

Museum of History and Holocaust Education Legacy Series
Andre Kessler Interview
Conducted by James Newberry
November 14, 2013
Transcribed by Ryan C. Wolfe, MHHE Fall 2015

Born in Bucharest, Romania in 1940, Andre Kessler lived in hiding throughout his childhood. He attributes his survival to his mother who refused to wear the yellow star and his landlord who let his family go into hiding. When World War II ended, Kessler escaped from behind the Iron Curtain to Austria and eventually immigrated to the United States.

Full Transcript

Interviewer: This is James Newberry. I am here with Andre Kessler on November 14, 2013, at the Museum of History and Holocaust Education at Kennesaw State University. Mr. Kessler, do you agree to this interview?

Kessler: Yes.

Interviewer: When and where were you born?

Kessler: I was born in Bucharest, Romania, March the eighth, 1940. My name at that time was Andre Ulnell Grunfeld.

Interviewer: Can you describe your earliest memories of life in Bucharest?

Kessler: The earliest memories were good ones. Even though Romania was part of the allies of Nazi Germany and they followed the Nuremburg laws up until December 1942, when my father was arrested. We had a fairly decent life. Of course they had confiscated telephones. Jews were not allowed to have telephones; Jews were not allowed to have radios. We were in our own apartment; it was a fairly good life as a three year old. Most of the time I ate and slept, it was a good life.

Interviewer: What did your father do for a living?

Kessler: My father owned two men's shirt factories. They manufactured shirts like Van Heusen and people like that. When it became against the law for Jews to own property and hire non-Jews, he had a Christian partner that he sold the business to on paper. So, he still worked for the company but he no longer owned it, so he was in the manufacturing shirt business.

Interviewer: And your mother?

Kessler: My mother was a housewife. She just lived in the apartment and ran the family, made sure everything was ready, we had a housekeeper. So she supervised the cooking and the cleaning and things like that then of course it became against the law to employ that house keeper, so my mother took over the duties, she ran the house.

Interviewer: What role did your Jewish faith identity play in your life and your parents' lives?

Kessler: Well my parents were orthodox Jews, they were very observant. My mother lit candles every Friday night, holidays were observed. When I was born it was against the law to have Jewish ceremonies, so my father smuggled in the Mohel, the one who does the ritual circumcision, into our apartment. He had his tools inside his coat pocket, sterilized them in our apartment, and on the eighth day of my life I was circumcised in secret in our own apartment. That was the way things were done then, it was against the law to have Jewish celebrations, any kind of Jewish observances.

Interviewer: Why do you think the Nazis were able to come to power in Germany?

Kessler: Oh I don't know. I mean there was the whole thing with the world economy; Germany was severely punished after the First World War. The failure of the stock market here in the U.S. carried over to Europe. Unemployment was rampant all over Europe including Romania. So the Nazis promised bread work and freedom back to the old Germany and that's how they came into power.

Interviewer: What sort of fascist groups in Romania popped up?

Kessler: They were known as the Iron Guard, they were a very strong fascist group, and General Ion Antonescu was in charge of the iron guard. King Carrol was forced to abdicate and Antonescu took power. They were not as anti-Jewish as the Nazis and the Hungarians, which the Hungarians were the Errol Cross. They all gave themselves fancy names and I'm using the translation into English. In Hungarian the Hungarians were the *milosh* and the Iron Guard. *mumble* King Carrol, who was still the power behind the throne, told Marshall Antonescu, he even promoted himself. He says, "Leave our Jews alone, any territory that you conquer is fair game." In 1940 as part of the deal for the Hungarians to come into the war, they took that section that was Hungary prior to 1918 and gave it to the Romanians; they gave it back to the Hungarians. Those territories were fair game. The Romanians fought alongside the German army and territories that were conquered were fair game, they took over a lot of those territories. Romania did not have an extermination camp. They did not systematically murder the Jews like they did at Auschwitz and Dachau and Bergen-Belsen and so forth. They had a slave labor camp known Transnistria. That's where my father, when he was arrested in December of 1942, was taken was Transnistria. The people that died at Transnistria died of disease, malnutrition and over work. My father was a large man he was 6' 4" and he weighed 246 pounds when he was arrested. He survived and he came back in August of 1945, he was still 6' 4", but he weighed 132 lbs. They had almost literally worked him to death, he dug ditches, shoveled snow, work on road repairs, anything the Romanians under Nazi supervision found for him to do he did. For that his reward was a bowl of watery soup a day and a piece of bread that was mainly made of saw dust. The barracks there, they slept on straw, the Romanians of the Iron Guard even said it was not worth wasting a bullet on a Jew, if they died they died there was no medical treatment and things like that. But, he survived; he came home in August of 1945.

Interviewer: Did the anti-Jewish laws go into effect once Romania joined the Axis power?

Kessler: Yes, yes they did.

Interviewer: How did that play out?

Kessler: Well again, it was just certain laws. Synagogues were closed, Jewish businesses were confiscated. There became roundups, during certain times the Iron Guard would want to show their German partners how well they obeyed their laws, they would have a roundup of Jews in Bucharest. One of the most notorious ones was they took them out to the stockyards and butchered them and hung them on meat hooks, there was if I remember correctly my dates again because I was a child, there were over three hundred people; men, women, and children butchered at the stockyards. So every once in a while they had a roundup of Jews, but most of the time the ones that came from northern Romania, from Chornowitz, they were sent to Transnistria.

Interviewer: Let's talk about your time in hiding; your father is at a work camp as of 1942, so life is changing. What does your mother do at this time as they begin to institute laws and require the wearing of yellow stars?

Kessler: My mother refused. I always say she was a very stubborn lady, when the decree came out for the Jews of Romania to sew the yellow Star of David upon their clothing she refused. She didn't sew it on to hers or on to mine. We were fortunate in the fact that my mother did not look like the stereotype of what a Jew was supposed to look like, my mother had blonde hair and blue eyes. When my father was arrested, I owe my life to my mother and to what we now call a righteous gentile. Georgiu Popescu was the superintendent of the apartment building where my family lived, and he and my mother got together and decided we should go into hiding. We were able to go into hiding in our own apartment because the area where we lived was around the king's palace and the parliament zone and it was declared a no live zone. Romania was a very vital part of the German war machine because they had the Plouleshti Oil Fields. We were bombed by the Americans during the day and the British at night. When they had extra bombs left over they would come back over Bucharest and try to bomb the king's palace and the parliament building, so that area was declared a no live zone. We lived in our own apartment; we went into hiding in our own apartment. The windows had been darkened; blankets and sheets had been shoved under the door so no sound would come out. That is where I spent the next sixteen months of my life, in that apartment building. My mother chose the smallest room in the house which was my parent's library. She chose it because it was the smallest room in the house, but it was also the room that was closest to the bathroom. So when the water worked, because of the bombings and things like that, she put a lot of water through me so I was full. The staple food of Romania is a corn meal based concoction called Mamaligga, and that is what we ate when we could get it. Georgiu would go out into the black market and buy the corn meal. What we didn't know is that not only did he hide my mother and myself but he also hid two other Jewish families in that building. We didn't know about each other because

he was afraid if one of us was captured we would betray the other two. So Gerrgew is indeed a righteous amongst nations. When I went to Israel for the first time in 1969, outside of the holocaust museum in Jerusalem Yad Vashem, is a grove of trees dedicated to the righteous gentiles. Oscar Schindler, Raoul Wallenberg, the Japanese council who gave forged documents to Jews so they could go into China. I had a tree planted in Georghiou's honor, so he is amongst the righteous gentiles at Yad Vashem in Jerusalem. We stayed in that apartment for sixteen months. One of the ways my mother kept me busy because I was a very active child, and I kept asking her why I could hear children outside playing. I wanted to know why I couldn't go out and play. She gave me the typical parent answer, "because I said so!" One of the ways she kept me busy, that room was my parent's library, and both of them were avid readers. She started to teach me how to read and write and by the time we came out of hiding when I was almost five I could read and write in two languages, both Romanian and Hungarian. It was long days especially in the winter time because Romania in the winter gets dark very early and light very late, so did a lot of sleeping and a lot of studying and that is how we passed the days.

Interviewer: You said there were bombs being dropped on the Parliament Building and the Palace. Was this frightening?

Kessler: The only time we really got scared was when a bomb fell at the end of our street and shattered one of the windows in the apartment. That was frightening, but when the air raid sirens went off, we went under the bed. We couldn't go to the air raid shelters. We were afraid that somebody would recognize us and we would be betrayed, so when the air raid sirens went off we hid under the bed.

Interviewer: Did you ever go outside?

Kessler: No, I was in the apartment for 16 months.

Interviewer: How did you receive information from the outside?

Kessler: From Georghiou, he kept us advised of what was going on and of course being non-Jewish he had the privilege of having a radio. He listened to the propaganda, who knew what was true and what wasn't true. We kept up with events through Georghiou.

Interviewer: I know you were very young but did you get some sense later of what your mother was anticipating would happen down the road or did she have any sense of when there would be an ending?

Kessler: I think like most parents she kept me secure, she didn't want to scare me or alert me, she kept a lot of things to herself.

Interviewer: And no word from your father at this point?

Kessler: No, of course not, he did not know where we were. When he was liberated, Russian troops came through and liberated Romania at the end of 1944 beginning

of 1945. He was freed, but of course he was sick. So they put him in a hospital for him to recover. He came back and when he walked into the apartment I didn't recognize him, I hid behind my mother, and I didn't know who that strange man was. I don't know where he got the overcoat he was wearing but it was four times too big on him. He was a mere skeleton of the man I remembered. It took a while for me to get used to it again, the idea that this strange man was my father. When everything started going back to normalcy they put me into school, I went into first grade. I had a problem; I did not know how to associate with other children because I had spent the last 16 months of my life in that apartment. I was a so-called problem child, when a child said something to me I didn't like I either hit or I bit. But, we got over that. My father got his factories back from his partner who was a very righteous man he'd give him back his businesses. In 1947, Romania became a communist dictatorship. They came to my father one morning and said the factories he owned have now been nationalized, that he will still run them but he will no longer own them. As I said, my mother was stubborn; my father was not to be outdone. He arranged for my mother and I to escape across two borders. We went from Romania to Hungary, from Hungary to Austria. There were people who knew where the gaps in the barbed wire were and when it was a goodnight to cross. When my mother and I got to the Romanian Hungarian border and these people saw that I was an 8 year old boy they panicked, they were afraid that I would make a noise and give them away. In addition to what my father had paid them, there was nothing wrong with that because they risked their lives to do this, my mother took off the jewelry she was wearing and gave it to them. They decided it was ok to take the risk. To this day I still remember the sounds of the guards, the smell of their cigarette smoke, and the barking of dogs. We crossed over; it was a very dark moonless night. We crossed over into Hungary and we were walking across the fields in Hungary and my mother stepped into a pothole, severely spraining her ankle. When we got to Budapest we went to what was called a safe house. I was right back in the apartment of don't make any noise, don't draw any attention to yourself, don't speak to anyone. It didn't last long, within a three to four week period my mother's ankle healed. We went to the Hungarian Austrian border, again there were people there to guide us. We crossed over and we were getting ready to board a bus to go into Vienna and we were arrested by the Austrian police. Luckily it was the Austrians, because if it had been the Russians, they would have sent us right back to Bucharest and we would have wound up probably in prison somewhere. We were with a group of other people; they talked to the Austrians and convinced them we were so called political refugees. They put us on a bus and sent us into Vienna. My parents had arranged for telephone conversation, and when my mother said a key word to my father he knew that we were safe in Austria. He arranged for himself to get out, but before he did, he had gotten a hold of some explosives and he planted them on timers. He went across the border, and when the Romanians went to look for their factories in the morning all they found was rubble, he had blown them up. Every once in a while, well almost on a daily basis, my wife looks at me and says you are so dog gone stubborn, and I say yes I am, I get it legitimately, I come from two very stubborn people. He joined us in Vienna, and when we got there they

told us that it would be at least three to five years before we could even think about coming to the United States because there was an immigration quota. My mother had two brothers who had come to the United States. My Uncle Alex came to the United States in 1929, my other Uncle Emory got out of Romania in 1940. He went to Palestine, there was no such thing as Israel he went to Palestine. He stayed in Palestine for two years and then came to the United States in 1942. In 1943 he enlisted in the United States army and he was with the second wave of the 29th Infantry Division at the Normandy Landings. Even with them guaranteeing that we would not be a burden to the state, my mother would not collect employment and things like that, they still told us it would beat least 3-5 years before we could come here. My father had two brothers who had gone to France prior to the Second World War. When my Uncle Yahknosh wanted to go to medical school, as liberal as Romania was in the late 20s early 30s, he was declined; they had a quota and would only take so many Jews. He went to France and got his medical degree from L'Université Paris-Sorbonne. I have a tremendous family, my mother was one of six children my father was one of thirteen. I had a lot of family. During the Second World War, both of my uncles that lived in France were part of the French Resistance. They had shipped their families to London, one was a doctor the other one was a fighter. I have two Uncle Emorys, one from my mother's side one from my father's side. Emory is a very common Hungarian name. During the war they fought against the Nazi occupation. My Uncle Emory who was the fighter despised the Nazis so much; he was a killing machine, every time he came across a Nazi that was the end of him. He was decorated with the Legion of Merit and the Croix de Guerre by General Charles de Gaulle. My father decided it was a lot easier to go to France from Austria than it was to the United States so he joined his brothers in France, and the deal with my parents was whoever was able to support the other one would eventually join them. Well, I wound up not seeing my father again for 13 years.

Interviewer: You were able to immigrate to the United States in what year?

Kessler: We finally got our papers in March of 1951. We left Vienna and went to Bremerhaven, Germany where the ships sailed from. They only sailed once a week and we wound up in what was called a Displaced Persons Camp. It was an old German Army camp. I don't know if they didn't want us to associate with the Germans or the Germans to associate with us, but for the first time in my life I was behind barbed wire. We were in the camp with other people waiting to be able to board ships to come to the United States. During the day I went to classes. While we lived in Vienna, I went to the school for the children of the French Occupation Forces. My uncles arranged for me to go the school for the children of the French Occupation Forces. I spoke during the day and German at night because that is the language of Austria. In the camp they were teaching us English. That was the first time I was learning English because of course we are coming to the United States. They had recreation for us; I was still with my mother in the barracks with the other women. In August 7th 1951, we boarded a very small former troop ship, which used to bring troops from the United States to Europe, the S.S. General Sturgis. When we boarded the ship, at 11 years old I was

a pretty big kid, and they decided that I didn't belong with the women. They had a women's section and a man's section. They put me in with the men, as an 11 year old child it was very traumatic because it the first in my life I was separated from my mother. Then I discovered that food was plentiful aboard ship. I could eat as much as I wanted to when I wanted to. Since my mother spent the ten days it took to cross in her bunk because she was terribly sea sick. I had my first taste of freedom, I roamed the ship. A very nice gentleman agreed to take care of me but he was doing things the men aboard ship did, play cards and things like that. I was always hanging over the side, they had very low railings and they were afraid I was going to fall overboard. We landed in New York City, August the 17th, 1951. We did not come through Ellis Island. We landed on the Hudson River in New York. My mother's brother Emory was there to pick us up along with my cousin Marty. My first recollection of the United States was my Uncle Emory drove a Buick convertible. We went down from the Hudson River from the docks down Broadway. It was getting dark and you could see all the lights lighting up on Broadway. They had a Camel cigarette advertisement where the guy was blowing smoke rings, and that is my first recollection of the United States. We went to my Uncle Alex's house in Queens, this was a Friday. Friday until Sunday night, my mother and her brothers sat in the kitchen and talked about, "do you remember what happened to this one?", "did this one survive?", "what happened to our parents?" In 1944 Adolf Eichmann, who was the head of the Gestapo and S.S., had come up with the Final Solution for the Hungarian Jews. My grandparents, aunts, uncles, and a lot of my cousins were rounded up and sealed into cattle cars, and shipped to the Auschwitz-Birkenau concentration camp in Poland. They managed to exterminate most of the Hungarian Jewish population within an 11 month period. It took them almost 4 years to do it in Germany and occupied territories, but the Hungarian Jews they did not even bother to tattoo a number on their arm because they went straight to the gas chambers. My grandfather never made it to Auschwitz, when he and my grandmother were arrested they were put into separate cattle cars. My grandfather raised such a ruckus that the Hungarian guards opened the cattle car he was in, took him out, beat him to death, and threw his body in with my grandmother. My grandmother, aunts, and a lot of my cousins went straight to the gas chambers. The only reason we know this story, my mother's cousin Anne. Most of these cities had three names, a Romanian name, a Hungarian name, and a German name because at one time it was part of the Austro-Hungarian Empire. In Romanian it was called Keree Mara, in Hungarian it was called Neut Cairoy, and in German it was called Grosskerai. My grandfather and grandmother lived on one side of the street, his brother and family lived on the other side, their windows faced each other. Her cousin Anne was 24 or 25 years old when she was sent to Auschwitz, she was selected for labor. When we associate Auschwitz-Birkenau we associate it as an extermination camp as well as almost 2 and a half million people that were murdered there. They also had uniform factories, knapsack factories, they had shoe factories, and they even had a coal mine. If you were young and healthy and able bodied, you were selected for labor. My cousin Anne was selected for labor and she knew the story of my family, she watched her mother, father, and my grandmother, go

straight up to the gas chambers. Because they were older, sickly people. The interesting part is that the most notorious of the S.S. doctors who did the selection Auschwitz was a man by the name of Josef Mengele. Dr. Mengele was known as the Angel of Death at Auschwitz. He was obsessed with genetics. He wanted to see how he could produce multiple births in German women. If you were a twin when you got off the train or if you had any kind of unusual deformity, you were taken to his laboratory and experimentation was conducted upon you. My great-uncle Professor Dr. Herman Kessler, of Budapest-Hungary was one of the Jewish doctors who was forced to work with Dr. Mengele. When Auschwitz was shut down because the Russians were closing in on it, the inmates who survived were forced to go on what was called a death march, they marched them back into Germany. My uncle Herman dove into a pile of human excrement. That is how he survived; when he heard Russian being spoken he came out. That was how he survived because they didn't want any witnesses, they didn't want anyone to know what they had done, so they were murdering the ones who had worked with Mengele. When my uncle was well into his 80s, I went back to Budapest and I sat with him in his apartment and I tape recorded him. He wanted the world to know what he had witnessed. The tape which is now a CD is at the United States Holocaust Memorial Museum in Washington D.C. My mother and her brothers were talking in the kitchen of my uncle's apartment. On Sunday night they said to her, "Alga, this is America, there is no such thing as free lunch, and starting tomorrow you are going to work." They got her a job in a doll factory. She worked from 3 o'clock in the afternoon until eleven o'clock at night and her job was stapling the clothes onto the doll. At the end of the first week her hand had swollen up to the size of a catcher's mitt from constantly making stapling motions. She left that job, one of two Jewish organizations I don't remember whether it was Hiaus or Joint, got her a job in a textile factory. She spoke four or five different languages but she was starting to learn English. One of the first rules she said when we got here was that we were not to speak Hungarian or Romanian in the house, we spoke English. I went to school, I learned English in school. She learned English, she got herself the tabloids, and there were pictures in there, The Times was too sophisticated for her. She had an English-Hungarian dictionary, she had the pictures and the words, and when she didn't understand a certain word she would look it up in the dictionary and translate it and that's how she learned her English. She never lost her accent, she sounded like Zsa Zsa Gabor, but she spoke fluent English. When she passed away in 1994, she spoke fluent English. She went to work at this textile company, and by the time she left there 20 some odd years later, she was in charge of the samples department. The law in New York is the day after Labor Day is that you have to start school. They put me in the Sixth Grade, but I had the problem that I didn't speak any English. I spoke four other languages but English was not one of them. They didn't have help for foreign students in those days. If you kept up fine, if you didn't the teacher didn't have time to occupy him or herself with you. I went to New York Public School 125, didn't have courses for foreign students, they still didn't know what to do with the immigrant children who came. There were like 50 kids in my homeroom class alone. I have a very good ear for languages, so within an 8 month

to a year period, I had a working knowledge of English. I had an accent you could cut with a knife but I had a working knowledge of English. That is how I learned my English.

Interviewer: And you were an athlete in school?

Kessler: Well, let's go back a little bit before we get into that. My mother would leave the apartment; we had a very small apartment in the section of New York called Sunnyside in Queens. Where she worked, the textile company was in Manhattan, so she would leave the house at 7 or 7:15 in the morning catch the subway which was a block and a half away. She would come home at 5:30 or 6 o'clock at night. I was on my own until it was time to go to school. The neighborhood we lived in was not the very best. It was a multi-cultural multi-ethnic neighborhood. We had people from Eastern Europe, Irish, and Hispanic; again it was multi-cultural, multi-ethnic. I was one of those kids that when I felt like going to school I did, when I didn't feel like going to school I didn't. When the letters started to come telling my mother I was truant, at first I explained to her that they were letters of commendation about how well I was learning English. I got away with that until she started to learn English. I learned in school what social promotions were, as you said, I was a very good athlete, my father was a very good athlete he was a soccer player in Romania, or futbol as they call it there. One of the reasons he was none and targeted is that in 1938 when it became against the law for Jews to associate with non-Jews, he formed a totally Jewish futbol team, him and two of his brothers. They challenged the Romanian National team to a futbol match, and they even had the audacity to defeat them. Right after the game was over, they were all arrested, taken to jail, and had the living daylights beat out of them. I inherited his athletic skills. I played five sports in school, basketball, baseball, soccer, track, and I was on the rifle team. They gave us .22 caliber rifles and we went out and target shot. I was passed along, if a teacher didn't give me a passing grade, there were five coaches in there screaming at them. Not only did I do my studies but I also played sports. In my junior year in high school before I became a senior, I was recruited by a lot of colleges to play basketball for them. Basketball was my strong suit. Two weeks before I was ready to graduate high school, I got into serious trouble; I was taken before a judge and given two choices. Enlist in the military or go to jail. Well, I didn't know what the military was all about but I had a pretty good idea what jail was all about. I was escorted from the judge's chambers to the Navy recruiting office that was in the same building as the court house. It could have been any branch of the service, but the judge happened to be in the Navy during the Second World War. That afternoon I was on my way to Great Lakes, Illinois for basic training. I had orders to report to Navy hospital core school, I had orders to become a medic. Three or four days before I was ready to graduate from basic training, an officer and our company commander who was a chief petty officer, came walking through the barracks and they said, "Everybody six foot and over stand in front of your bunks." I stood in front of my bunk and this officer came down and he asked me, "how tall are you son?", I laughed at the son because I was 18 and he must have been all of 24, but he referred to everyone as son. All enlisted men were son. At that time I was 6'3"

or 6'4", he says "how would you like to go to Washington D.C. and be part of the Navy ceremonial honor guard?", and I asked him what that was. He told me that I would go to Washington and march in parades, go out to Arlington during funerals for military personnel. I told him that I had orders to go to hospital core school. He says, I promise you, this is considered choice duty; you can only stay 13 months in Washington and when your 13 months are up you can go back and become a hospital corpsman. I said ok that sounds like a good deal, Washington D.C. I went down to DC and was with the Navy ceremonial honor guard, there were 84 men, I was the only Jew. I did experience some anti-Semitism, took care of that real fast, and I was selected for White House color guard. When the president Eisenhower would have state dinners and things like that, all of us with the military carried the different instances of the different military units. I was carrying the Navy flag. Well the FBI and the Secret Service did a background check on me and they discovered that I wasn't a citizen. So, for a second time I was taken in front of a judge, and I was sworn in as a citizen that very day. I spent the thirteen months there. When my time was up like he promised I was sent back to Great Lakes, Illinois, and I went through and graduated Hospital Core School. I get my orders to report to Camp Lejeune North Carolina to be with the marine corps, I said I enlisted in the navy what is this marine corps bit. Well the navy and the Marine Corps don't sell this to a marine because they will fight you on it, but the marines are part of the navy department. They don't have their own medical personnel. So us as navy corpsmen are stationed with the marines and take care of them. I had been promoted, the day I graduated hospital core school I had the time in so I became a third class petty officer. All the presidents formed what they called the elite, the green berets and the navy seals etc., for the marines it was the reconnaissance marines or recon. I wound up with the reconnaissance marines, and lucky me I got to go to Fort Benning, Georgia to learn how to jump out of an airplane. I always laugh because it is not a natural act to jump out of a perfectly good airplane but that is what I wound up doing. We wore marine uniforms with navy insignia; the only marine uniform we were not allowed to wear was their dress blues. I got to jump out of an airplane. While I was in Washington, since all of us in the ceremonial guard were six foot and over, we formed a basketball team. We went around and played other military places, some schools and things like that. One night we were playing somewhere, one of the schools, I had one of those nights that you dream about, and I scored 52 points. This guy came up to me and introduced himself and handed me his card and it said New York University, athletic department, chief scout. He asked me how much time I had left in the navy and I said about four years. If we could get you an early discharge, would you be interested in coming to New York University and playing basketball for us. I said sure, yea, why not, whatever. Well I didn't hear from him for another year, year and a half, and I said ok that was a nice B.S. story afterwards. Next thing I know, I'm down at camp Lejeune, North Carolina, and I was in my barracks and the NCO of the day comes to me and says, Kessler you got a visitor. I said who would visit me at Camp Lejeune, North Carolina? I went to the day room and it was this gentlemen. He says we have arranged for you to get an early discharge, you will be discharged in October and school starts in November. What

they did in those days, you could not play varsity until you were a sophomore, as a freshman you have to play junior varsity. Well they arranged that they gave me credit for all the courses I had taken when I was in the navy. I entered school as a sophomore! I was able to play varsity basketball. NYU in those days was a powerhouse; we were one of the strongest teams in the country. Before the NCAA it was the NIT's, we won the NIT three years in a row. I am going to throw names at you that most of the time only older people recognize, but I was on a team with Zack Sanders, Hap Harrison, Mal White, and Barry Kramer. We hold the distinction that all five of us who were on the starting team later on went to play in the NBA. The closest that came to it were Michigan State and UNLV, where four of their starters played NBA ball. When I went to NYU not only did I play basketball but I also went to classes. Our coach Lou Rossini may he rest in peace, insisted that we go to classes. It wasn't like today when they can play one year of basketball and the next year they go off to the NBA. You could only go into the NBA when your class graduated. I have a bachelor of science in business administration from NYU. When I graduated from NYU I was drafted by the Philadelphia Warriors who are now Golden State of the NBA, and I played 2 years of professional basketball.

Interviewer: In the NBA, who did you room with?

Kessler: My roommate was arguably the best basketball player who ever played the game, his name was Wilt Chamberlain. Even though the team was owned by a Jewish man, our traveling secretary shall I say was not exactly a big fan of Jews or blacks. I roomed with Wilt Chamberlain because he thought it was an insult to both of us, putting the black kid and the Jewish kid together. The big guy and I became very close friends. Unfortunately, we lost him fourteen years ago at the age of 69. The NBA I played in and the NBA of today is not the same. It was still a very small league, we only had ten teams. The furthest west we would go was Minneapolis, Minnesota, because it was the Minneapolis Lakers. The days of George Mikan, who was the first big man in the NBA. Some of the cities we went too, like Cincinnati and Saint Louis followed the Jim Crow Laws, so the black athletes on our team were not allowed to stay in the same hotels that we stayed in. My team mate from NYU Barry Kramer and myself were both drafted by the Warriors, he was the number one draft, I was the number three draft pick. There were only four draft rounds in those days. Barry and I and some of the other players, stayed in the same hotels as our black players stayed in. The police came and arrested us for what in those days was called civil disobedience. What I was trying to avoid by joining the Military happened when I was playing basketball, I wound up in jail. The traveling secretary had to come and bail us out so we could play a game that night, have enough players. It was a very different NBA from today. Coach Rossini must have been prophetic, my knees gave out and I had to retire. They didn't have the surgeries in those days that they have today. I retired and went to work for a textile company. The sales manager, was a very nice man by the name of Frank Murphy may he rest in peace. In those days I was known as Andy, I tried to become as Americanized as much as possible, my nickname in the NBA was Tiny, I was Tiny Kessler. He says Andy, we are going to promote

you, you are going to become our South Eastern salesman, I asked what he meant by South East. He said you will be headquartered in Atlanta, and you are going to be traveling Georgia, Alabama, Tennessee, Mississippi, North and South Carolina. I said Frank you got to be kidding me, those people run around without shoes on down there, I am not going to Georgia. He said I tell you what, try it for six months, if you don't like it come back to New York we will find a different job for you, but my feeling is that you will be living there within six months. Well he was wrong; I was living here within three. I fell in love with the city of Atlanta; I fell in love with Georgia. One of the first things I did when I got here is I took the New York plate off my car and put a Georgia tag. It was the days of the freedom riders, and if I went into Alabama and places like that with a New York tag on they would think I was one of the freedom riders and I would be arrested or murdered. I fell in love with the state of Georgia. I travelled here, I lived in Atlanta, I was a confirmed bachelor, I was single and 33 years old I was never getting married. My mother may she rest in peace, always told me I was a bum and I'd ask why I was a bum, and she'd say because you are 33 and you are not married. I reunited with my father in 1961. He never came to this country he stayed in France. Every time I would go visit him, he would arrange dates for me with all his Jewish friends because he thought I wasn't married because there weren't any Jewish girls in the United States. In 1973, I met a very lovely lady from Savannah, Georgia, and within six months my bachelorhood went right out the window. Everything goes well we will celebrate our 40th wedding anniversary in November. We have two children, our daughter is 37, she graduated from Georgia Southern University and she works for the Kroger Corporation in management. She got married five years ago, my son in law Rusty, purely by coincidence, is also an ex-navy corpsmen, he spent 8 years in the navy. I tease my daughter that she married her father, she does not think it is funny. They have two boys; Benjamin is 2 and three quarters as he says, and our grandson Joseph who is just 10 months old. Our son is 35, he did his undergraduate work at the University of Georgia, and then got his masters from Emory in public health and risk management. He and our daughter in law Lindsey will be married 8 years, they have a five year old son named Samuel, who just started kindergarten this year and I can't believe he is five years old. In February we have our princess, our granddaughter Jordan was born, she's now nine months old. That is my family, I am very proud of my family, I always say that my children and my grandchildren are my revenge on the Nazis. That they didn't want me here, they wanted rid of us, but I'm here, my grandchildren are here, and they are not, so *sound of disdain*.

Interviewer: You said you saw your father again for the first time in 13 years in 1961.

Kessler: Right

Interviewer: Can you describe why he didn't immigrate to the United States?

Kessler: As I told you he went to France, and when he got to France he went to work for the Citroën Motor Car Company. This was 1948 he was 45 years old. He worked from eleven o'clock at night until seven o'clock in the morning building cars, by

hand, for Citroën. In the apartment building he lived in, across the hall from him was a lady who was also a Holocaust survivor. One thing lead to another and one day my mother opened the mail and there was a divorce decree in it. He had gone through the rabbis in Paris and said look I'm separated from my wife, she lives in America, I live here in France, we have no family, I want a divorce, so they granted him a divorce. My mother had nothing to say about it. She was not upset by the way. She had developed a very independent nature. In Europe when you went from your father's to your husband's house, she had developed a great deal of independence; she was a very independent lady. She said oh good I'm rid of this so and so. He stayed in France. I went to reunite with him in the summer of 1961. I found out, I met my stepmother, and every three or four years, I was single in those days, I would use him as an excuse to go to France. I would stay with him about three or four days and then roam all over Europe. That is how I reunited with my dad. He is buried outside of Paris, France.

Interviewer: In those years roaming across Europe, what was your feeling of being back on this continent, where when you were young you were forced to hide?

Kessler: I went back to Bucharest in 1969. My mother had still had a sister that lived in Cluge, Romania, and I had a cousin there, my cousin Tibby. We went to Romania; my mother did not want to come into Bucharest. She says, I have my memories, I don't want to go back there, I am staying here I came to visit my sister. They hadn't seen each other in 20 some odd years. My cousin Tibby and I went down to Bucharest. I wanted to see if the building where I was hidden was still there. It was and I went in with Tibby and a woman comes out and greets me, she looks at me and says Mr. Grunfeld? That is what she remembered me as, that was my name at that time. It was Katya, Georghiou's wife. Georghiou had passed away but Katya and her daughter still lived in that building. I asked her who lived in our old apartment. She told me it was a lady who was a very high official in the Romanian Communist Party and she says if you go up there, and no offence to cat lovers, she told me she had at least a dozen cats if not more, and it was the days before kitty litter, and if she opened the door if she would even let me in, don't be offended by the smell from the cats. We went up there, I pretended that I didn't speak Romanian, my cousin Tibby was with me, he told her that this used to be my parents' apartment and of course she denied anybody else had ever lived there besides her. I don't know how much you know about the Jewish religion but on the door post in our homes we had what we call a mezuzah. I wear one around my neck. It is a bigger version of this. It goes back to when we were captives/slaves in Egypt when God decreed the slaying of the firstborn. Joshua went around and painted blood on the doors of Jewish homes and that is the beginning of the mezuzah. You could still see the outlines of the mezuzah. When a little currency changed hands, she let me in. Some things I recognized some things I didn't recognize. That was my way of closure there. When I left Bucharest, my mother went back to Budapest to be with her uncle. I left there and I went to Auschwitz-Birkenau. I walked in under the gate at Auschwitz that had a sign that read "Arbeit macht frei", work will free you. I walked down the main street of the old barracks, it is still there as a museum today. I was very fortunate that I got to go

back three times, I was invited to go back with the march of the living twice where our children go there and visit. I was asked to go with a group of non-Jewish visitors back to Auschwitz. I don't know if you ever saw the film with Elie Wiesel and Oprah Winfrey where they went back to Auschwitz. Professor Wiesel, and don't call him Dr. Wiesel, he doesn't like it. I have had the privilege of meeting Professor Wiesel three times. When he goes back to Auschwitz he never raises his voice, he speaks in a whisper because he feels it would be an intrusion to the people who were murdered there. I went to this mound of dirt that one time was human beings. I put on a Jewish prayer shawl, covered my head, and recited Kaddish, the Jewish prayer for the dead. That was my closure at Auschwitz. I left there and went to Israel. I reunited with my family there. I have three cousins from my father's side who live in Israel. Amazingly enough my cousin [Yakov], who was born [John Grunfeld], but when he got to Israel in 1956, [David Gullion] was very serious about everybody taking Hebrew names. He says leave your past behind. He became [Yakov Benzeeon]. I started to talk with him, and found out he was a paratrooper in the Israeli Air Forces. We are all crazy, we both jumped out of airplanes, it must be in the genes. I had a very good time in Israel. The only place I will not go back to is I will not go to Germany. I refuse to go to Germany. It is a hang up on my part; I will not buy anything that I know is manufactured in Germany. That is one place in Europe I will not go. I went to Austria; I went on a trip to see my past, to see where we lived in Austria. I spent a lot of time in France, I love France. It is such a wonderful country. The only place I will not go back to is Germany.

Interviewer: When did you begin to tell your experiences to others?

Kessler: When the old Jewish Federation was on Peachtree Street. They built a museum down there; we had a museum in the basement of the Federation building, underneath the pool. In the mornings we opened the museum we had people come through there, we had to walk through and make sure the pictures were still on the wall because it was so damp there from being underneath the pool that the pictures would fall off. I started to speak, let's see my daughter was born in 1976, so right around '76 or '77. Herbert Kohn, myself, and I don't remember who the third was but there were three of us original speakers. We would either come to the museum or we would go to different schools. That is how we started, by going to different schools. In '96 when the Olympics were here in Atlanta, the Federation moved to Spring Street. Ben Hirsch was the third speaker. He was the architect of the museum where we are now at the Breman. What I didn't know is that one of the first monuments to the Holocaust is right here in Atlanta, Georgia, at Greenwood Cemetery. He was the architect of the monument at Greenwood Cemetery. I started to speak in '76 '77. The joke has become that my wife, the native southerner, native Georgian, I've been to more places in Georgia than she ever knew existed. I was appointed to the Georgia Commission on the Holocaust by Governor Barnes. When Governor Purdue was elected, all of us had to submit our resignations, they were all accepted. He reappointed half the old commission and half a new commission with his people on it. Before I was reappointed, Lt. Governor Mark Taylor, asked me to write down all the places that I had in, in

Georgia. I sat there with a map of Georgia, my wife was with me, we had a long yellow legal pad, and by the time we got through, there were two and a half pages of that legal pad of all the places I had spoken in Georgia. Some of these places when I got there I increased the Jewish population by one, me. I still do a lot of speaking, I still go down to the Breman, of course I speak here out at KSU. I was out here when the Anne Frank exhibit was first here, that is how I started my association with Kennesaw State University. I do not do as much speaking now as I used to, I try to limit it, try to speak maybe every other week or so. We are very fortunate that KSU has groups coming through. The Breman, we have now until the end of our year we have groups coming through almost every day.

Interviewer: Why is it important for you to speak?

Kessler: I do it as the voice of my family. When I started to speak, I used to say I lose 80% of my family in these camps. I really had no idea what 80% of my family was, it sounded like a good number. My mother was down here visiting from New York and HBO was showing the Simon Wiesenthal story, "Murderers Among Us". In that movie, Mr. Wiesenthal's daughter asks him why they don't have a lot of family. Why during holidays and bat mitzvah and stuff like that, they don't have aunts, uncles, grandparents, and so on. He explains to her that they lost over 70 members of their family during the Holocaust. I glance over at my mother and she's no longer watching the movie, I asked her what she was doing and she says she is counting, and she said well he said 70 and I can only remember 120. That is when it came in to realization for me what 80% of my family was. One hundred and twenty of my family Members that were murdered in these camps. They don't have a voice anymore; they have no one to speak for them. That is why I go speak, I have become their voice. Unfortunately, there is a lot of Holocaust denial going on. There are people saying that there was no such thing as the Holocaust, that it was all a Zionist-Jewish fabrication. Unfortunately, it is not. We are losing our survivors, our survivors are getting older. Some of the groups of students and adults I speak too I tell them that they are going to be the last generation that hears a living survivor. Two weeks ago we lost another one of our speakers at the Breman, [Aaron Allembic] passed away at the age of 83. A lot of us are, thank god, are in good health. My strength is back and it is important that we keep the memory of the Holocaust. Even though the Holocaust is one of the most documented events in human history, 40 or 50 years from now who knows. It's all going to be on tape it's all going to be on film, there aren't going to be any living survivors around. It is important that it is not forgotten, that is why I do what I do.

Interviewer: Thank you Mr. Kessler.

Kessler: Thank you.