JACK UNIKOSKI né Israel Unikowski
and
GEORGES KESTENBERG né Jurek Kestenberg
September 10, 2004

Tape 1, Side A

Interviewer's Assistant (DT): There. It's ok.

Interviewer (Q): United States Holocaust Memorial Museum. This is an interview with Georges Kestenberg né Jurek Kestenberg and Jack Unikoski né Israel Unikoski. This interview is conducted by Annette Wieviorka with Dominique Touboul (ph) on September 10th, two…

DT: …thousand and four.

Q: …thousand and four in Paris. This is Tape Number 1, Side A. So, the first question is to ask you if you have any souvenirs from this man, David Boder, who made the interview in 1946.

Jack Unikoski: I had completely forgotten about him. I – When I was first contacted by the Holocaust Museum, by Elizabeth… I've forgotten her second name. Elizabeth…Boden – I had completely – I had completely forgotten about him. And she just rang, actually, my son because she found the name of 'Unikoski' on the internet, and my son lives in Canberra. And my son said, "That's not me; it's my father." And eventually she contacted me and reminded me of him. I had completely forgotten about that interview.

Question: And when she remind of him, do you remind at that time?

JU: Yes, I remember it, that I was surprised that it is possible to talk to a tape and to hear it again a minute later. This is the first time that I have seen such a technology in my life.

Q: And how was this man? Do you – Can you see him now, or you have forgotten what…?

JU: What I remember is that I had, I had – not argument, but we did not – we did not see eye to eye on many things. He wanted me to speak particularly for me. I wanted to speak generally. And he always kept on reminding me, "Yes, I know the general thing, but where did – what did you do? What did – where did you go?" And I kept on saying, "I've got to talk within the framework of the time. I can't just say, 'On the first of January, I did this. On the first of February, I did this.'" I – And that was a little bit – this I remember it was… Professor Boder?

Q: Professor Boder.

JU: This I remembered. We had this… disagreement of the point of view.

Q: And do you remember where he was, where you was? You were sitting just like us?

JU: More or less. It was in Fontenay-aux-Roses.

Q: Yes.

JU: (to GK) Do you remember?

Georges Kestenberg: Yes.

JU: It was the Fontenay-aux-Roses. And this I remember – it was a tape approximately 25 cm long, so very big. Today, it would be out of… That's all I remember.

Q: And you were sitting opposite to him?

JU: Yes, yes. It wasn't as small as this one. It was about 10 times as large. Maybe even bigger.

Q: And do you remember him, or…?

GK: I remember perfectly – not perfectly, not perfectly, but I more or less remember. We were in a small room there. I was sitting. His face, no, I don't recollect it at all. Is he still alive?

Q: No, I – but you do remember the interview, afterwards I'll show you.

GK: Yes, I vaguely remember the interview. You know, it's been sixty years after all. These memories are pretty, pretty vague. But I remember perfectly well the day he came. Yes, he asked me if I was willing to do – to talk with him, tell about my memories, my past. I remember, but I don't remember *him*.

Q: I got a photograph of him on the Internet.

JU: Yes.

GK: Yes, yes.

Q: I never heard about him. It was the first time. So, do you remember with this photo?

GK: No.

Q: No.

GK: I don't remember. I don't see his face.

JU: If you would have shown me the photograph…

DT: Could you get closer to the microphone, because I hear it…?

JU: Sorry. If you would have shown me this photograph without mentioning who it was, I wouldn't have wouldn't have recognized. Once you're telling me who it is, it starts to come back to me, yes.

Q: This photograph is 1957.

JU: Yes.

Q: That means ten years later on.

JU: Later, but I, I see the resemblance, yes.

GK: *I* don't remember, not at all.

Q: And do you remember why you were chosen for this interview? You were many young men and women at that time.

GK: I think they asked who was willing to give an interview. I think they asked at the O.S. E. if there were any volunteers to be interviewed. There weren't very many of us, actually, I think. Four or five, the boys, in all. Féla was there, a young woman.

JU: Féla.

GK: So we weren't that anxious to talk about the past. It was hard all the same, back then. So a lot of them didn't want to remember all that.

JU: I always felt that it is important – nobody lives forever – I always felt it is important to tell the story. Because I didn't realize that there would come a time when there will be people denying that the Holocaust ever happened. But I thought it was important for people who haven't been there to know what happened.

GK: Sure.

JU: Because – why exactly me? Because I volunteered, as Jurek said. Because I felt it's important to tell the story. And I didn't think that my story is particularly interesting in comparison to other people. I know there were people who went through a lot more than I did. And I thought that everybody should tell their story.

Q: Were you friends at that time?

GK: Yes.

Q: When and where do you meet?

GK: I met him in 1945.

JU: In Écouis.

GK: In Écouis.

Q: In Écouis, yes.

JU: We were liberated together on the 11th of April, 1945.

Q: In Buchenwald, I guess.

GK: In Buchenwald, yes.

Q: And then you - But at that time, you were not friend? You –

GK: No, not in Buchenwald. In the camp I didn't know him. I met him after the Liberation, at the O.S.E.

Q: And what happened in the camp, after Liberation, for both of them – of you, sorry?

GK: You mean, what happened then? Well, after the Liberation we went directly into the S.S. barracks, which were empty. We were put up there, and fed by the Americans of course. And I've always felt a lot of affection and friendship for Americans ever since that time because I saw, the first time I saw an American officer come into the camp, I think he was a Black. And I saw him crying when he saw what was happening all around. And I was very surprised to see a hero like that with a submachine gun and a helmet. For me they really were supermen. To see them crying like that impressed me a lot. Since that day I've been an ardent admirer of Americans.

Q: And do you have the same souvenirs, mémoires, of that Liberation?

JU: When we were liberated, it was just before Passover, the Jewish Passover. But I did not participate because I thought I will do away with religion all together. But we were, as Jurek mentioned, we were given the casernes.

GK: The S.S.

JU: And we were approximately 1,000 young men. And from the – we were divided in three groups. One group was chosen to go to France. And I think it was by a combination of the Joint, the O.S.E. and the French Red Cross. I'm not 100% sure. But we were chosen a group to go to France, another group to go to Switzerland and a smaller group to go to England.

GK: And to Poland…

JU: And some returned to Poland voluntarily.

GK: Yes.

JU: And that's how we came to be together in Écouis.

Q: And you traveled by train for…?

JU: By train, mm-hmm.

Q: From Buchenwald to…?

JU: Oh yes, by train, yes.

Q: By train.

GK: Escorted by an American officer.

JU: Schechter, Rabbi Schechter.

GK: Rabbi Schechter, who was an American Army officer. And we were escorted, if you will, by the, by the Americans. The trip was… not hard, but it was a trip that was, for us it was fairly pleasant. It was the journey of freedom.

Q: And what was the atmosphere in this train? It was a very – what kind of…?

GK: Very happy, very happy.

JU: Very happy.

GK: Everyone was radiant with happiness, because we were leaving in freedom, no more suffering, no more – we were weak, we were thin, but it was very, very joyous.

JU: The question…

GK: We realized a little later, you know, we realized later that, life now, it's going to be completely different, that never again will we have the chance – well, I was 15 – we'll never again have the chance to say "Mama, Papa" – that that was finished for us, we'll never again have anyone to turn to. It was – we realized this later. The – at that moment we were very, very carefree, very very very happy to go off towards the unknown, towards France, and be free. And at the same time, we had perhaps a small hope of finding someone from the family who survived maybe in Poland in another camp – we didn't know very well. That is actually why I didn't leave for Australia, because I thought maybe I'd find some family, and if I left for Australia it would be too far to try to find someone, to go back to Poland to look for someone, and it's because of that that I stayed in France.

Q: I read the transcript of the interview, so I know that your mother died when you was a child, three years old, and that you lost your brother in Lodz ghetto, so what were your feelings when you leave Buchenwald and you go to France?

JU: I realized that my family – I was almost sure that my family – my father and my stepmother – did not survive. Because Kalisz was very close to the German border. It was – the German army came in, I think, the 2nd or the 3rd of September and Kalisz was the first – one of the first towns that were made *judenrein*. They were taken out in big trucks very early, and we never heard from them again. And I realized that there was no point in going back to Poland, that I have got nothing to go back to Poland for.

GK: It was the same for me. I knew that in any case my father and mother were dead. I saw my father die. My mother went directly from Majdaneck I think, the fourth or fifth day to Auschwitz. So I went back to Auschwitz last year for the first time to see in the archives, if by any chance my mother's name might be there. I was told that no, the people who arrived directly from Majdaneck were sent directly to the gas chamber, so the archives didn't exist. There are no… So even then, I knew that my father and mother had perished but I thought maybe I could find a cousin or uncle or aunt. That's why I didn't go to Australia. I didn't – I signed up for the departure, then I thought about it I said to myself no, it's much too far for me.

Q: And why did you choose Australia?

JU: Originally, I didn't choose Australia. I chose Canada. I went to renew my carte d'identité and the interviewer – it was in préfecture de police – told me, "What are you doing in France? We don't need you here." And I went out, and I said, "It's time to leave Europe." And I started talk to my friends who lived in a group. We were together in Fontenay-aux-Roses – we lived – and I said, "Let's go see if we can emigrate to Canada." And I failed the medical. I had all the papers ready, but the doctor rejected me for various reasons on the medical examination and I couldn't

go to Canada. All went from the same, from Fontenay-aux-Roses. I was the only one left in France. So, I decided the next best thing is Australia, although it was the same doctor, because it was the British dominion and it was the same doctor. So, I went every few weeks until the doctor went on holidays, and there was another doctor and he passed me within five minutes. I had my papers and about four weeks later I was on the ship.

Q: And it was when, precisely?

JU: Precisely? In December 1948.

Q: And before – So, you arrived in Paris. I guess it was Gare de l'est or something like that, where…?

GK: I don't remember.

Q: You don't remember? Do you remember when – the precise moment, you arrived in Paris?

GK: From Écouis? From Écouis?

Q: No, from Buchenwald.

GK: No.

Q: You don't remember?

GK: We weren't – we weren't in Paris. We didn't come to Paris. We came directly to Écouis.

Q: Oh, you went directly – it was…

GK: Yes.

Q: Directly…

GK: We went to Vernon, I remember, the train, then the population meets us at the railway station in Vernon, with the brass band, there was…. The train stopped in Vernon and then we came directly to Écouis.

Q: You have the same…?

JU: Yes, the same thing.

Q: It's the same. And –

GK: We were in the same train.

Q: But you were very close friend at that time, no?

JU: Not yet. After.

Q: Not yet. And you have always been in touch after you leave from Australia? The friendship remained, or…?

GK: Were we in touch? A little later. At the beginning we lost sight of each other a little because, well, each of us had his own problems and we left – I left the O.S. E. in 1948 in a way that was perhaps a bit unusual – like him, actually, also. And when we were at the O.S. E. I was at the Château de Boucicaut, then later I was in Le Vézinet, on rue Rolin, and then I went to dental school in Neuilly – it was the dental school for learning dental prosthetics – prosthetic technician. And once we more or less knew how to get by on our own, well, in 1948 they told us, "Now (clap) children, it's over – you have to get by on your own." They brought us our suitcases out onto the street, it was a pretty offhand way of going about it. They gave us – I remember – 8,000 francs. It was 8,000 francs, which represented for me two months' rent in a hotel at that time. I was told, "You're on your own" and it was over, the O.S. E. was over. They never – they never took care of finding out what became of us. I have to say that those 8,000 francs enabled me to pay for a month in a hotel and what was left over I ate up in no time. And afterwards it was very hard. You know, when I got out, I promised myself that once I left, when I got out of those camps, that I would never be hungry again, I'd never live in poverty, now that we're free. It so happens that in 1948 we left the O.S. E. and afterwards it's very difficult. After, let's say – we could no longer pay the hotel room either, so we – we were kicked out. I came back…

Q: But you say "we" – you were…?

GK: There were many of us then . Him too, it was the same.

Q: It was the same situation for you, too?

JU: I know the O.S.E. does and did a lot of good things.

GK: Sure. We're very grateful to the O.S.E. because they did a lot.

JU: And I recognize it, but for historical – to – for the truth, we have got to mention it: They gave us a month's notice; maybe even six weeks, I don't remember exactly, and they said, "It's time for you to be independent." And when we came home, on the 15th of July, our suitcases were in the street, rue Rolin.

Q: Rue Rolin, it was rue Rolin.

JU: 19 rue Rolin.

Q: 19 rue Rolin.

GK: No, five - five rue Rolin

Q: Five rue Rolin.

JU: Number five? Or…

GK: Five!

Q: Five.

JU: And it was a terrible time. At that time, I did not realize the injustice of it, because I thought, "If they don't want me, they've got a right to put me in the street." As I grew older, and when I

came to Australia – I know that in Australia, if someone is in jail and he is freed after a few years, he gets somebody to go and ask him once a month, "How are you doing? Have you got a job? How are you living? Where do you live? Do you pay rent?" and so on. From the minute the O.S.E. put us in the street 'til the time that I got the papers for Australia, I had not one telephone call or a visit or a – or a question from the O.S.E., "How do you live?"

GK: It was the same for me.

Q: And where was the hotel you stay?

JU: I could not find a hotel. It was the day after Bastille Day. It was impossible to find a place. I went to the *patron* where I worked. Number five rue des Hautes Rillettes. This is off –

GK: Yes, it's not far from République, it's between République and…

JU: République and Châtelet.

GK:And Arts et Métiers, yes.

JU: And I asked him, and he had on the sixth floor, he had a little room where he kept the off-cuts.

GK: A maid's room. A maid's room.

JU: Because I worked in the *tricot*, and he had off-cuts. And I knew that he was only using this room as a spare room. He didn't live there. He gave me the key, and I went up and I couldn't open the door because it was – he hadn't used it for a long time. By this time it was midnight. The boss Simon came up with me with a can of oil; he opened the door for me. And there was a lot of – a lot of wool and cotton and pecks, et cetera, and made a... He had a folding bed standing at the wall, which I opened. I put a bit of cotton, and I stepped in. I must also mention I had a shocking experience. I had to go to the toilet and the door was shut and I couldn't – I didn't have the key because the key was inside the room, and I stood outside the door and I didn't know what to do. Luckily, I noticed a little bit of a light underneath the door and it was a French people – There was no electricity, I must say, there was no inside toilets, either. It was on another floor. Anyway, I knocked at the door, and these French people came with a crowbar and they broke the lock and I could open. And not only did he open the door for me, and then he took a screwdriver. His wife was standing there in her nightdress with a candle, and he put the lock back. Why I'm mentioning this is, it was a shocking time, and it was three years after the Liberation. But saying this, I've mentioned this to the O.S.E. and they have publicly apologized in Israel. So, but, it is mentioning for the future that it had to be handled a little bit more with empathy.

Q: And you stay in this little maid's room, or you go to an hotel after that?

JU: Then, I start looking for a hotel.

Q: Yeah.

JU: When – I don't know Paris' situation at the moment. At this time, in 1947, people lived in one room in a hotel for many, many months, maybe even years…

GK: True, yes, yes, yes.

JU: In one room. It was called a hotel, but it was actually like an apartment, although it consisted only one room. I met friends, and they were in the same situation, and we said, “We have got to find a hotel where to live.” As we could not find anything in Paris, we found a hotel in Fontenay-aux-Roses.

Q: And it was the same hotel, you were together, or not?

GK : No, I went to a hotel that was very close to rue Rolin, that was on rue des Écoles. There was a hotel, I took a room, it cost 4,000 francs a month, and then I looked for work. So the O.S. E. had told me they found work for me with a dentist on the rue des Écoles as a prosthetics technician, but it wasn’t a job. I thought I’d be paid, but it was practically a training position, so almost no, it meant that I didn't get any money. I looked for work, I didn’t find any. At night I'd often go and work at the central food market of Paris. Unloading trucks. I got paid 67 francs an hour, I remember – I got 402 francs pay for six hours of work, which represented in the morning a sandwich plus a few little things – not much of anything. And then in fact after two months I couldn't pay for the hotel any more so they kicked me out. I went back and I found the suitcases there in the lobby and I didn’t know what to do. I didn’t know where to go. So I had a friend, a buddy of mine, who was with us in the camp too, who worked and had a small apartment on rue St. Claude, well, a studio apartment – a room on the seventh floor.

Q: Do you remember his name?

GK: His name was Davidowitch and he made fur-lined jackets. So I went to his place and said to him, “Davidowitch, you have to let me sleep at your place.” And I stayed a few days at his place. We ate together and then afterwards I looked for a hotel room, I still had no money, and that’s when we found a friend who had a room on Boulevard du Temple in a hotel, his name was Sam Afner… I went to see him, I said to him, “Sam, I have no money,” Sam was working already, he worked, he had a little job, I said, “I don’t have any money, I don’t have…. I don’t have anything, can you lend me a little money so I can find a hotel room?” He’s an extraordinary guy, I know him, he was a wonderful person. He went to his cupboard, lifted up some shirts and said to me, “How much do you want?” I said, “Listen, I don’t know, what can you lend me?” He said, “I don’t have much, I have 4,000 if you want.” “4,000 francs, that’s fantastic, that’s a month of…” He said, “Take it.” And then I found another room for the time being and in the meantime he got his papers for Australia. Because the others had already left but he had tuberculosis, so he had been turned down at the medical examination.

Q: Sam Afner.

GK: Right. So he was turned down at the medical examination and afterwards he was supposed to try again after getting medical treatment in France, so he received… that was maybe two weeks later, he received the authorization to leave for Australia, and I took his room. A small room, Boulevard du Temple, at 16 Boulevard du Temple, Hotel Printania, and there I lived for several years, maybe three or four years. I worked, I found a little work, I did a little of everything, I did … some friends who worked in the garment industry taught me how to iron, so I did ironing. It was no great fortune but well, you manage to pull through.

Q: Well, we’re going to come back in Écouis, if you don’t mind. So you arrived, it was not far from Vernon …

GK: Yes, it was n…

Q: What kind of … 30 kilometers from Rouen. So how were you welcomed in this castle? And what was the life? Can you tell the story of Écouis?

GK: We arrived, it was a small village, Écouis, a very small village, it was nine kilometers from Les Andelys, 30 kilometers from Rouen, we were very, very well received, by the mayor, by the municipality, we were very well received, and life there, we had a park, we were completely carefree at that time, because, well, all we thought about was getting back on our feet a bit, regaining a little strength. The activity of all young people of 15,16, 17, we played soccer, and as far as I'm concerned, a pretty strange experience, because we thought of only one thing, and that was to get out, go to Paris, and we had learned that in Paris on Bastille Day it was one big ball, and one of my friends and I decided at night, in the morning, to go to Paris. And we left with my friend who is now in Australia, who is going to come soon…. We hitchhiked. On the road, there, at six o'clock in the morning. A car went by with a trailer, we didn't know a word of French, to Paris, he says, "I don't have any room but you can get in the trailer." And in the trailer there was a cow. It was a thing like that, it was one on each side, and when we got to Paris imagine what state we were in, full of cow dung, by the cow, it didn't stop the whole trip, we were full of … And we landed in Paris, city.

Q: It was your first visit to Paris?

GK: Oh yes. Full of cow dung, you know, it was… And we looked for a place to go, we approached people, and we had little clothes with Buchenwald here, we didn't know, we found someone, who told us, we didn't understand anything he was saying, and he brought us to the center for concentration camp deportees at the Porte d'Ivry. And since we didn't manage to explain ourselves very well, to express ourselves, he thought we had arrived directly from Germany. So they brought us, medical check-up, washed, we took a shower, he brought us to the Lutetia Hotel. We landed at the Lutetia Hotel, arm in arm, they gave us a beautiful room, to sleep, he couldn't sleep in a bed because he says it's too comfortable, so he slept on the floor, he slept, we spent a day there, and the following night there was a knock at the door, police, they came to get us because in Écouis they had reported that two boys were missing. They checked, there were two boys who hadn't come back, they thought that we'd escaped, we'd gone to Paris. So in the middle of the night we were brought back to Écouis, so we didn't see much of Paris. It was our first Parisian experience. We did it again some time later, we shut ourselves in a cupboard because they were moving the furniture to take it to Boucicaut, so we did it again, we went to Paris again, we slept at the reception center there, there was a reception center on rue des Rosiers, there was another one at Lamarck Colaincourt, and that way we spent a few days, we escaped again.

Q: And why do you … and why do you try to escape?

GK: Why? Why did we escape? Because we wanted to see Paris. And over there we were in Écouis, it was a tuberculosis sanatorium,we were supposed to stay there, I don't know, two or three months, to get our strength back.

Q: And you had the same experience?

JU: More or less. We decided … we were supposed to have been under quarantine. After all, we came from very bad conditions. But we were young, impatient, and when the opportunity arose, because it was on the way to Le Havre and there were American jeeps going day and night willing to give us a lift. All we had to do was climb over the fence, stop the first jeep, and it took

us to Paris. And when we came to Paris the first time in our lives in such a city, the police, when the police knew that there was some, when a policeman came and asked, we thought he was going to arrest us, we were very frightened of police, but they picked us up and took us to the Hotel Lutetia. It was absolutely terrific. I must say that the French government and the people received us…really, I've got no word of criticism. They absolutely terrific. And we were in Hotel Lutetia, in a room that we never dreamt existed.

GK: Chateau de Versailles.

JU: Yes. And eventually we had to go back – and they sent us back to Écouis. Over there was a nice place practically empty because they all kept on running into Paris.

GK: And at that time, you know, when we got to the Hotel Lutetia, there were still crowd barriers, and there were people lined up behind them, and they asked us, "Where are you coming from? Did you know this person or that person," people were always looking for a … for relatives, people who had disappeared, but the Hotel Lutetia was one of our best memories. It was … It was good, wasn't it?

Q: And what languages do you speak at that time?

JU: I spoke – I spoke mainly Yiddish. I speak a bit of Polish, but mainly Yiddish.

Q: Mainly Yiddish. And you?

GK: Polish.

Q: Polish.

GK: Polish and Yiddish.

Q: And you have no accent in French?

GK: Oh, yes, still, I have a little accent. But I spoke mostly Polish because I before the war, in our home, we spoke Polish, not much Yiddish. I learned Yiddish in the Warsaw ghetto and …. and there we spoke among ourselves, we spoke Yiddish, no problem, and Polish-Yiddish, we made a little mixture.

Q: But you were taught in Écouis? There were classes? There were – what was the life? The everyday life in Écouis? You were not playing football from 8:00 to… No.

GK: Volleyball, soccer, you know, we went swimming, we walked to Les Andelys, all the way to Les Andelys, and there were bicycles. No, but it was a totally carefree life, we thought, we didn't even think about the future, we thought it's over now, it's wonderful, it's good, and afterwards we began to realize that now we're alone after all, and we'll always be all alone after all. Because well, as far as I'm concerned, I was 15 at the time, so…. But I still had a little hope of finding someone from my family.

Q: And you didn't find anyone?

GK: Yes, in fact, I did, oh it's a little more complicated, I had, before the, I had two cousins, and there was one in Warsaw who had decided to have an artistic career, she wanted to become an

actress, her sister was studying medicine in Warsaw. And when the war broke out, the one who had decided on an artistic career was in Italy. And when the ghetto was proclaimed, she tried to bring her family to Italy. With Italian passports, forged Italian passports. So the father and the mother didn't want to leave the family, and she tried to get her sister out, her name was Tamara, and with forged Italian papers, she managed to get her out of the ghetto, to bring her to Italy. The one who led the artistic career there, she stayed there, and my younger cousin, the one who was a doctor, continued her studies, and she got married in Italy later, she married an Italian composer who made musical scores for films, who is pretty well-known in Italy actually, he worked with Fellini, he did the sound track for "The Barefoot Countess" and "The Vikings" with Kirk Douglas, he was an adorable Italian, charming, Maestro Nascimbene, and I found her after the war in '46, she was in Italy. The other cousin met an American officer and left for the United States, she was a beauty, actually I have photos, I could show them to you if we go to the car, gorgeous those two girls, she married an American officer who became the military attaché of the American Embassy in Bolivia at the time. So she was very far away. So I found my two cousins, I was overjoyed, they were young, she was young, she was…. I don't even know if her husband, the Italian, knew that my cousin was Jewish. I didn't even know. So maybe it posed a little problem when she… when I met her, when I found her again, she would had had to admit to him maybe that her cousin was Jewish because he spoke mostly about the concentration camps, she might have been a little embarrassed, mind you, it was….wonderful, the reunion was extraordinary. She used to send me a little money, you know… and so there it is, that was the experience.

Q: And you found – You… no relatives at all?

JU: No. Unfortunately, no.

Q: So how long did you stay in Écouis?

JU: I don't remember exactly. Approximately three months?

GK: Three months. Three four months, maybe yes. Not more.

JU: Yes.

GK: From there we left directly for Boucicaut.

JU: When we came to Écouis, we came approximately a thousand young men.

Q: [dissenting voices] A thousand is so many.

JU: Originally, originally,

GK: [dissenting voices]. 400

JU: No, sorry, we were liberated in Block 66 in Buchenwald a thousand young men. Block 66. I don't remember exactly the number that came. A few hundred went to Palestine the first week. You remember this?

GK: Yes, maybe.

JU: A few hundred left for Palestine immediately. Some found family. Some found family in America. Some found family in France. Some decided on their own they would go back to Poland. And we stayed approximately four months. And then we were divided within groups. Religious. Secular. And in various supposed age too. So some went to Fontenay-aux-Roses, to Château de Boucicaut. Some went to Vézinet which is another place. Then there was a religious place, Tavernier. And we went – I went to Fontenay-aux-Roses.

Q: And you too. You were not religious at all? What kind of Judaism did you …

GK: At all

Q: Nothing.

GK: Me, not at all, not at all.

Q: And you?

JU: I am a secular Jewish person. I lost my belief in the war. I was brought up religious—in the religion. And I -- I must, without boasting, I know a lot about the Jewish—the Bible, reading …

GK: Very clever, my friend.

JU: It is not a matter – I just happened to follow it, to follow as an interest, not as a religion. When I came to Australia, they were short of a reader for the Torah. So they approached me and I said to them "I can, I know it, but I am not a Shomer Shabbat." That means somebody who keeps the Sabbath. They said, we didn't ask you. So for about thirteen years, maybe even longer, I was reading the Torah, all the holidays – holidays, not every week, but on the holidays, until they got a new rabbi and without asking – without telling me "we do not need your services anymore", I went up on the Bimah to read and they just came up to me and just—I understood, they did not have tell me, that I am not wanted anymore. So, no, I am not religious. But I know the Yiddish literature quite well. I brought up my sons, went to Yiddish schools, and they know, they read, they speak, they can read and write Yiddish.

Q: And you know no religious practice?

GK:. No, not at all. I know absolutely nothing, I practice, I go, on Yom Kippur, we go to synagogue to say Kaddish, that's it, the traditions a little bit, we like them, we observe the traditions, but otherwise no, not at all. My father, no my father was not at all religious. My grandfather, very religious, very well-known in fact in Warsaw. Not my father, to my grandfather's despair, and… no. We lived in Warsaw in a neighborhood where there were very few Jews, it was a Polish neighborhood, in fact that's why I didn't know… I didn't even speak Yiddish before the war, no, not at all.

Q: So you arrived in Boucicaut. Most of –It was only for boys, I guess.

JU: Yes.

Q: No, no girls.

JU: No.

Q: So, and it was also a very secular …

JU: Yes.

Q: Jewish home

JU: Yes.

Q: So how many were you in Boucicaut and what was the life in this Château de Boucicaut? It was really a castle? What kind of …

GK: Yes, it was a castle. Very very pretty castle with a very big jarden, it was really very very nice.

JU: Life was good.

Q: Life was good. How many people in this chateau?

GK: Very, nice, very nice, very nice, very nice. I can't tell you, I don't know exactly, there were perhaps 70, 60, 70 of us, not more. Maybe 60 or 70.

JU: Maybe.

Q: And how old were the boys? Only teenagers, or …

GK: I think so… There were boys from age 15 on, 15 or 14 to 18

JU: I must – I must bring this. It is important. The French government and the French Red Cross, when they heard that in Buchenwald there were children liberated, they took it literally, they would be children. Children five years, six years and so on. When the Rabbi Schechter started to bring us to France, they said, "Where are the children?", because we were 15, 16, 17 year olds. They said, "Where are the children?" And we said, "You want children, you go to the crematoriums and you will find the children!" because they were surprised that instead of children, young men and it took surprisingly very few weeks, a few months, for us to recuperate. After a month or two months, you couldn't know that one was in Auschwitz or Buchenwald. We looked healthy—although some of us were not—young men.

GK: And even at the O.S.E. I think there were some people who were surprised when we arrived because they were in fact expecting young children, they weren't prepared for that, there were counselors, boys and girls, who were barely older than us. Girl counselors who were 20 years old and there were boys who were 16, 17, they were a little surprised too. I have to say too that when the war broke out and I went into the Warsaw ghetto I was 10 years old, so consequently… and when we got out I was 15.

Q: And what did you do in Boucicaut. What were the people taking care of you? Do you remember them, or not?

JU: Yes. We started learning French. And the bit of French I do know is thanks to Château de Boucicaut, Madame Reiche…Monsieur Reiche and Madame Rache …
GK: Monsieur Reiche.

JU: Monsieur Reiche. Or we had a teacher for French.

GK: I don't remember him.

JU: Madame Grossmann.

End of Tape 1, Side A

Tape 1, Side B

GK: I don't remember.

JU: Anyway, I forgot.

GK: We had a sports counselor who had also been deported, whose name was Maurice Brauche, who is still alive and I think he lives in the south of France. And there was, I don't remember very well, we learned French but very very little, almost none. What they wanted above all was to give us a trade. So there are boys, I for one went to the dental school, well, that, we didn't think so much about work at the time. We thought about having fun, going out, flirting with girls, and anyway, 15, 16 years old, what do you want do. And others who learned the…tailor, they in fact learned to sew on sewing machines there, they managed on their own pretty fast, they found work fairly quickly, and they managed well. It was the tailors, the shoemaker, knitted garments, knitting workers, and those, they found work, they started working fairly early. We had a hard time finding work, in fact I didn't find any.

Q: You spent two years in Château de Boucicaut. From the end of 1945 to…

GK: The end of –

Q: 47, or –

GK: [Correcting her] 46, yes, because afterwards we left, I left for Le Vézinet, because they started to close down the Château de Boucicaut, to Le Vézinet, to Le Vézinet and then rue Rolin. We ended our roaming at rue Rolin.

Q: You also go to Vézinet or you stayed in Boucicaut?

JU: I stayed in Boucicaut until they closed it down. I don't know the exact reason why but it was decided to close it down. And I was sent to rue Rolin.

Q: And what was rue Rolin? It was a kind of open home for [various voices] young adults. Or…

GK:. No, it was a small building with a garden where there were rooms, it was a former hotel, I don't know, there were rooms, there was a ground floor but it was very nice, rue Rolin, it was very nice, a small building, in fact we went there, because he absolutely wanted to see this house again, we went last week, we visited, we couldn't go in but we….. We were in the place again, very near the Place de la Contrescarpe, La Moufle, we wandered around there, we looked for our… It was very pleasant, it was opposite the Lutèce amphitheater.

JU: And I went to the Alliance Française every month, to learn French.

GK: And we went to the dental school, and there was a French course there that was very… how shall I say, that we didn't attend very often because we were thinking of other things than going to learn French at that time.

Q: And what kind of connections were – do you have friends among the persons who had the same experience or you have other friends and other people you used to see?

JU: This I want to point out that people like us not having family, the group not only in France but all over the world having all this time a connection with one another helped us a lot to –how is it – but to survive—to have a normal life, because we sometimes think ourselves how come that we more or less grew up normal people, got married, we have children, got – made a living, because a lot of it helped, we had this group—not so much financially, one did not need financial help from one another, but always knew you can pick up the phone, you can ring direct to France, I can chat to Florida—in America, I can ring up somebody in Canada, and we have a talk, and when I come, it may go down ten or 15 years and we meet – we meet as if we had never left one another. This is actually amazing.

GK: I think we're unique in history maybe, because we really have friends all over the world, we call each other constantly, if one of us is sick we know it immediately. I went to Australia, I arrived in Australia a few years ago, four or five years, we were invited by one of our friends who was with us in Buchenwald, we were at the airport, everyone was with flowers, it was a reception as if I were the President. Everyone waited for us with flowers and… no, no, we call Australia every Sunday, every month, we call everywhere, Canada, I get calls… People ask me, "Where do you get these calls from?" Spain, England, Italy, in Australia there are a lot of friends, it's true, we are a very very big family.

Q: So it's your family.

JU: Absolutely.

Q : And it was like that since the beginning? Or …

GK: Maybe not, not as, it wasn't as deep as now, as it has been for the past 15 or 20 years. Before, at the beginning, you know, everyone had his own problems, everyone wanted… we were busy, we didn't have so much time to… But afterwards after we met again we've been inseparable since. We meet every five years in Israel, practically, on April 11, we celebrated the liberation of Buchenwald, it was the 50th anniversary… From all over the world, everyone came, it was a very very big reunion.

Q: Only the children, what they call? The children of Buchenwald. And how was it when you arrived in Australia?

JU: When I…

Q: You shipped to Australia? It was by boat?

JU: We went by ship. It took three months. From Marseilles to Sydney

Q: I'm sorry?

JU: From Marseilles to Sydney. It took three months. The ship was called “L’Eridon”. It was a French ship, which was a troop carrier during the war. And the conditions were horrible. We were over 200 people in the hull. And people got sick and it was shocking. Water came in and it ruined all the luggage. The trouble was I had bought the last minute, I don’t know why because I'm not that particular with my shoes, shoe polish [laughter] and put it in my valise and when water came in and when I opened it up it had, right through all my clothes, a perfect round hole. Right through the clothes because it got rusty. The shoe polish was a tin and it got rusty. I could take off my jacket and it had a round hole and I took off my shirts, it was a round hole, and I came to Australia with the clothes that I was in, with five pounds sterling, which I left myself for what they call "al kol tsarah she-lo tavo." It means “for a black hour” – an hour that may be not more.

GK: Tell the story. Before, a little story that is very funny before he left for Australia, he bought himself a pair of shoes, because it was in fashion then, shoes with triple soles, hepcats wore those shoes. Tell the story because it’s very funny.

JU: I said to myself. I’ve got a little bit of money. I will leave myself five pounds sterling. The rest I will spend in Paris. I went to the market. And I …

GK: It was the Carreau du Temple, I think.

JU: And I thought I would buy myself a nice pair of shoes. Triple soles. Very nice. The guy wrapped it up for me. As I am about at fifty meters away, I thought I have got to have another look at these shoes. They are so lovely. I started taking off the parcel, and I take out paper, paper, paper and I find one shoe! I go up to the thing! “Monsieur! You gave me only one shoe!” He said, Ljudka, Ljudka! This young man claims that he has got only one shoe! How is possible,” he says, “to give him only one shoe?” I said, “Look. I do not want to make trouble!” I said in my broken French, because I speak French but not so well. “I do not want to make trouble. You know, and your wife knows, and I know that you packed only one shoe, so if you don’t want any trouble…” “Oh, sorry, sorry! Here is the shoe.” She takes it to madame at the table. “It must have fallen out!” [laughter] Sorry. She wraps it up. And I go up to see her and I say, “Look. Listen. I am going to Australia in a few days. I am not interested in the problem. What I am interested is the logic. What is the logic of selling me one shoe? One shoe is not good to you and one shoe is not good to me! Can you explain to me what was the purpose?” She said to me, “You are a nice young man and I will explain to you. You see, in the 5,000 francs that you paid for the shoes I make no profit. Very little. I couldn’t make a living. You would have gone home; naturally you would have found one shoe. You would have come back claiming that I gave you one shoe, which is true, but I would have naturally said you lost it in the metro, but I can sell you—make you one shoe for half price!” [laughter] So this is a shoe and that is the logic. And I went satisfied at least I understood what it was all about. Going back to Australia, I came with five pounds sterling, went down from the ship after three months, we had been in Tahiti for ten days, the ship broke down, and I went in a milk bar and I saw a picture of an ice cream called Peter’s ice cream, and I did not know what—it cost very little—I think two pennies—and I showed we were a group of eight, Rafael Goldinger, Charles Gorlicki, and it was a whole group and I showed to give everybody an ice cream and I put all the money on the table. She gave me back the paper money. I had to go first to a bank to change it from English to Australian, which I got more, because I think I got six pounds and five shillings, and she gave everybody an ice cream and still gave me money. I said what a wonderful country and I have never changed my mind since.

Q: And what was your life in that marvelous country?

JU: There were ups and downs. I married a lovely woman.

Q: I'm sorry. You—you stayed together, the eight Buchenwald friends in Australia?

JU: Originally—well, on the ship we could settle wherever we wanted. Because we looked at the map, Australia is a big country, and we were as free as a bird. We could have chosen any part of Australia we wanted. We came to Sydney. I decided I will stay in Sydney. And I got a beautiful room on the North shore and Sydney is a beautiful city. The harbor is marvelous.

GK: Do you know it?

Q: No.

JU: But, to go to work I had to take a tram, then the ferry, then another tram, and I said I have never seen a country where you go to work in a ship. And after three months, I was a bit sick and tired of water. And everybody said to me, why did you choose Sydney? If you don't like water, Sydney is not for you. Because the harbor is everywhere. So I went with my bit of money that I had and I bought a train ticket and I went to Melbourne. And I want to tell an interesting episode. When I came to Melbourne, I start asking where are all my friends. They are all living in a house from the Jewish Welfare Society on Burke Road. So, in quiet I start speaking a few words English, and I came to that house in Burke Road where all our friends were, we were called the Buchenwald boys. I came in there and the director was a Mr. Fink. I said, "Mr. Fink. I am also from Buchenwald and I would like to live with all my friends." "I am sorry. There is no room." "I said surely, Mr. Fink, you must have room for one more person!" "I am sorry, Jack. There is no room!" I said, "Mr. Fink. I want to tell you a story that I just happened to read. There is a place – there was a place for deaf and dumb children. And everybody could not speak. One day, a father of a deaf and dumb child wanted to bring in the boy to this institution. As he came in, he wanted to explain to the director that his boy is also deaf and dumb. The director wanted to show him that there is no room. So he took a glass of water and he filled it up and he showed to the father, you see? The glass is full! There is no room. The father promptly took a leaf of a tree, he put it on the water, he looked around it, and did you know the thing? Not one drop of water went over the edge. Mr. Fink said, you can move in. So I moved in at that place. And from there I stayed there a month. Just to get the feel of it. And then we got a job. It was very easy to get work. And, uh, got married.

Q: And you got married. When did you get married?

JU: I got married in 1954. And if you want to hear the story how I got married, it's an interesting – [Various voices] Interesting story. I said, I have got to find a young girl—a Jewish girl, preferably, so I looked in the paper and I could see an advertisement of a youth camp. I said to another friend of mine, let's go and give a deposit and join the camp! He got cold feet at the last minute. He said, no, we won't know anybody. I went by myself. At lunch time, I went up on the second floor, and I knocked at the door, and I showed the young girl the advertisement, and I said I would like to meet young people. She said okay, but you are at the wrong door. This advertisement is for the third floor, not for us. And I said, OK, thank you, and as I was at the door, she calls me back. She said, do you know that these people that you enquire are the Communist Youth League. They are called the Eureka League. I said, to tell you the truth I don't care if they are communists, if they are socialists, I want to meet young people. Preferably Jewish, but not necessarily. She said, in that case, why don't you go with our group? We are a Zionist youth group and we are also making a camp! (laughter) I said, by all means. Tell me the number, I will ring up. She said, here is the number, ring up, this is the – the girl is the Secretary,

send her a deposit and you can join the group. I rang up and that was my wife. And I was the only person who gave a deposit.

Q: So, and you have children. How many?

JU: Two sons. One lives in Israel and he just got married a month ago. That's what _____ that trip was about. And one lives in Canberra. And he works in the government. He's got two children.

Q: Okay. And you, what was the life when you left rue Rolin?

GK: Well, as for me, afterwards I found work, I found a little work, I worked in pressing, it was a very very hard job, with an iron that weighed five kilos all day long, it was very hard. I didn't earn a very good living. Then I met my wife and she said to me, "You can't go on like this, because it's not possible, you're going to ruin your health with this job, it's very hard." And among my friends I found friends who… in the meantime I did a lot of trades, I did a lot of things, I delivered potatoes, I drove vans, I had work, a little of everything, and then I found work in a real estate agency that was run by one of my friends. So I stayed there, I think I stayed there around 20 years with him and that's it, life went on, then I found work in a large import business. I started there as a warehouse worker. And I worked my way up to head of sales for 15 years. Very very big business, it was very good in fact. I finished my career there.

Q: And do you have children?

GK: No. We don't have children because we had a very difficult life, we never thought we could provide for their needs. Because we have to work all the time, all the time, all the time, and so there it is. We're sorry, but it's too late.

Q: I want to ask you uh, What do you think… I am going to ask it in French because it is a little complicated. And Dominique is going to translate. I think it is better to have it translated on the tape. [French] I suppose that you think sometimes about what influence the war and your experience during the Shoah had on your life. How is what you are today also due to what happened? Can you say something?

DT: Do you want me to translate? [voices] I assume that what you have gone through during the war has had an influence on your life afterwards. How did the Holocaust influence your life?

Q: Do you want to answer this in French first?

GK: No, that is a difficult question, personally. I don't think that the Holocaust influenced my life. The only thing that I explained to my friend, the only thing I think, is that… the years we spent in the camps, the experience we went through, all those dead, the six million dead, the suffering I saw, my parents perishing, my mother, my father, dying before me, the five years we spent in the camps, I think that… and my own personal suffering during those years, it's a miracle, practically, that we are here, because going through the camps as we did, and other camps that weren't as terrible, I think that it's the price we paid, I think, this is my idea, to have Israel, because I think that if it had not been for those six million dead, if there had not been a Holocaust, Israel would not have existed. There would never have been an Israel. So I think that perhaps my parents did not die for nothing, and this is the price we paid for Israel, that is the only thing.

Q: Are you very attached to Israel?

GK: Oh yes. I think that it's the reward, it's the price we paid. So I tell myself, alright, everything I went through, my parents went through, and that it wasn't for nothing. It's a little mystical perhaps, but that is how it is, I think that is it, it's perhaps, if not it's difficult to… if you don't believe in anything it's difficult to… It's our reward.

JU: If I may say, I am not entirely in agreement with Jurek on that point. I reckon that it would have taken time, maybe 50 years, and Israel would have come into being. Because it is not that the United Nations voted that made Israel. Had the Arabs won the war in 1947 – 48, there wouldn't have been Israel. Nobody would have fought for us. The fact that we exist is because we won the war, not because the United Nations voted. But apart from this, I would have been glad that – to have the six million people alive and to have Israel in another 150 years. [voices] I don't think that you can call a recomp –this is a delusion in my opinion -- with all due respect—that it is a compensation for our mad—for the six million people. But I will answer your question directly. What did it change our lives? Because I haven't got much schooling. I did not go much – a little bit of school. So I cannot talk from an academic point of view. I only tell what—from my observation. [voices] I think that generally suffering in the youth does not change automatically the character of a person. I think that the character of the person stays the same irrespective. In our group, we've got people stupid, we've got people clever, we've got people rich, we've got people poor, we've got people jealous, it goes on like a whole spectrum of life. The only difference that I see, is, from our group, the fear for tomorrow. If I can say that this is from our youth, I know of people who have more money than they can spend or they can eat, and nevertheless when you talk to them, what is going to happen tomorrow? They're still not sure, they are still not sure, at the best of times, they will always think something can change. Somebody can take it away from me. That is the only thing that I can see the difference between our group and other people. And sometimes I wonder when somebody comes in court, you know I read this quite often, the youth is brought out, he did this crime because he was abused when he was young—or all this kind of thing. And I say to myself, in that case, we should have all grown up, if not murderers, we should have been criminals, but we should have come out—how will I say?—abnormal. But I see in our group the same people that I see all over the world.
[Various voices]

End of Tape 1, Side B

Tape 2, Side A

Q: This is a continuation of the United States Holocaust Memorial Museum interview with Georges Kestenberg and Jack Unikoski. This tape is number 2. So you said that some of the boys of your group were very, very successful.

GK: Yes. We're very proud.

Q: And you, too?

JU: I will agree.

GK: There were no delinquents. Yet, there certainly were reasons, these are boys who have known practically nothing in their lives, and when I hear now, when you see what's happening around us, when they say it's society's fault, we didn't have these problems. There were no delinquents at all, the boys… it's not so…

Q: Do you know why you were only boys--there were no girls, because there were girls in the camps. But the same for girls and boys at that time--I mean for Jewish boys and girls.

GK: Because practically all of us came from Buchenwald, and in Buchenwald there were no women.

JU: But I think overall, girls found it more difficult to survive. The hunger in ghettos, as far as I know, my brother died when he was 19 years old, and from my observation, girls and men, especially young men who grew taller, had very little chance of surviving. If someone stayed short, and he was male, he had a little bit more chance of surviving the hunger because the one shot or sent to a gas chamber, it does not matter, but the hunger killed a lot more taller people and females.

GK: That's possible.

Q: So, Georges Kestenberg, you told us that you never gave interviews and that the only one was this Dr. Boder one in 1946.

GK: In 46, yes.

Q: And you?

JU: I do.

Q: Do you testify now?

JU: I find that it is very important if in our time when witnesses are still alive, can be written a dissertation and given a master of arts or even a Ph.D., writing a book that had never existed. How is it?—It's very important that people who are still alive now to leave their testimony for the future generations.

Q: So you testify in what kind of circumstances?

JU: For the Holocaust Center I made a tape in Melbourne. We got a Holocaust Center. For the Spielberg Foundation, I made a four-hour tape. And whenever I am contacted, I usually don't decline.

Q: [voices] Sorry. No, no.

GK: I haven't given any interviews for several reasons. First of all, it was very difficult for me to express myself, to speak about things, about what I had gone through. Then I always told myself that it's impossible to express everything we went through. It was absolute horror and I had the impression that people would not believe it. It was not possible to believe. So I told myself I was talking in vain, because if in the end it's not possible that people understand and believe what happened, what we saw, what we went through. And to say that we survived for five years, when every hour, every minute it was a miracle to survive because where we were it was really a miracle, every hour, every day, every hour. It was impossible to believe. So that is why, I said alright, it's not necessary, there's no point. But he may be right, maybe I should have done it. And it was much too difficult because in the end afterwards you're sick and then you remember things that are hidden in a corner of your brain and you don't sleep nights, so there it is, it was perhaps a little bit of cowardice, and so there it is.

Q: Do you have the feeling that the memories are very close, very close in your head?

GK: They are both very close and very far away at the same time. When you recollect, it's true, you remember details that you thought you had forgotten, and it's very painful.

Q: And you told us that you don't read books about Holocaust. Do you see films like Lanzmann, Spielberg, or other very …

GK: No, the only film I've seen was "The Pianist."

Q: Because it was about Warsaw?

GK: Warsaw, yes. It didn't move me very much.

Q: And you. The same question.

JU: The same question. Well, I also don't avoid – I avoid to see films. I always say what is the point? If to remind me, I don't need reminding. My wife usually, Rachel, she usually looks— tapes a film and tells me watch it or don't watch it. She always –

Q: She was in Australia during the war?

JU: No. She was hidden in a convent in Belgium. My wife comes from Belgium. [voices] She was hidden in this, in a convent in Belgium. In one and her sister in another convent. And her father worked as a Pole in a coal mine right through the war. And her mother worked in a convent as a domestic.

Q: And the whole family survived?

JU: Survived. Yes.

Q: So, sorry. It's your wife who tell you—

JU: She will tell me it is safe for you to watch it or it's not safe because sometimes I get nightmares at night and I cry out in the middle of the night so she protects me, she usually tells me watch it or don't watch it.

Q: And are you involved in associations except your Buchenwald "Hevra" [laughter] this group. So except this group, I mean involved in associations or in political organizations dealing with Jewish matters?

JU: Not political. We belong to a group who we buy subscription tickets for the theater. And we go to practically all the shows that they put on in Melbourne. And this is a separate group who have never been—and we get on very well, we go out for the – going out after the show which is in the afternoon and we go—we just moved in, in a retirement village, only two months ago. So we got another group in the retirement village we will listen to classical music. I cannot complain.

Q: So. You may have…Do you want… Do you want to tell something? Do you think that we have forgotten—that I have forgotten something important about your life since you left Buchenwald?

GK: No, no, there are a lot of things to tell but you can't do it in two hours, but it was very good, you did a very very good… We covered all the angles, we covered it very well.

Q: So I am going to tell something… This concludes the United States Holocaust Memorial Museum interview with Georges Kestenberg, Jurek Kestenberg né Jurek Kestenberg and Jack… Unikoski.

JU: Yes.

Q: Unikoski né Israel Unikoski. Thank you.

GK and JU: Thank you.

Conclusion of interview.