fortress.

Before...when...uh...when...before the liquidation of the ghetto, the Germans arrested all the members of the Altestenrat. And they brought him to the Ninth fortress. It was in July 1944. And they...Dr. Elkes was released immediately the first, but he didn't want to be released until the Garfunkel, and Goldberg, and the others be released. But it didn't help. They took him out. But when they let him go, when they brought him back into the ghetto, he immediately went to the chief of the Gestapo, Yeager and he said...uh...command them please I warn you. This is what he said. I warn you. Garfunkel, my assistant, my deputy, and Goldberg, the member of the Altestenrat, they gave them portions of portion before they went to the Ninth fortress. He divided. He took his portion of poison and gave one part to himself, one part he gave Garfunkel and Goldberg, and he said, "If they will torture, you...you have the...the way out. And he said, "I am afraid when they continue talking them on the Ninth fortress my closest friend, the most respected former member of parliament, Garfunkel, can commit suicide, and you have to rescue him. You cannot keep him there. I order...I'll commit you at your place. And this is how he got the release of...of Garfunkel and of Goldberg and all of the rest. This is...and...and then before the liquidation, he had a...dared to speak to was a mass murderer. He was the liquidator of many ghettos in Poland. When he came to...to the ghetto of Kovno, first of all he...he converted it to a concentration camp. And then he...he...uh...he...uh... actually took all the rights and all the...the...what the ghetto community had to do, the Committee was absolutely powerless. They had no right to do anything. They were not permitted anymore to give...have contacts with the civil authorities. And then it went...and the had to...to...and here the Red Army was already come closer every day to Lithuanian, and it was expected that everyday they might come to Kovno, but Gerker had a order that he should...the remnants of the ghetto, approximately 7,000 Jewish...Jews, that they should be brought, transferred to Dachau, to the concentration camp in Germany. Dr. Elkes commandant. You know like I know that the Germans lost the war. It's now only a matter of days or weeks. You can save your own honor and your own life by postponing the transfer of the remnants of the ghetto Kovno to Germany 4 days. And this will be not a rescue of your own life and your own honor, but this will be also a gesture for the...for your people ...for your German people. And...uh...we will see to it that after the war, you will not be brought to...to punishment and so on. If it...there was not any single man, not in the Kovno ghetto, not in any other

ghetto in...in Lithuania or in Poland that dare speak to a liquidator of the ghetto the way he spoke because they could just with one...with one finger on his...on...on...on his bayonet it would kill him. But Elkes dared. And then he said to him, "For the first time a German approached a Jew saying, "Herr...Mr....Dr. Elkes. I understand you well. But I am...I know...I agree that we lost the war. But I am a German officer, and I am duty bound to fulfill orders. And it may what happen I must do my...fulfill my task. But I'll see to it that you'll brought to a special...special train. This is secondary. But the very approach of Dr. Elkes showed only a very more strength that not one in any Jewish community of the ghetto dared, and that's why Dr. Elkes is the only Jewish leader whose name was praised after the... after the liberation by the First Zionist World Congress in Basil that convened in December 1946 and it was from a very great honor to hear from the podium of the World Congress that was dedicated totally to the Holocaust to...that Dr. Elkes was the only one of Jewish leaders of the ghetto that he was praised for his behavior, for his courage for his...for his...for all what he has done and for all that he stood for. Now there was also...I must....before anything, I must say my last...my last... my last...my last meeting with Dr. Elkes at a tiny house of Miriam and Dr. Elkes in the ghetto before my escape from the ghetto. It happened so that un...unexpected at all, I had to escape from the ghetto and Pnina, my present wife, arranged it without even telling me. And when I got word that a wagon will come to take me out from Kovno to a farm 50, 40 kilometers far away, of course, I came to Dr. Elkes and I told him this and we sat at his home from let's say 8:00 in the evening....there was present Dr....Dr. Elkes and Miriam Elkes and Garfunkel, the very high respected deputy and they were great friends. And when I told them about my plans to go to...to run away from the ghetto, which was as I said before already concentration camp, they said...Garfunkel said, "Go? What do you think? It's a concentration camp. How do you go out? Who'll let you go out? They kill you on the moment when any part of the ...the barbed wire you'll try to squeeze through, they'll kill you." And we had the...the example of who was head in the ghetto when he was caught in the... Don't do it. You are going to do a...a suicide. It's absolutely suicide. I beg of you. You have a wife. You have family. Don't do it. This was the approach of Garfunkel, and it was correct to his character. This was exactly as he felt as he saw it. Very, very honest man. Very great friend of mine. A great friend of Dr. Elkes. And then Dr. Elkes says, "Goebel." My name was "Goebel." He took me in his hand and he says, "Go. If you would be my son, I would tell you go. Because you are the only one who knows better than anybody else in the ghetto what expires in the ghetto. Because you have written a diary day in day out. And I know each entry of your diary which you read before me every morning what you have written the former, the previous night. And this has to be...to reach the outer world. So your escape is a mission, and I am sure...I know you...I know your courage and I believe and I am sure you...you will succeed in escaping from the ghetto. And in...in the last moment he took out from his drawer a letter which was a list will to his children, Yuill and Sarah Elkes in London. He loved them. And he gave it to me. And he said, "This, I'm sure you'll succeed in your mission, and you'll give...and over this my last will and testament to my son and to my daughter and they should have from you our intimate friend, the firsthand information of what expired, when I wrote this my last letter and what is there. Nothing could encourage me more to dare and to escape from the ghetto. When I left at 2:30...at midnight after embracing Dr. Elkes and kissing Miriam Elkes and Miriam Elkes looked at me and she listened to Dr.

Elkes and I could...she...she didn't say a word, but her eyes said everything. (long pause, crying). So This was a relationship none....

Conclusion of interview.