

KIRZHNER, Joseph
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Interviewed on April 24, 1992
One audiotape cassette

Abstract

Joseph Kirzhner was born in Odessa on January 7, 1916. He had four brothers. One died before World War II, one served in the Russian Army as Joseph did, and the youngest brother was sent to safety in the Ural Mountains. Three brothers survived, but their father, a hat maker, was killed fighting in the war. His mother was exterminated.

Joseph drove tanks in the Russian Army for about five years before he became a prisoner of war in 1942, and was sent to a concentration camp. Joseph was sent to three or four concentration camps, partly because he tried to escape four or five times – twice from Auschwitz. After being caught, Kapos used sticks to beat his bare feet, and then made him walk until his feet bled. In Auschwitz, one or two surgical experiments were done on him. He remembers little except constant beatings, wire all around, and German soldiers trying to shoot all the inmates as the liberating Russian Army approached.

He was liberated in April 1945. One of his feet was frozen, and he had stomach problems. After treatment in a hospital, he returned to serve in the Russian Army. Later, he worked as a shoemaker. He and his wife emigrated from Russia to the United States in 1978. Joseph has suffered health problems, especially regarding his foot, ever since the war.

The interview was conducted through an unidentified interpreter, Kirzhner's step-grandson, with assistance from Kirzhner's wife.

Transcript

Interpreter: What exactly do you want to know?

Interviewer: Just start off with his name, as best as we can determine his date of birth and also the place he was born and then ask him a little bit about his childhood, brothers and sisters, father and mother, you know that kind of thing, what they were like, what his father did for a living, what his mother did.

Interpreter: He was born in 1916, January 7, 1916. That I can verify. He was born in the city of Odessa, that's south Ukraine. His mother was a housewife and his father was a hat maker. Those days in 30's, 40's, hats, everybody used to wear them. There were three brothers, just three brothers. One died; his younger brother died before the war. His second brother is still alive. He lives in Russia in the city of Krasnodar, that's by the Ural Mountains. So there were four brothers originally, I'm sorry.

Interviewer: No problem.

Interpreter: One now still lives in Odessa.

Interviewer: Was he the oldest?

Interpreter: No, he's the second oldest. His brother was born in 1914, his older brother. He is still alive.

Interviewer: I know that this will probably be hard, but does he remember anything about Odessa growing up?

Interpreter: Before the Second World War, the life was a lot better than when they were leaving. His older brother went into the Army a couple of years prior to him, his oldest brother. He was an aviator.

Interviewer: His brother was?

Interpreter: His older brother, yes. I have to clarify something, because he mixed me up with the dates so I have to look up some records.

Interviewer: Sure, no problem.

Interpreter: He went into the Army altogether in 1940's, he was liberated from a concentration camp. Altogether, he was about nine and a half years in the Russian Army; that includes near three and a half or four years in concentration camp.

Interviewer: So he was a prisoner of war. I didn't know that. It didn't say that in his records. It is one of the groups in fact that we are trying....

Interpreter: I think he was in Auschwitz. He doesn't remember. In 1942, April of 1942, April or June, I can't make it out, it is very old; in January of 1942 on the city of Rostov (Rostov-na-Donu), in a small town called Panevtsy, and this is where he was actually taken prisoner. In April of 1945 he was liberated.

Interviewer: So he was in a concentration camp for three years?

Interpreter: Three years. Now during these three years, I remember, because I was filling certain papers. In those days, about ten years ago, I was filling the papers for UJ, you know repatriation fund whatever they call that, I remember that he ran away four times. He was in two or three different camps besides Auschwitz, he was in -- I'll find out which. This is by the way, a copy of, when they liberated him, the Russian Army was giving a like a record.

Interviewer: So he was liberated by the Russian Army?

Interpreter: Right. And it says here he was liberated by, it was signed by Lt. Kronov (see references below, which say signed by others) in April of 1945, Silesia, Upper Silesia. Where was?

Interviewer: It's in Poland (mostly in SW Poland, with some portions in Germany and some in Czech Republic, according to *Where Once We Walked*).

Interpreter: Auschwitz was there?

Interviewer: Close. Auschwitz was in that area.

Interpreter: Ahlborn was another camp and Katowice in Germany.

Interviewer: I think that's in Poland.

Interpreter: In Poland also. Because I can't make it out. It is a very, very old copy, a dark copy; you know what's the problem. And the handwriting, it's not print or anything. You know what repatriation is, right? This is his copy of his "NKGB" or "NKB"? that he is back citizen and that they checked him out and that he was in German concentration camp and they gave him the letter of repatriation and everything. OK?

Interviewer: Was he? I know that many of those who returned after the war to Russia, the NKB were not very nice to them.

Interpreter: This is the original one. OK, in the back. OK. It says here that he was in the Army in the 9th Polk, you know what's Polk, right, it's like a battalion, in June 1942, between June and July 1942, he was taken a prisoner and its station Tatsnitzki and Rostov (Rostov-na-Donu), probably T-a-t-n-i-t-s-k-i, T-a-t-z-n-i-t-s-k-i, T-a-t-s or T-a-t-z, something like that and like they used to say Gubernia province near Rostov (Rostov-na-Donu), OK? And in 1942, he was stationed right there, there was a camp just for war prisoners. Later on, in 1942, they took him to Katowice, Upper Silesia, in Germany, you know where it is, right?

Interviewer: Yes.

Interpreter: From over there, he ran away and he was later and captured and taken to Ahlborn.

Interviewer: Is that also in Germany or is it in Poland?

Interpreter: Also Poland. And then, he ran away from Ahlborn and they took him to Upper Silesia and that was, I think, I don't know the name of the town -- Nikloch, Upper Silesia -- Niklai, looks like Niklai, it says here Upper Silesia and it says here, Germany, but I don't think Upper Silesia was Germany.

Interviewer: Yes, what the Germans did was they incorporated most of Poland into the Reich, so it became German territory.

Interpreter: Now do you want, it says here he was liberated by first, Russian front, yes here it says the name of the city, Nikolai (Mikolow, Poland or Mykolayiv, Ukraine or Niklovichi, Ukraine), Upper Silesia and the man who gave him the letter of liberation is Captain Ivanov and they had to check him out because it is dated May 12th, 1945, so actually straight from the concentration camp they took him back to the Army. Oh, I'm sorry, I was wrong. Right after they liberated him, they put him into the hospital, they had to operate.

Interviewer: He was injured and wounded?

Interpreter: Right, he has the wound. He was all cut up, because of his stomach and everything. When after the war and people liberated, they were drinking and eating and they weren't eating for years so right away a lot of them -- so he was in a hospital and they had to do surgery on him and everything and he came out of the hospital, he doesn't know why he had the operation or anything. According to the records here, indicate this is the original letter given Kirzhner, Joseph, born in 1916 in the city of Odessa and he was liberated, and it is signed here Captain Ivanov and it is dated April, 1945, NKO, Department of Repatriation. And he was liberated by the 1st Ukranian Front. And Colonel Karnavolov was the guy who signed it and it was a special Krovok, some kind of Karnavolov punt, this is where they used to collect all the war prisoners, look in the records, check if they were traitors or not, anything like this. And it was stamped by his stamp and it says he was the head of repatriation for 1st Front of Ukraine. He's a Colonel Major Karnavolov. OK? Altogether, I remember that he ran away four to five times from the concentration camps and he was caught because they couldn't run far enough. So they were punished and one time, in Auschwitz they did some kind of experiments. I think a couple of the wounds, because he wasn't operated only after the war. During the war they also did some kind of experiments because there were a couple of operations done on him.

Interviewer: Does he remember that?

Interpreter: He doesn't. I asked him before why did they operate and he doesn't remember anything, all right? His father got killed in the beginning of the War in Odessa.

Interviewer: Was he fighting in the War?

Interpreter: Yes, he died in the front. And Mama, she was like the Jews, they were all exterminated, she was exterminated. His older brother was at the front fighting, the same as he. And his parents sent his younger brother who lives in Krasnodar; they sent him to relatives in another town.

Interviewer: So away.

Interpreter: Away from the front. He is the youngest brother. He is still alive. He lives in Krasnodar. What else would you like to know?

Interviewer: Let's see. Can we back up a little bit and ask him a little bit about his time in the Army? Like before the war and also about the Finnish War.

Interpreter: He remembers that he was in Finland and that he was in active Army, because they were fighting but that's all he remembers.

Interviewer: In the Army, what did he do? Was he an artillery man?

Interpreter: He was a driver, a truck driver.

Interviewer: So he drove a transport?

Interpreter: But in a tank division, he probably was in what do they call it, the mobile tank division? Oh, he was a driver of tanks? He drove a tank, OK.

Interviewer: Does he remember where he may have gotten near, what cities?

Interpreter: According to the records he was captured on the Rostov (Rostov-na-Donu). If you remember, on Rostov (Rostov-na-Donu), in 1942, it was the biggest tank, uh, that's what happened.

Interviewer: No, I mean in Finland?

Interpreter: Oh, Finland. In Finland, he wasn't a tank driver yet.

Interviewer: Oh, OK.

Interpreter: He already was a tank driver in Finland. And he was taken in prison, they were surrounded, the army was surrounded under the city of Nikolaiev (Mykolayiv) near Rostov (Rostov-na-Donu), you know. He was fighting in the city of Nikolai (Mikolow, Poland or Mykolayiv, Ukraine or Niklovichi, Ukraine) on South River or South Book (neither found).

Interviewer: Oh, the Book River, yeah.

Interpreter: It is about 500 km somewhere near the city of Rostov (Rostov-na-Donu). This where actually he was taken prisoner. He doesn't remember, there was something Millinov, Milli, he remembers some names of the people that were in prison with him. The head of the 5th part of division something, Maltzev; another tank driver Yapalov, another tank driver Furdarov. During the war he told them that his name, he didn't tell them his real name because he was Jewish and the Jews were automatically killed so he went under the name of Urlov Sasha, which is Alexander because he has the eye because if you look at his eye --. He told them he was a Tartar. Faust or Raust (Rauscha?) was the name of the concentration camp in the city of Nikolai (Mikolow, Poland or Mykolayiv, Ukraine or Niklovichi, Ukraine). Faust. And another camp by the name of Selima (Sellin?), or this is Selima Faust, I have no idea. No, I'm sorry. Selima was his friend. They were together in a concentration camp. You remember he was in Auschwitz. According to that letter, Nikolai was the last camp they (can't understand). Nikolov? (Nikolaistr. ?) I think it's Nikolai (Nikolaistr. ?).

Interviewer: I'll look it up when I get back.

Interpreter: According to that letter, it's Nikolai (Nikolaistr.?).

Interviewer: Does he remember anything about the camps, being in them, what they were like?

Interpreter: He says all he remembers is wire all around, and my grandmother says sometimes when they show movies then he remembers, he says this tower here, this tower there. He shouldn't really get into -- too much for him in one day. He remembers constant beatings. I think that should be enough.

Interviewer: Let me get a little bit about the end straight. You said he was in these different concentration camps from '42 to '45. And he was liberated by the Russian Army, the 1st Ukrainian Front in April of 1945. Now he was interviewed by the NKGB.

Interpreter: The NKO is a different, I wouldn't know; let's try to figure it out. NKO, this is exactly what it says. After the war, a lot of prisoners, they said "well, if you're alive, then you are a traitor". So NKO is probably a special committee who used to check and I think I gave you the name of the Colonel who signed it. OK?

Interviewer: You did. I know that most of the prisoners were considered traitors. But he wasn't?

Interpreter: He wasn't. First of all, he had his two feet frozen, his legs were frozen.

Interviewer: And that's because he was in the camps; in the colder air.

Interpreter: Exactly. That I know from his medical history because I go sometimes to the doctor and when they ask him certain things from the years before I remember. And I remember he used to tell me when I was a kid that a couple of times he ran away a few guys together with, the name of his friend I gave you, a couple of times he ran away from a couple of camps.

Interviewer: When he told you these stories, did he give you any more details?

Interpreter: Well, when they used to catch them, they used to give them heavy beatings and they used to beat them on their feet. The guys who used to beat them were different prisoners.

Interviewer: They were Germans?

Interpreter: Not only Germans, not only Germans.

Interviewer: Do you remember who they were? Were they other prisoners or were...

Interpreter: Yes, he told me they were Kapos. They used to beat them with a stick on their bare feet and make them walk, you know, until the blood used to come out.

Interviewer: Did he give you any more details on this kind of thing, was this in Auschwitz or was it somewhere else?

Interpreter: I can't make it out. He's trying to tell me something. I think Germans threw something. He has a problem with his kidney so sometimes it becomes unclear for a while. When the liberation army started moving in closer and they started bombing the camps, so the German soldiers lined everybody up and they started to shoot them all, or to shoot them before the Army got there, before the liberation came. All the prisoners started to run in different directions. This was just before liberation. And right away, right after, the bombing and shooting and disarray, within an hour or two the Russian army moved in and they were liberated. When he was liberated, he had a problem with his stomach and his feet were frozen.

Interviewer: Was the problem with his stomach because he didn't have anything to eat, was that what it was and he ate too much?

Interpreter: He doesn't remember why but it was all the way up to here. You know maybe it was experiment or something. He doesn't remember. I can't make it out. He was operated once in Germany and after the war the second time. I know that his feet, you know why because his original trade after the war became a shoemaker and when I was a child I used to sit next to him and he used to fix the shoes in the house, we used to talk and I used to ask him questions and he used to tell me and I asked him how come you like your shoes white and he said because I like it white and with warm lining because during the war, he said my foot was frozen and if I get a little flu or something, my foot swells up and red constantly and then he got some kind of rash, which goes on, you know.

Interviewer: Well, the only thing I can do if you remember more of what he told you, because....

Interviewer: Basically, this is.

Interviewer: This is all he told you?

Interpreter: Yes. I remember a picture of his father, my grandfather, because he was a very big, bold man and we used to have a Communist hero called Kotovsky, his last name, I don't know if you ever follow Russian history. When I was a little baby, I remember I used to tell everybody my grandfather was Kotovsky because he was big and bold man and he had always uniform of Russian Army and I remember him on the pictures and what else. I did meet my grandfather's two brothers and we live here 17 years already so you can understand. I remember the stories of him running away from the camp and in one camp he told them he was from Moldavia and another camp he told them he's Tartar because most of the Tartars were considered like people the Communists and Russians used to terminate them themselves so Germans tried to leave Tartars alone. They used to give them a heavy beating and take them into the camp.

Interviewer: So he told this to the Germans, that he's Moldavian and Tartar.

Interpreter: Right, exactly. Once he told them Moldavian and that didn't work, so the next he got captured when he ran away with the other guy, you have the name, I don't remember, they told both that they were Tartar, and he advised him to say the same and he'd teach him a couple of words here and there and that's it. That's how it went. All together, I think they ran away four times. I remember from previous records that I filled for his pension and everything. Each time they were caught, they were taken to a camp. I think from Auschwitz alone, they tried to run twice.

Interviewer: And they were caught both times?

Interpreter: Yes, and they were beat on their feet by the Kapos. That I remember pretty well. And then when they wanted to do something, they were barefoot.

Interviewer: After the War, after the operation, what did he do, did he stay in Russia for a long time?

Interpreter: Oh, he came back to the city of Odessa. That's when he met my grandmother. Because this is my step-grandfather. My real grandfather died during the war also. He died in the Russian Army in 1942. 1944, my real grandfather died. They met after the war. But he always had his health problem after the war. As I remember, in 1950's, he was in the hospital, 1960's.

Interviewer: When did you all come to the United States?

Interpreter: We came 1976, they came 1978.

Interviewer: You came before that.

Interpreter: In 1976.

Interviewer: OK, I think that's all the questions I have.

Interpreter: All right.