

**AN INTERVIEW FOR THE COMMEMORATION OF
KRISTALLNACHT WITH
ESTHER TOPOREK FINDER
RAYMONDE FIOL
ALEXANDER KUECHEL
PHILIPP MEINECKE
FELIPE GOODMAN**

An Oral History Conducted by Barbara Tabach

The Southern Nevada Jewish Community
Digital Heritage Project

Oral History Research Center at UNLV
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[Introduction re: Kristallnacht]

On November 9th to November 10th, 1938, in an incident known as Kristallnacht, Nazis in Germany torched synagogues, vandalized Jewish homes, schools and businesses, and killed close to one hundred Jews. In the aftermath of Kristallnacht, also called the Night of Broken Glass, some thirty thousand Jewish men were arrested and sent to Nazi concentration camps. German Jews had been subjected to repressive policies since 1933 when Nazi Party leader Adolph Hitler became chancellor of Germany. However, prior to Kristallnacht these Nazi policies had been primarily nonviolent. However, after Kristallnacht conditions for German Jews grew increasingly worse. During World War II, Hitler and the Nazis implemented their so-called final solution to what they referred to as “the Jewish problem” and carried out the systematic murder of some six million European Jews in what is now commonly known as the Holocaust.

[Round table commences]

Today is March 17th, 2015. This is Barbara Tabach. I'm going to ask each of you—we'll start with Esther—go around and say your name and spell it, too, if you would, please.

My name is Esther Toporek Finder. Toporek is T-O-P-O-R-E-K. Finder is F-I-N-D-E-R.

My name is Raymonde Fiol. R-A-Y-M-O-N-D-E. Last name Fiol, F-I-O-L.

My name is Alexander Kuechel; A-L-E-X-A-N-D-E-R, K-U-E-C-H-E-L.

And I'm Philipp Meinecke, P-H-I-L-I-P-P; Meinecke, M-E-I-N-E-C-K-E.

I'm Felipe Goodman; F-E-L-I-P-E, G-O-O-D-M-A-N.

Well, I thank all of you for coming here today. We're going to talk about the Kristallnacht commemoration. I did attend this past one in November of 2014 here at Temple Beth Sholom. I'd like to start by you thinking about what people will need to know fifty years

from now, why that commemoration occurs every year. I'd like to know how it started here in Las Vegas specifically because this project is about Jewish heritage in Las Vegas. So we're going to tie this all together. And all of you live here, so that will be one way we'll start.

So, Esther, do you want to tell us a little bit about the background of the commemoration?

Well, I don't know that there is a tradition of having a Kristallnacht commemoration here, but just the last two years we've had events, and Ray and I have been connected with both of them. In 2013, it was the seventy-fifth anniversary of Kristallnacht and we had a commemoration that was in conjunction with an international conference that we had and that was at Green Valley Ranch, and for that commemoration we had over eight hundred people. So that was a very large event.

RABBI GOODMAN: I've been here for now almost like eighteen years. I can tell you that we've had commemorations on and off, but it was nothing that was really calendared every year. It's only since Esther has been here that these things have really started to appear on the calendar constantly and the way they should be, very well planned. Before that every congregation had some thing or the Federation maybe once did it if we managed to get a speaker. But it was not until a couple of years ago with that conference that Esther really got it on the radar of people. I think it's wonderful.

Yeah, it is very wonderful. And why was that important to you, Esther?

Well, any opportunity that we have to educate people about the Holocaust, I think that's something we should take advantage of. And we should also commemorate for the sake of the event and that was the beginning of the Holocaust. This last year the event got started because of

Ray, also. Ray was honored as the Senior Citizen of the Year for the State of Nevada.

RABBI GOODMAN: Wow.

There was a reception for her. I remember it was on May 28th because that was on my birthday.

[Pause in recording]

ESTHER: I'm going to back up and get a running start on this. Ray had been honored as the Senior Citizen of the Year for the State of Nevada and the program was in May last year, of '14. I'm sitting at a table with a woman who starts talking to me and she said, "It's the state's sesquicentennial. Would you consider doing a program in conjunction with the state's sesquicentennial?" And I said, "Okay, let me talk to my partner in crime." So I talked to Ray and we thought about maybe doing something for Kristallnacht. Ray thought that was a good idea. Then we approached Rabbi Goodman and all the things started to fall into place. But if it hadn't been for Ray's award, there wouldn't have been a program this last year.

How did you get chosen to be the senior citizen of the whole state?

RAYMONDE: Someone nominated me.

It had nothing to do with your background?

Yeah, my involvement in the Holocaust group and the Holocaust education, yes. I don't know who did it. I have my suspicions.

ESTHER: I can tell you. It was Nora Kraidman.

RAYMONDE: I had a feeling it was. Yes. Nora is in charge of survivor services at—you've met Nora?

No.

ESTHER: Jewish Family Services.

RAYMONDE: —at Jewish Family Services for the needy survivors. So we cooperate a lot. So

she was kind enough to nominate me.

Oh, that's wonderful.

I think that's going to be the third year. So they're looking for another contestant—contender.

And—go ahead.

RAYMONDE: I was just going to say it was an honor. Then I was Citizen of the Month for Las Vegas. Mayor Goodman gave me an award, and all the councilmen. And my name was up on the street there.

You're quite important. Well, that's great. That is wonderful.

ESTHER: We have a celebrity here with us.

Yes. So then, who organized or creates the program for the commemoration?

ESTHER: That was a joint effort for this last one.

RABBI GOODMAN: And I screwed up the entire thing, but that's okay.

ESTHER: No, you did not.

RABBI GOODMAN: With the videos. Remember the videos?

ESTHER: Oh, yes, I remember.

RABBI GOODMAN: But I found Philipp.

ESTHER: Yes, you did. It was a collaborative effort. Ray and I did some things and we contacted Rabbi Goodman. We said, “Would you like to do this?” He said, “Sure.” No arm twisting, nothing.

RABBI GOODMAN: Right.

ESTHER: It was just great. We put—

RABBI GOODMAN: Listen, it's very important to have these things happen and to commemorate it and also for people to see it. I am a firm believer that if we don't do it

constantly, people are going to forget. It's so easy to forget. I don't want to speak too much, but it's very easy to forget.

It's okay to speak too much.

RABBI GOODMAN: It's okay to speak too much? Well, part of the reason why I did this...When I was in Cambodia some years ago, we had this tour guide that found out I was Jewish. I was getting money from the ATM. He basically kidnapped me and took me to a killing field. The kids were in the hotel with Liz. And he said to me, "I want to see this because nobody ever asked us to see this and if you're Jewish you will understand." I started to think that if we don't really stress the importance of genocide and what people have done to other people and especially our case, it is so easily forgotten. Nobody remembers what happened in Cambodia. People don't talk about it. It's a horrible thing. I don't want that to happen to the memory of my people, too. In essence, the memory of my people is also a model for all humanity, which shouldn't happen to any human being. So it's very, very important.

Well, that's great. Okay. So Alex, you shared your story on that day in November here.

Do you mind sharing more of that again for the record here?

I'm a survivor of seven concentration camps, the only survivor. I was born in Berlin, Germany. My parents originally came from Poland even though I never heard a Polish word spoken in my home, only in German. I'm a German citizen. I was a German. I went to a Christian school. At that time I didn't encounter any anti-Semitism. As a matter of fact, I remember when they had courses in Christianity, I was excused.

When Hitler came into power, of course, I had to leave the Christian school and I went to a private school, Rykestrasse. Rykestrasse had a synagogue in back of our school. As a matter of fact, it was the largest synagogue in Germany. It was rebuilt now and a lot of people came

there to see it again. Most of my teachers who had to leave the German schools because they couldn't practice their profession, like doctors and lawyers, they came to our school and most of them there were Zionists oriented. We had a wonderful education. In each subject we had a separate teacher. I remember so many things in school that people in college, they don't know today.

In the afternoon—my father became religious in the later years—I went to the Talmud Torah and I learned Hebrew and I learned (Homish and Rushie and Gomoraw and Chohan Haro) that people don't remember, the young kids. Today it helped me out of many things. If you know something, it's good to know. I'm educated in that respect. I never feel strange when somebody discusses something. I can cut in any time.

I had a sister. She was three years older than I was. My father was a manufacturer of men's clothing. It became very difficult to work and he had to do it from his apartment. Of course, if you manufactured something to sell as a merchant, those were very difficult, too.

I remember and I was fourteen years—no. As a matter of fact, in 1938 about, my father was picked up by the German police because he was from Poland originally. He was sent to a police station and from there they were sent to Zbąszyń. And the Polish people, the government didn't let the Jewish people in. Poland was very anti-Semitic. It was a Catholic country. They had to be in no man's land for a few months. Almost about ten thousand people had the same tragedy. Then they were admitted to stay there for a while.

My mother was concerned about my sister being left in Germany. She met a young man who was Jewish. His name was Max Noiman. She became engaged and she went illegally to Switzerland and they didn't admit her. To give you a thought about...Switzerland was one country who gave a directive to the German government, which many people don't know at all,

to put in every single passport the letter “J.” In every name for a lady, the name was “Sarah” and for a man the name was “Israel” for his first name. So when he came to a country, you were able to identify an individual.

Coming back to my school, I had the opportunity to learn languages. You could learn Spanish because many people wanted to immigrate to Spanish-speaking countries, or you could learn English or you could learn Ivrit, which is Hebrew. I learned Hebrew, anyway, because every first hour in our modern school I learned Modern Hebrew, the modern language, and I learned, of course, English, also.

My sister, as I mentioned, she tried to go to Switzerland. They didn't admit her and she went illegally to Belgium. She went to Antwerp and from there she went to Brussels. She got married. And I found out later after the war, she had a boy maybe two and a half years old. They were picked up by the Belgium police, were sent to an army barracks in Belgium, and from there they went to Auschwitz, and they lost their lives, which I found out after the war.

I used to belong to a Jewish organization, the Maccabi Hatzair, and I was going to go to Palestine as a young boy. In February 1939...

Let me go back because we come to Kristallnacht; it was in 1938. I remember it like today. A neighbor knocked on our door. They were nice people. As a matter of fact, Christmastime they invited me to show the Christmas tree, et cetera. And they knocked on our door. My mom and I—my sister was already gone. And they told us, “Do not leave your apartment tomorrow morning; something very terrible is going to happen.” So they knew already from (girblits) or some Nazi parties that something terrible is going to happen.

In a moment, of course, I think in Berlin, maybe, they had maybe five hundred thousand Jewish people living there. The whole city went through all the department stores. We had two

big department stores in Berlin. One was called Herman Teets and the other one was called Israel. At that time also it was a big department store. They didn't do anything to them because of apparently Americans. But I could see already they had the swastikas on all the windows painted, et cetera. I remember across from my street was a store, a subsidiary from that time where they sold merchandise to make the old clothing. It had been this before when people went in there and helped themselves to all the merchandise. As we found out later on, of course, all the department stores, people went in there. They stole furs and in the streetcars they exchanged their merchandise with each other. Ten or fifteen people went in the concentration camps that particular time.

In February 1939, I received a permit, an affidavit it was called, to go to Palestine. I was packed to go to Palestine. I remember like today I had a mosquito net for Israel, for Palestine, my short, short pants, et cetera. It was given by the Jewish organizations. (NAME), our leader from my organization, Maccabi Hatzair, came to my mother and said to her, “There are people in concentration camps.” At that time in 1939. “If you had any type of visa, to leave Germany,” which it didn't really want in the beginning, but it got rid of all the Jewish people. I would save some people if I would give up my certificate to go to those people in the concentration camps. So my mother agreed to that.

In '39, June, we received a letter from the gestapo that we had to be the next day or a few days afterwards to the train station. The train station was called Anhalter Bahnhof. It was a big train station. We had one suitcase each. We had ten Marks [Reich marks]; my mother had ten Marks.

We came to the border of (NAME), it was called. I remember as a young kid—I was fifteen years old at that particular time. When the Kristallnacht, I was fourteen years old. We

came to the border and I remember my mother was strip searched. They took some of my suitcases away. All I had was a knapsack; that's all I had and I came to a strange country; I came to Poland. I had no idea of the languages and I came to Krakow, which was a beautiful city, of course. It was not destroyed during the war. I came to some of my relatives. Of course, we were called [Plyton], we were called refugees, and they don't appreciate us very much at all. I don't think they were very nice to us. As a young kid I remember I was walking in Krakow. It was wintertime and I had holes in my shoes. My uncle had a factory of shoes. I couldn't get anything from anybody.

In the meantime, it was difficult for me to stay in Krakow with my parents. By the way, we picked my father up on the way going to Poland. My mother was born in a tiny, little town in [Novagora]; I mean a real tiny town. They had maybe three Jewish families living there. She had a sister still living there. My uncle was very, very religious, very religious. He called me...I was a...I don't belong to a Jewish religion. I should cut my hair; otherwise, Mashiach is not going to come. And I said to my uncle...I remember I had to address him in a third person; I didn't know you can't say "you." In the third person I had to address him. I said to my uncle, "Uncle," I said, "If you will be so nice if you give me one Zloty," one dollar, "I'll cut my hair." She said I'm an [something]; I'm not very respectful. I said, "But, Uncle, Mashiach will come for one dollar?" That's a little story, which I remember today.

About three weeks before the war started, I get a letter, which I remember it distinctly. It said, "My dear Alexander, I will tell you the good news today that your permit arrived to go to England with the children transport." Because I was promised if I give the certificate away to go to Palestine, I would go to Palestine or with a children's transport to England. "Your passport is going to come in the next few days."

September first, the Germans marched in and I got stuck in Poland. The Germans marched in. They were guards. They conquered Poland in no time at all. They could do anything they wanted to. They could kill a person with no consequences, like in a concentration camp.

And the Jewish people, I would say in Poland, 99 percent, they're all religious. When somebody says today, "God punished the Jewish people because they were not religious," that doesn't exist. They will wear *kippahs* and long beards. When Shabbat came, I remember it like today, commerce was dead. All the businesses were closed. They went to the services, et cetera.

And the Nazis—the German Army, not the Nazis, they came afterwards. They took the Jewish people. They cut their beards on their face. With a toothbrush they had to clean the sidewalks. They were beating them up. They were sent to concentration camps at that time and later on they created ghettos. And I got stuck in Poland.

And then—I smarted over from Krakow to—there was a little town there. I smuggled from there to Chrzanów, which was annexed by the Germans and what's called later [Kraynow], which was a small, little city with a lot of Jewish people, which was maybe twenty kilometers from Auschwitz. I went to a labor camp and from there I was able to come home, which was not far away from there. Then later on I was sent to a concentration camp. And then I went to seven different concentration camps.

When people ask me, "Why did you survive?" Okay, how did I survive? One thing I must tell you, because I belonged to the Boy Scouts, it helped to give me strength. But all I would say is luck, luck, luck. Because one has to understand when you came to concentration camp and they line you up in the morning at three o'clock and the SS comes and they're going to send you to another camp and they start counting you—one, two, three, four. "You go there and

you go there.” And they pretend and say, “Who's an electrician? Who is a shoemaker? We're going to send you to nice concentration camp.” So if they would have picked me, maybe I would have gone to Auschwitz.

As a matter of fact, I must tell you I never knew in a concentration camp that a concentration camp existed where they gassed people because nobody ever came back. Nobody ever came back to tell us about it. We didn't know about Treblinka or [NAME] where people went from the train directly to the gas chamber. First time we ever heard anything that's going on in this world was when they went to Italy where some people came from other concentration camps and they knew about it.

In a concentration camp when you came in there, you lost your identity. You no longer existed. You were nobody. I didn't have a number because—I got a number on my neck, like a little number, but I was not tattooed because only the people who were in concentration camps where they were exterminated, they received a number on their arm. They shaved your heads. You had a number; you are nobody. A guard could do with you anything he wanted with no consequences. He could shoot you. He could do whatever he wanted to.

I saw people in the concentration camp...they pray to God. I knew people...we celebrated Passover with some friends. They were very religious people for Passover. And some people cursed God. In one concentration camp, I belonged to the *chevra kadisha*, which is you have to stay twenty-four hours with a dead person.

We had the one camp; that's in one camp typhoid broke out. Ninety percent of the people didn't survive. I remember as a young kid I read a lot of books. It says, “If you see your past in front of you, you're going to die.” And I saw my whole past in front of me. And I remember there was a young man next to me. His name was Bernard Von Garten. I remember his name.

He used to live in France. He said, "I don't want to live." I remember we were on bunks and there was a window there, all broken. The snow came in there from there. What happened is the guards closed our concentration camp because they were afraid to put us on trains because they were afraid we might contaminate with German population. So we were all by ourselves. We had no doctors, nothing at all. People became delirious from the high fever. Typhoid broke out because you got lice and from lice you can get fleas afterwards. We took the dead people afterwards and we had to take them on a horse carriage to be buried behind a wall in a tiny, little town.

People asked me, "How could people escape?" It was impossible, almost impossible because you were in unfriendly territory. I remember three people tried to escape and they caught them. I remember the *lagerfeuer*—that was before we had typhoid—one was on top of a Mercedes, one in back of him, beaten half to death. They came to the concentration camp and they called the *kapos* out and said, "You finish him off." They beat them to death. Then the next morning I saw they were hanging there. There was a man up there—I remember it like today—one was hanging there. He had a Star of David around his neck and a cross. Then other people I remember today, they came from another concentration camp and they went to the *lagerfeuer* and they showed their muscle and said, "I'm strong; I want to live." They were taking some in what you can call bathroom. They shot them. No, first they put them in a shower, hot and cold shower. Then they shot them. When we came to the bathroom, all the brains were on the wall from where they shot them, that particular concentration camp. There were some jokes in the concentration. And I said to myself, *one day I'm going to laugh about it*. At that time I couldn't laugh about it.

When I first came in a concentration camp, there was a big concentration camp called

Blechhammer. I had short pants on, a nice-looking young boy. We had a *lagerfeuer*, which were in prison on the inside. On the outside was the SS or [NAME] they called him. He saw me. I remember as I'm talking to you. He said, "Look at the {27:17}. He called *kapo* over. He said, "If you touch one hair of him, you go back to the [NAME]." You go to work again. He put me in a group, which was unloading cement. And there was a bridge and the water there. We carried cement. And this guard, he was in the SS. He was a soldier and he called us [Hebrew?], from the Bible, [Hebrew?]. And if he didn't like somebody, he pushed them; they fell in the water.

So I would say I had *mazzal*. I don't know if you know the expression [heil/Hebrew?]. You know what [same word] is?

RABBI GOODMAN: Grace.

I had [heil]. Whatever concentration camp, I had [heil]; I was lucky. The young man who was working in the kitchen, he saw me and he said—he knew that I was in that little town [Chanoff] and he was from [Chanoff]. He had a very bad reputation, by the way. He saw me standing in line for food and he said, "You're from [Chanoff]?" "Yes." "You like the food?" I said, "Well, I'm going to eat it." He said, "Every day you come here, get two meals. Don't let anybody interfere."

One day he came to me and he said, "Are you getting two meals?" And I looked around; I was afraid to talk. I said, "No. What do you want? Why?" The *kapo* doesn't let me in. He said to me, "If I'm not better than the other person..." He called the *kapo* over. He had a lot of power, this guy in the kitchen. He was running around with boots, shiny boots, dressed like a king, like many *kapos*, like the people who are [something] that was in a concentration camp. He said, "If you ever don't let him come for a second meal, I will put you in the worst place

you've ever seen in your life.”

The first time we came to concentration camp in Blechhammer, we had German prisoners, political prisoners. We had English prisoners. We had Italian prisoners. We had people from Palestinian brigades, but they were kept separate; they were treated completely different. That was in the first concentration camp.

People were dying. They gave up hope. All you thought of was to get some extra meal, something to eat. I was able to organize some food sometimes with somebody outside, with [word] outside. I remember the day before I went to the one camp we had typhoid, a guard took me in the city to pick something up. I came back. And the German person who ran the [boshtel]—you know what [boshtel] is? Where you worked. He was a German civilian. He said, how come I go so slowly? So I had a sense of humor and I didn't know whether he was going to kill me or not, really, at that time. I said, “I ate so much; I'm so full; that's why I'm working so slow.” That's a fact. I remember it comes to my mind now.

So they said I should be beaten up. And they took—I remember the guy's name. His name was [NAME], a *kapo*. He was a nice person. He put me in the arm with a big grip there and he started beating me. And I didn't say one word. He said, “[German/33:02]” *Son of a bitch*. “Why don't you yell?” I said, “No, I'm not going to yell.” And they beat me up. The next day we went to the camp, the camp was closed; typhoid broke out.

I could tell you so many different stories in the concentration camp. Of course, when the war ended we had a *lagerfeuer* and it was [Bruno Meister]. He was in many different concentration camps and he had a very bad reputation. He was awful toward the people. In that particular camp he was very good. He convinced the guard, the SS—there were SS women and men—to—we heard a cannon from [PLACE], North Germany and the Germans were very much

afraid of the Russians. They were going to take us deeper into Germany. And if they found out after the war that people went into Germany deeper, whoever could walk was shot right on the spot in wintertime. And they had wooden shoes and when you walk on wooden shoes, the snow started baking on them and you couldn't walk.

So in the morning when we woke up, the guards were gone and the gate was opened up. I was never really liberated per se because a day later the Russians came in. They didn't have any food to give us, no medicine, nothing at all. They wanted to go into the building to fight. They wanted to take revenge, which I understand. So they left them. And a few Russian soldiers were behind. I have a picture and I looked at it the other day, as a matter of fact. It was one Russian Jewish young man from Romania. He said, "Don't say I'm a Jewish person. I'm afraid to say that." Because the Russians were anti-Semitic. But we asked him, "How come you joined the Russian Army?" He said, "It was between the Romania and joining the Russian Army."

So unlike the British and the American who were liberating the concentration camps and took care of the people, we were alone in this world. We had nothing. We went in the countryside and we tried to organize some food. The Germans didn't want to give us anything at all. So I took the Russian soldier's machine gun and we went to some houses there. Some were empty completely because they escaped; they were afraid of the Russians. We went to the cellars and found all those sausages hanging there. They didn't want to give us anything at all.

So I went to [CITY], in the city of [CITY] and I said to myself, *what am I going to do here? I'm in enemy territory. What am I going to do here?* So I said to myself, *see if I can hitchhike to Prague, to Czechoslovakia because I heard there was a Belgium consulate there and I want to find out if my sister is alive or not.* Hitchhiking...I mean you went on a cattle car. You

jumped on there and you tried to find out the one that went up to Prague.

In Prague, I didn't speak the language. I spoke some Polish, which I learned in the concentration camp. And I learned Yiddish in the concentration camp. I only spoke German. They called me [Yiddish]. I came to the consulate and I said, "I have a sister in Belgium and I want to go to Belgium." They said, "Yes, you have to wait two weeks."

I didn't want to wait two weeks. So I hitchhiked again and I hitchhiked to Berlin. What I did is I put a Belgium flag on my jacket I had on because we organized and took some clothing. We had to wear something. And I went on the Russian trucks and didn't say I was Jewish. So Belgium...[German phrase]; we like Belgium people.

I came to Berlin and I remembered my friend, she was in a Zionist organization. When [NAME] left, there was a sign there, "I'm alive and live outside Berlin in Zehlendorf." I came to Zehlendorf. He lived with his mother. And his mother saw me there and she almost fainted. I spoke to her and she said, "You don't speak German anymore; you're Yiddling. You're talking like Yiddish." Being in a concentration for so many years, I lost my dialect, apparently. You want to hear the rest of all that?

No. Let's pause there. Because we may come back and finish the story.

Yeah, sure.

So full circle, you left Berlin, which was the events that started on November ninth, tenth, 1938.

I left Berlin in June 1939.

And then you came back. What year was that?

Nineteen forty-five. I think the war was over in about—we were in May 1939, pretty late.

And Philipp, you're a whole different generation from the rest of us. Maybe I should ask

you first, Rabbi, how did you find Philipp and his story?

Well, in January of last year, of 2014, I went to Israel with a group of pastors from Las Vegas, angelical pastors from Las Vegas. It was a trip sponsored by Christians United for Israel and they were on this experimental trip where they took all of these pastors and two rabbis, me and Rabbi Tecktiel. It was like a joke, right? Twenty-two pastors and two rabbis and [Dalia Park]. I have to tell you to make a long story short, it was a fascinating trip and I met a lot of good friends.

There's two pastors that I study with constantly. Every other week we study with the gospels and now we have Hebrew Bible, with [Joshua Ties and Paul and Dan]. When we went to Paul's church to study, Philipp was there because we were studying something on Abraham and he's like a super expert on Abraham, believe it or not. There was a complicated text we were trying to decipher. So Paul called Philipp in and he came and he studied with us.

Somehow I find out he was from Germany originally. He has no accent. I think he's a perfect English speaker. I really don't even remember how, but the whole thing got...he told me his story of growing up in Germany and moving to a little town outside of Munich. Right? Where he saw how the Russian Jews actually came and resettled the Jewish part of town. The synagogue was opened up again.

It was a very moving story because I have to tell you the truth. I have never spoken with a German of my generation, ever in my life; I mean who's not Jewish. He's younger than me. But I have never spoken about the [show out] with a German in my entire life who's not Jewish. So for me this was like an earth-shaking experience. Here we have a pastor who has a personal faith who actually loves Israel and the Jewish people. I just keep thinking all the time, *if my grandmother could see this, oh, my god, she would never believe me.*

Somehow I told Esther about Philipp and I said, “I think he should speak at our commemoration of Kristallnacht because his story is so powerful and such a beautiful story of hope of how the new generation is a completely different thing and how we should be grateful that there are young people like him that understand what happened and who help us make sure that this never repeats itself again.” So that's how Philipp comes into the story.

And Philipp, share your story with us.

Well, it was with hesitation at first when Rabbi Felipe asked me to be a part of it because I only shared with him about three minutes. And then Esther fact checked me for a little background information. I remember we were on a conference call, the three of us, and I got to share the longer version of what I only could share with the rabbi.

RABBI GOODMAN: And by the way, for me alone, the short version was compelling enough, trust me.

PHILIPP: And I just shared. I remember it was just awkward silence at first. I remember that. I thought to myself, *I must have done something or said something that completely offended everybody*. And then Esther was like, “All right. We'll see you for the commemoration event.”

Anyway, I was privileged to be a part of it and the reason being is that I think...when you're two, three generations removed from an event, it becomes a historical record on page. It does not touch lives anymore because the generation that actually had to live through it, by and large, is gone. And so you lose the voice. You lose the touch. You lose the presence of those that lived through these events. In my case, my grandparents have all passed away. I can no longer go to them and ask them.

Early on in my childhood, I did ask them. On my father's side, my grandfather would always say, “We don't talk about this.” I would ask him, “What about this event? What about

that event?" "We don't talk about this."

My grandfather on my mother's side, on the other hand, he was a high-ranking SS officer. He was in a special death squadron unit, completely comprised of guardsmen from the concentration camps. The reason being is that his unit needed to have the most dehumanized brute people in order to work behind enemy lines and sabotage the enemies before the German Army could invade and advance. So asking my grandfather on my mother's side, till the day he died he was convinced of the cause.

I remember to this day. I may have been a very, very young child at the time. But I looked at my grandfather and I always feared him. There was darkness all about him. In fact, in 1986, when he did pass away, I remember to this day that I was at the grave site. The family was doing the honors. As is custom in Germany, you would take a little shovel and put some dirt on the casket as it is in the ground. I remember there was ice cold shivers coming down my spine. And I was a six-year-old boy at the time; it was 1986. I remember turning around and there was my grandfather's chauffeur in full SS regalia, which is illegal in Germany. It's almost considered treason. He was in full regalia. I could see the skulls on his buttons leading all the way up his uniform. I could see the SS symbol on his leather gloves. I could see the shiny dark black boots. I could see the iron cross that my grandfather also earned because he was a war hero of sorts. I remember to this day that I didn't want anything to do this at all because there was such darkness, such fear that I had just by that man just standing there, and all he was doing was trying to honor my grandfather.

Later on, as I went about my schooling in Munich, I almost had forgotten about the event when my grandmother started deteriorating in age and then in health. My mother thought it was best to move from Munich to the small town Straubing, which for me being a big city kid that

was probably the worst thing at the time because what do you do in Straubing? You go from a one-point-two-million-people big city to a small Podunk town in the middle of Lower Bavaria, 95 percent Roman Catholic, backwoods. I mean this is where we're at. I thought this was the dumbest move to make. But we moved in with my grandmother and took care of her. I would always ask her, "What about this? What about this event? Did you know about this?" Because I would learn in history. In Germany you're required to go through what is known as Western Civ about three times by the time you graduate from high school. In the latter years, the emphasis is on World War I and World War II and how we arrived at the form of government we have today. So by the time you go through that again, you get very familiar with the historical events that you read in a book. I would ask my grandmother, "Did you know about this?" "No, we didn't know about this." "What about the atrocities and was my grandfather a part of it?" "No, he was not." To the day she died she would deny any involvement and any knowledge about it. So that wasn't much of a help.

But I do remember it to study history. And I was fortunate in about tenth and eleventh grade to have a history teacher who felt the burden of letting this generation know to never forget as well. He was not Jewish; he was German, but he had lived through the events as a young man. He swore to himself, "If I ever have a chance to impact a generation of students and make sure they don't forget; that they own up to the atrocities of their grandparents' generation, to make sure that these events never happen again, I'll do my best." So he required us...when *Schindler's List* came out, we were required to watch it. There is no opt out. It was like, "You're going; you're watching it; and then we will discuss it." I remember he would come—there's history books in front of us. But he would say, "You can read this on your own. Let me bring you an original newspaper article from the Kristallnacht. Let me share with you what German

news reporters in the town of Straubing shared about what happened that night in our town.”

And he would read it to us. We're listening to it, just the horror. Then he would take us downtown to one of the few surviving synagogues completely intact. We would go down there and we would stand in front of that building and he would tell us the story of what happened that night. The Nazis came with torches in hand. They were going to burn that place down. And as they were about to burn it down, the mayor of the town came out and said, “I understand what you want to do. I'm not objecting to it. However, we tried to do this before and no sooner had we set that synagogue on fire, an east wind would come up out of nowhere and burn half the city down. Now, we can't have that happen again.” So that incident saved the synagogue building. They would desecrate it. They would smash all the windows. They would take the sacred relics out of it, demolish it, burn it or sell it, hide it. They would slaughter pigs and throw the pigs' heads into the synagogue. But they would leave the building intact and then they would deport the few Jewish families that at that time were there. I think there were about a hundred and ten families, a hundred and twelve families or so in that city at the time. They were deported to different concentration camps. In 1945, only one of these families would return to that city.

As I was sharing with Rabbi Felipe, one of the things that really hit me is that as atrocious and as horrible as the events were, if you just leave it at the horror, you can feel the weight of it and it would make you feel hopeless especially in the new wave of anti-Semitism rising again. Where is the hope in all of this?

I've shared with Rabbi that I got to witness something in my early childhood years. When the Berlin wall came down, Russian-Jewish immigrants were allowed to travel from Russia through Germany back to Israel, the idea being that some several hundred thousand— [NAME] is what they were called—were allowed to come from Russia and settle in Germany for

a time. Most of them didn't know anything about Jewish customs. They were not practitioners of the Jewish religion. They didn't speak Jewish nor had they any exposure to the Hebrew Scriptures at all. But they knew we were Jewish by decent and this is our way out.

I remember to this day that at that time—I was still in high school—there were thoughts about shutting down the synagogue because there were not enough people to run it and they were about to decommission that rabbi that was there when Germany signed that treaty with Russia. All the sudden that little town of Straubing got a boost of Jewish immigrants and there they were. All they knew is we were Jewish and we're now in a better place than what we were in Russia. They invited me—I still don't know how I got that invitation, but they invited me to their first Hanukkah fest, which was chaotic. It was one of the greatest experiences because here you have a rabbi that now has fresh blood in his congregation and they had no clue about anything. They were people that didn't speak the language. People were trying to teach the custom. Long story short, it was a very chaotic night. I remember sitting there out on the balcony with tears in my eyes and I was like, “If people could see the hope that I'm seeing, I'm going to tell that to people that feel the burden of the [Showa] that there is hope two generations later and that what was meant for evil is turning into good. If there's just a glimmer of hope, it would be enough to carry it into the next generation.

So when I was invited to speak at the Kristallnacht event in 2014, I wanted to really make sure that I got to share that glimmer of hope because the theme was from fascism to freedom. What happened there is in Straubing we had a revival of the Jewish community. Today there is a school there. Many more families are there. It is no longer chaotic. It is very organized. We have a vibrant Jewish community that is now alive and well.

I remember on occasion when I would go to my mom's hometown and I'd get to visit, I

do make a point to go by that synagogue whether it's during the day or at night. In fact, when my wife and I first got married and we had a chance to go to Germany, I would take her to that synagogue and tell her that story because I wanted her to know as much as I love the Jewish people, this is personal. And I got to see it. I got to experience a hope in the midst of atrocity and I wanted to share that. I wanted people to understand, yes, there is a new wave of anti-Semitism in Western Europe. Yes, there is a generation that is lost in terms of who is our identity? Yes, there is a growing wave of hatred going throughout Western Europe. However, there is a generation of men and women that don't want this to be just another page in a history book. While they're not guilty themselves of the blood that their grandparents may have spilled, they will carry that burden with them whether they like it or not. What they do with that, to me that is hope. That's why I want to engage in these conversations because I want people to understand, no, you may never forget and we need to do our best not to have these events happen again. And for as long as there are still survivors that we can touch and shake hands and listen and hear their stories, let us make sure that we take these stories and we personalize them and carry them on so that they, too, will have an eyewitness account or audible account of both the weight of the atrocity as well as the glimmer of hope.

ESTHER: How do you follow that?

That's very powerful. All of your stories are powerful. That's wonderful. Thank you so much.

RABBI GOODMAN: I have no story.

But—wow.

RABBI GOODMAN: That's a good story.

Yeah. So if you take a deep breath from that...Ray, when you are hearing the experiences

all the time and it's part of the group that you head up and all of that, how do you feel?

What do you think?

RAYMONDE: I just hurt. I just hurt.

So does that urge you on in what your mission is?

Oh, yeah. Oh, you can't stop. I think I came into the position by default because nobody was doing it. I said, "At this point in my life I can't stop. As long as I can, I will continue." Esther has been my coach. She's helped me along the way. As long as there are survivors, it is so important for students, for anybody to have the direct testimony. I think we make a difference. We have to continue and do it as long as we can. And the second generation is coming up to the plate. They have to as they're building a good group. And we have to continue doing it. It's not just the Jewish people. The world hasn't learned. What's happening in Europe is horrible. I was just a year ago in my hometown of Paris. I don't want to go back, never again. So it's hard.

Esther?

I would like to address something he said. I wasn't so much fact checking. What I was doing...Ray, you were on the phone with me. We were the three. It wasn't Rabbi Goodman; it was Ray with me. We wanted to hear what you had to say to make sure that it was the kind of thing that the survivors could hear and could handle because some of the stuff is too difficult for them. And we didn't have any problem. We thought you had the message of hope. And I was very enthusiastic about having you because I know what it's like to be a descendent of a survivor. I can't imagine what it's like to be a descendent of a perpetrator. So I thought that was a very important component to this and I'm hoping that maybe we can get you to come do another program with us with somebody that's not too far away who is second generation descendant of perpetrator. In fact, my father was in Blechhammer, also, and I believe this man that I'm

thinking of, his father was a guard in Blechhammer. So I think it would be really amazing to have some of us together and to do a program like that. But that's something else.

I also just wanted to mention that the theme from fascism to freedom was specifically designed to go along with the sesquicentennial because the survivors came to this great America and to this city and I wanted to tie all that in with that. So that's why that was the theme.

ALEXANDER: The survivors came to the United States of America with no chip on their shoulder, no chip on their shoulder. They were without...many of them didn't have a profession because they were younger. But in order to come to United States of America, you had to have a profession. When I was further living in Germany, in Nuremberg, there was a school called ORT, which is a Jewish organization and they said I became a welder. I didn't like it, but I had a profession. I was sponsored by a Jewish organization to join. You had somebody that will guarantee that you're not going to be a burden to America. You had to have clean lungs. You had to be healthy. You could not be a communist. They were very, very concerned about somebody being communist.

As a matter of fact, I'll tell you a cute story. I came to Bremen. After the war they put an organization together, Survivors of the Holocaust. But there were some communists in there in the concentration that were survivors, too. So some Jewish people joined that organization not knowing it had a communistic background. I came to Bremen by myself there. And the CIA or the Secret Service called me and they said, "Mr. Kuechel, give me your papers from your organization, your membership." And I spoke English to him. And he kept talking to me for ten minutes and I got so excited...speaking German. He said, "No, your English is good enough." Then he let me go.

Then the next day somebody said, "Whoever can speak English can go aboard ship two

days earlier.” So we went aboard ship and there was a guy from Texas. He talked to me and I didn't understand one single word. [All laughing] That's a fact. I was one of the first ones to get seasick, including the crew. It took us twelve days to come to United States of America.

RAYMONDE: It took me fourteen. I lost a pound a day.

ESTHER: It's not the way to lose weight.

RAYMONDE: No.

Well, this is quite a round table of immigrants. We have a lot of representation here. This is great. I think that just reflecting and hearing the stories again and more in detail, it was a really good program that needs to find a broader audience. And whatever I can do to help do that I think that would be...this is really important conversation that shouldn't just stop with the oral history, but should be a broader topic. We need to continue it. I thought it was good in the program, too, how young people were included. They weren't included in today's conversation. But who were the young people there that day?

RABBI GOODMAN: A couple of Hillel students.

ESTHER: I think one was on the March of the Living in the past. You know the March of the Living? Groups of young students, teenagers go to the death camps and go to Auschwitz and then they learn about the Holocaust. They visit some of the sites and then they go to Israel for a few days. So there was at least one March of the Living student and then there was one from the Hillel, who I think had also gone on the March of the Living, but before I started teaching the kids.

RABBI GOODMAN: Yes, yes, yes.

ESTHER: So that was somebody I had just met. I've been teaching the March of Living kids for the past couple of years, but this is somebody from before.

PHILIPP: Just to piggyback off of that that is the reason why, I believe, this generation needs to go and go see those sites, be able to interact with people like you and you and just say, “Tell me your story; let me see it.” Growing up I never denied the concentration camps existed. I personally didn't need to go there in order to make sure it actually took place. The denial in my family was blatant enough. But I did end up going to a work camp, Flossenbürg—

ALEXANDER: Flossenbürg is a big concentration camp.

PHILIPP: It was officially, in quotations, dubbed as just a work camp. I remember going into this one room and I asked the tour guide, “Where was the purpose of this room?” Because I see this stone table that had a rim around it and it was slanted and it seemed like it was siphoning into a hole. “What was the purpose for it?” There was a little hesitancy because they didn't expect that kind of question. I was specific about it. They said, “This is where surgeries were performed.” And I said, “What kind of surgeries?” Because last time I checked, even in the thirties and forties, you knew about sterilization and you knew better than to operate on a stone table. Then I saw some pictures on the wall. It was very evident as to what was going on, what kind of surgeries were performed. And also to see the bullet holes of the executions, to see those sites, I think it's important for this generation that is coming up that now the only one reference that they have is a few pages in their history books, for them to see and touch, hear, feel, experience that this was real. Because when they do, it's personal and at that point they want to make sure it doesn't repeat.

There's power in hearing the words.

ALEXANDER: You see (1:04:20) going to university to Harvard and all those places of learning. They ask some questions. They know about the constitution. They don't know what the name of the vice president is. They don't anything about the Holocaust. They don't know

anything at all. If there's a word for stupid, there should be a bigger word than stupid. It's unbelievable. They don't know from anything at all. How can you...? When I give lectures for the last nineteen years, I tell the students, "Define the word "hunger" for me. Define the word "hunger." Any human being can define that if you went through it. So I see when I talk to people how can anybody imagine they take six million people; they take them and they kill them off, a generation? How is that feasible in your mind? It's impossible to believe. And history repeats itself. They're doing it with the Christians today. And we got two billion Christians in this world. Nothing to be done about it, basically, two billion. One point six billion Muslims. When the Germans were goose stepping in Germany, they didn't goose step to join the Olympics. When they goose step in Iran today, they're not there to join in the Olympics. If somebody tells you they're going to get rid of you, you better believe it.

RAYMONDE: I would like to point out everybody knows about the concentration camps—Auschwitz, Dachau. Where my parents were taken, we were in the [Alden]. They're gone. There's no evidence. Each village became a camp. What Hitler did was try—the [Alden] is close to Germany and he was getting rid of the French people, the residents, and replacing them with foreign-born Jews working in the camps, which turned out to be, obviously, camps. You were totally a prisoner. The plan was when the Jews were no longer needed to work the camps—they were growing the food for the German Army—they were, obviously, taken to Auschwitz. And my parents were taken from there to [Dawnsee] and directly to Auschwitz. Nobody writes about that. It's not known. There were hundreds. But because there's no evidence...And most of the people who were there are no longer living; they never made it. This lady, this Christian lady who is dedicating herself to erecting monuments to all the victims. There was a newspaper article. Where is the press? One person wrote about it. Nobody's telling

the world about what happened there. Not only was it in France, it was all over, all over Western Europe, to my knowledge.

ALEXANDER: People don't know what happened in Russia to Jewish people.

RABBI GOODMAN: Alex, when did you start telling your story?

ALEXANDER: Nineteen years ago.

RABBI GOODMAN: How? What happened that made you tell the story?

ALEXANDER: I was in Sun City and a gentleman there was telling a story about it and saying how the Pope and the Christianity helped the Jewish people. So I got up. I said, "Wait a minute. That's not quite so."

RABBI GOODMAN: The Pope? He said Pope?

ALEXANDER: Yes, yes. He was a representative from the Christianity. I said, "That's not quite so." So somebody from Sun City who was with the Speakers Bureau, he said, "Alex, why don't you start speaking?"

And I'm going to tell you something else. I never spoke to my two sons about my experiences. You know why? I didn't want to take their innocence away. I never spoke ever to my sons about my experiences

RAYMONDE: Well, I just got a call today. I got a phone call. It was lunchtime, a meeting lunch. The phone rings and I say, "Hello?" And she says, "Well, maybe I have a wrong number." I said, "Who are you trying to call?" She said, "The Holocaust Survivor Group." I said, "You got me. Okay, that's it. Can I help you?"

"Well, I don't know where to start. My father is a Holocaust survivor." And she proceeds to tell me he has Alzheimer's. "I never knew his story. He never spoke about it. I made up things about my father's experiences. All I know is he's from Latvia. He ended up in a

concentration camp in Germany. I don't know how he made it into the United States, nothing.” I said, “What about your mother?” “Well, he never said anything to my mother.”

Anyway, she needs assistance for him. Both parents have Alzheimer's. The mother is American-born and she knows nothing. She said, “I made up a story.”

My own daughter recently told me that she made up a story in school that my parents died in a car accident because she had no explanation. So is it bad; is it good? I don't know. But if you can't talk, what do you do?

ALEXANDER: American soldiers who fought in the Second World War, they do not want to speak about it, either.

RAYMONDE: That's not so.

ESTHER: I think right after the war, those people who experienced either the camps or the liberation, as the military, did try and speak a little bit and people weren't ready to hear it and they were shut down pretty fast. So the survivors started speaking to other survivors. It came in waves. I was just talking about this the other day with March of the Living kids. In '61, in the Eichmann trial people started talking about it. When they came out with the TV show *Holocaust*, they started talking about it and then it went away again. And then with *Schindler's List* they started talking about it. Then, of course, with Spielberg getting all these testimonies, now all these stories, many of them are preserved.

My mother, I don't have her voice. I don't have her story. She died before we had the technology. So it's gone.

So I mean it came in waves. There were some liberators, even many, many, many years later felt guilty because they couldn't do more. I did an interview. This was for the U.S. Holocaust Museum when I lived in Washington, D.C. The man that I interviewed worked with

Quaker Relief; he went across with the British troops. He gave food to the prisoners that they couldn't digest and they ended up killing prisoners by the thousands. He was living with this guilt for decades.

RABBI GOODMAN: Oh, my god.

ESTHER: He tried to help and he did the wrong thing. He didn't talk about it much, I can tell you.

RAYMONDE: I had a teenage friend in Paris. He was a survivor from the camp. He escaped. I don't know how he made it. That was enough for me. He started to tell me. He found an apple. He ate the apple. He was sick. It made him so sick to eat an apple because he had not had that much food. He couldn't digest it. That's hunger. That's hunger if an apple makes you sick after you eat. And after he said that, I said, "You can't tell me anymore." And I broke off the relationship; I couldn't deal with it.

RABBI GOODMAN: Henry Kronberg has a story that when he was in Germany, after he had liberated and a couple of years later, they run, in a train station, into one of the guards and he recognized him. And this guy used to be a very peculiar guard; he used to kill people when they were handsome. He would kill handsome men. This guy was the ugliest person he has ever seen in his life. He saw him and he was with a friend and he told him and they started screaming at him, "You are the guard." And the guy said, "No, you're crazy." One of the American soldiers that was guarding the place was Jewish and they apprehended him and they took him in. The more stories I hear like this, the more incomprehensible it all is, right? And it never stops. It keeps on going.

ESTHER: It's a bottomless evil.

RABBI GOODMAN: The stories never end. It's unbelievable.

Right. And so it is painful. But it is something that's powerful and it needs to be heard, and so I appreciate you all talking today. If there's any last story or comment you'd like to make...This will be transcribed and we will find a way beyond maybe the Web portal to share this.

RABBI GOODMAN: I want to thank Pastor Philipp for being here. It's a very special thing. I've discovered—I have to make this statement because I grew up in a Catholic country. I was never looking for sympathy, but I never found support in other clergy in what happened to the Jewish people during the Shoah. It's only recently since I really made some friends in the pro-Israel angelical community that I found a tremendous support. I won't call it validation, but somebody to hold me up from a different faith so it's not only my story and my burden to tell. Somebody shares with me this idea that people should know. So thank you so much for being here.

Well, I appreciate you—

ALEXANDER: I have one that people may not realize and I say it without any prejudice. The Jewish people were killed by Christians. They were all Christians, and they weren't even good Christians. Ask somebody, “Good Christians?” You couldn't be because Jesus didn't even teach that. They were Christians. The machine gun people went home for Christmastime, brought presents they stole in Paris and France and all over Europe, put their children to bed, sang *Holy Night*, put the candles on, then went back sometimes with their wives to watch when people were being machine gunned. That's incomprehensible.

RABBI GOODMAN: It's evil.

Yeah, it is. That's a good word.

RAYMONDE: But I have to say I was saved by a Christian family; otherwise, I would not be

here.

ALEXANDER: True. Oh, there's no question about it. Those people I call saints because—

RAYMONDE: They are.

—because they saved you. In the Jewish religion, the biggest deed in the Jewish religion is to save a life, a human life. You know what it means to save a human life? They would have killed out the whole family if they would have found out about it. And those people will honor the state of Israel. Whatever you do, you can never repay those people ever in your life.

RABBI GOODMAN: Impossible.

Well, thank you.

RAYMONDE: So there are good people.

RABBI GOODMAN: There are a lot of good people.

Well, thank you all very, very much. This is a very important contribution.

[End of recorded discussion]

