Aaron Kuptsow was born on 23 June 1922 in Philadelphia, Pennsylvania, one of three sons of Russian Jewish immigrants. He went to local schools, graduating from high school in 1940. Aaron briefly attended the University of Pennsylvania before enlisting in the Army Air Corps in October 1942.

Initially stationed with the 15th Air Force in Italy, in August 1944 Aaron was transferred to the 8th Air Force in England, to the 398th Bomb Group, 600th Bomb Squadron. Trained as a radar navigator bombardier, or “Mickey Man,” Aaron was flying with the 398th Bomb Group on his eighth mission when on 26 November 1944 his plane was shot down on a mission to Misburg, Germany.

Aaron first was taken to the Dulag Luft interrogation facility at Wetzlar, where he spent some weeks, before being transported by rail to Stalag Luft I, located in Barth, northern Germany; he remained here until the camp was overrun in May 1945 by advancing Soviet troops. Along with the other Allied POWs at Barth, Aaron was evacuated from the camp after several weeks, flown to Camp Lucky Strike, France, then shipped back to the United States. He was discharged from the Army in late 1945.

Again a civilian, Aaron returned to Philadelphia, where he attended medical school. He got married (1947, wife Anita), and helped raise a family. A medical doctor, Aaron spent nearly four decades in private practice in Philadelphia. He was interviewed in April 2004.
T: This is an interview for the POW Oral History Project. My name is Thomas Saylor. Today is 10 April 2004, and this is an interview with Dr. Aaron Kuptsow of Philadelphia. On the record, Dr. Kuptsow, thanks very much for taking time this afternoon to speak with me.

A: You’re welcome.

T: Let me ask you first, as a member of a bomber crew, and you were a radar navigator, you flew a number of missions with the 15th Air Force in Italy and then with the 8th Air Force in England. What goes through your mind when you’re on a plane during a mission?

A: Well, the job itself, I was a radar navigator bombardier, and the responsibility was to get the planes to the target and bomb. Now the situation with radar, which was considered a new secret weapon at the time, if the area that we were going to was clouded over there would be no way that the planes would see where to drop bombs. If it was too clouded over, they would have an alternate target to fly to, to see if they could drop them there. If they couldn’t drop them, then they would fly back to England or wherever, and they would jettison the bombs into the water someplace because they couldn’t land with the bombs on the bomber. So if the skies were clear, I didn’t have too much of a job to do.

But most of the time the clouds were over, especially in France, were pretty well clouded over. So I would then actually, what I was looking into was a scope which would show the outlines of the land and the buildings and things like that. A rather crude outline, but it was my responsibility to identify what I was looking at and then we usually, as radar, we flew in the lead planes. In other words, we would be the first plane of a V-shaped formation. The others would follow the lead plane. When we’d drop the bombs, why they would follow suit.

T: So they dropped, really, on your dropping.

A: Right. If the skies were clouded over. Yes. They would also depend on radar to navigate because there were no radio signals or anything like that during war conditions.

T: So that means, if on a mission that there had been clear skies, for example, that the radar would not have been used?
A: Right. We would have it on but we would not count on it. In other words, it’s much better if you have visual signs of where you’re going, to identify the target that way.

T: What kind of special training had you had to learn this? Had that been done stateside?

A: It was done stateside. After I got my commission as a navigator. After my furlough I was assigned to Langley Field, and upon arriving there we were notified that this was the very secret area. Any mail that we would be sending would be censored and we were not to make calls home to identify what we were doing or anything like that. It was a top secret type of field and it was relatively new. I think I was in like the second class that they started.

T: So it really was a new technology that you were on the ground floor of.

A: Right. Actually the English had developed radar. And they were using it along their coast and they were able to identify when the German planes were coming over to them. That played a big part in the success in the Battle of London.

T: That’s right. And so this was adapting that technology to aircraft.

A: Right.

T: Let me move to the mission of November 26, 1944. That’s the mission on which your plane was shot down. Was there anything that made that mission any different than others you had been on?

A: Well, let’s say I had a premonition. Actually, as a radar man I was never assigned to a crew. In other words, I worked out of, like, a pool. Whichever squadron was going to be leading the group that day, I would be assigned to that squadron. So whenever I flew—I don’t think I ever flew with the same crew twice. See what I mean?

T: Yes.

A: Like a specialist.

T: Yes. Many people have talked about flying all their missions with the same people, and for you it was just the opposite.

A: Right. So I never actually established a strong bond, relationship, with a crew as such. So that the crew that I was shot down with were all new to me. Now, unfortunately it turns out that particular crew, they were on their twenty-fifth
mission, which would have been their last one. They would have gone home. And they came down with me.

T: I’m thinking about the kind of bonding relationships you mentioned that crew members had. With whom did you hang around with if we can put it that way?

A: The only ones that I really had a bond with were the ones in the immediate barracks that I was assigned to.

T: Were they doing the same job as yourself?

A: No. No. They were actually—we were officers. We were the commissioned officers of the group. Now the ones that would be in the same barracks would either be pilots, bombardiers, or navigators. The day before I was shot down, November 25, three of the officers I had gotten very close to had this bed sort of surrounding mine. They didn't make it back to base. They got to England coming back from a mission but then they crashed about three or four miles from the base and they were all killed. And that really hit me. That day. I think at the time, that as a young individual you sort of feel invincible, you know. Nothing is going to happen to you. But that particular day it struck me that you can get killed out there.

T: This sense of invincibility, people have mentioned that before. Would you say that characterizes you too? The kind of person who when you went over there thought nothing of...

A: Yes. I didn’t really think too much about that until it struck home that place. I had lost other friends along the way. But this one was particularly close. It really affected me. Another thing. I’ve often been asked: did you ever think of how many people you might have killed down below when you were dropping bombs. And that never entered my mind either. We were thinking of a target and never thinking about individuals that might be in the surrounding area.

T: On that subject. Did that ever come up as a topic of conversation of whether it was a residential or industrial or military target?

A: No. Of course, you’re briefed to try to hit the target. So you’re thinking of it as a structure and not so much the human beings being associated with it.

T: What kind of a target was Misburg?

A: It was an oil refinery. We had been to this city of Misburg before and we had bombed it, and apparently they had a knack of rebuilding very quickly. So this time they sent...the mission on the twenty-sixth was over one thousand planes. Bombers. In fact, there’s a man, I’ll probably give you the name of it if you want, who wrote a book about the ten most disastrous missions of the 8th Air Force. And that was one of the missions. I think we lost like one hundred-some odd bombers that day. You
figure ten men on a bomber. That’s over one thousand men down. It was a tremendous fighter plane battle going over. I think the Germans lost a couple hundred fighter planes and I think the United States lost fifty. A lot of us were shot down.

In fact, on that mission I was in the lead, the first plane. There were two deputy leads, also equipped with radar. One of the problems with the radar then was that on occasion the fuses would blow and there you are, you know, leading and the radar is black. So a lot of times they would send either one or two deputies along.

T: What we might call backups.

A: Right. In case the first one went out, one of the others...well, that particular day all three of us were shot down.

T: Holy cow!

(1, A, 104)

A: They were very accurate.

T: Now this is a B-17 bomber, right?

A: Right.

T: In the B-17 where was your duty station? Where were you sitting actually?

A: I was actually right behind the copilot.

T: Facing which direction?

A: Facing toward the rear of the plane.

T: What could you actually, on a mission like this mission to Misburg on 26 November, what could you actually see around you? What was your perception of what was going on outside?

A: In the B-17 I really couldn’t see much of anything except toward the back of the plane. When I was in the B-24s, in Italy, when they would open up the bomb bays, then I could look right down through the openings and see the flak coming up at us and things like that.

T: But in the B-17 you really were almost unable to see anything.

A: Right. Secluded, sort of.
T: Does that make it easier or more difficult?

A: Easier because when the bomb bay doors open on the [B-]24 and you can see all the stuff coming up and exploding under you, why you know, it’s a little more frightening.

T: How did you experience the plane being shot down? What actually happened to your plane?

A: We were hit by anti-aircraft. We had just dropped bombs, and usually after you drop, the plane makes a sharp left and goes into sort of a dive to gain speed by going into a dive and then trying to get out the area as quickly as possible. Just as we made the left there was a tremendous explosion and the plane rocked, and then there were a couple more and then pilot announced that the cockpit had been hit. The windshield had been blown out in front of him and two of the engines were gone. He said, “We’re losing altitude. We’ll try to make it back to either Switzerland or something like that.”

T: So the plane was still able to fly even though it had been hit.

A: That’s the advantage of four engines. We had two of them that were going. But they can’t sustain us. So he asked us to throw everything overboard that can be thrown overboard. They started to do that. At that point the radar—they told us you have a secret gadget and were to destroy it if we were ever going to have to bail out or anything like that. I opened up the top of the radar equipment and I had my shoes and I was smashing them. In those days you had the glass tubes, sealed type tubes.

So I proceeded to start smashing the tubes with that. Meanwhile, they were throwing the machine guns and things like that out of the plane to lighten it so that we could maintain altitude. It was not working too well, so he finally said, “We’re not going to make it. You better start bailing out.”

T: Did everyone get out of the plane okay?

A: Everyone got out. I was the last one out, because the job of smashing up the equipment. The tail gunner went out just before me and so I was the last one out. I don’t know how high we were at the time, but I don’t think it was that high because it didn’t take me too long before I actually made contact with the ground.

T: Was this your first parachute jump?

A: Yes.

T: So in the kind of training you go through to be a part of an aircrew, practicing a jump isn’t one thing you do?
A: It’s supposed to. We were supposed to be sent to Biloxi, Mississippi, for parachute training before going overseas, but they were anxious to get us over there. So they sort of skipped that. So, yes, this was my first. And I think in the account I mention that after I jumped I remembered I should have counted to ten but I never got to that. But everything went fine on that jump.

T: Was that also your last parachute jump?

A: Yes.

T: So that’s your first and only.

A: Right. That’s the end of that.

T: Okay. So didn’t enjoy it enough to go back *(both laughing)*.


T: Yes. Maybe his first too. Let me ask, as you’re coming down to the ground in the parachute, regardless of how much time you had, what goes through your mind? Suddenly, not that long before you were in an airplane, fairly safe in a sense, and now you’re parachuting down to enemy territory.

A: Right.

T: What were you thinking of?

A: Yes. I didn’t have a lot of time to think. In fact, you know, I thought afterwards, what were my thoughts when I was getting ready to actually leave the plane? And I think it was one of these things where you know, you’ve got a job to do. Just get out. And it was too rushed to think too much about it. I was surprised at the impact when the parachute opened. I mentioned about my GI shoes that had tied onto the harness of the parachute. Apparently the impact must have broken the shoelaces and they just blew away. Then I was stuck with just the flying boots.

T: That’s all you had on your feet when you landed then.

A: Right. And that was a horrible situation.

T: Those are not really for walking are they?

A: No. And also, I’m short. You know, five [feet] four [inches]. I wear a size seven shoe. I don’t think that they were equipped in their supply department with a size seven flying boot. They were fleece-lined boots, kind of heavy, and I think one or
two sizes too big for me. But they did stay on with the impact of the chute. But then when we had the march, after we were captured, to the jail, why, I saw a sign that said seventeen kilometers, and I walked that. And that was horrible, because I guess my feet were rubbing back and forth inside the boot and I could feel they were getting wet and everything. Later, when we got to the jail and I took the boots off, it was just a mass of blisters and bloody and stuff like that.

T: What kind of countryside did you land in? City, small town, or countryside?

A: Farmland.

T: Farmland. When you hit the ground, were there people around or what happened exactly?

A: I didn’t see anybody, however, as soon as I made contact [with the ground] I released the harness of the parachute and got out the harness and started to run. And as I started to run, I don’t know where I was running, just running, and I started to hear gunshots and I could actually feel some things sort of whistling by me, and at that point I just stopped and put my hands up and a couple of farmers came over and got a hold of me.

It’s interesting, because I guess about two years ago, because of the website, I was contacted by a person in Germany who says he was about twelve years old at the time and he saw our plane come down, and he thinks it was me because I was the last parachute out and he saw me being captured and he said if I ever come to Germany he'll show me the exact spot where I was captured.

T: Boy, that’s interesting. Here’s a person who brings you back all the way to 1944.

(1, A, 218)

A: I’ve had other interesting things. I had a Russian who had been a Russian soldier and apparently he was one of those that liberated us, [he] made contact with me also. He just identified that he was part of the Russian party that liberated our camp. And then I had another fellow that was in the Navy who contacted me because when I came back it was on the Admiral Mayo, was the name of the ship, and he was a crew member. When he read my article he didn’t remember what port we had come to in the United States, and so when I mentioned the port of Boston, why, he contacted me by email to thank me for giving the information.

T: So having your stuff on the web has brought all kinds of contacts.

A: Yes. You know, I had contact with a school in Leeds, England, and they had me on the speakerphone to their class and the kids were asking me questions about it. So I’ve had a lot of that. Yes.
T: And of course, that’s the way that I found you as well. So there’s one more you can tell the next person.

A: Right.

T: When you landed, parachuted to the ground, I’m interested about the kind of treatment you received from the first Germans, civilian or military that actually got to you.

A: Well, as I recall there were two, I guess they were farmers.

T: Not in uniform.

A: No. Not in uniform. And they walked me—both of them had rifles—they walked me to the road and they just kept me there. Then after a short while there were other, presumably farmers, who came marching up with others from our crew so that we were sort of assembled on this little roadway right next to a fence which I think enclosed the farm.

    When I had landed, well, being Jewish we had been told...we knew that the Germans were anti-Semitic. But I didn’t know anything about Holocaust or anything like that. If I did, I guess I would have been scared to death of what was going to happen. But I knew that they were anti-Semitic, actively committed. But we had been told that our dog tags had an H on it for Hebrew, so we had been told, being Jewish, if you’re ever going to be captured in German territory to throw away your dog tags.

T: Did you do that?

A: And I did that as soon as I hit the ground and got out of the harness. I pulled off the dog tags and just hurled it. While we were on the railroad while they were assembling the rest of the crew, another farmer came up holding the dog tags. By that time the police were looking at all dog tags you know. And here I was the only one that didn’t have a dog tag and they started to say something about the spy. Automatically if you are captured and you don’t have dog tags it means you’re not in the service, so technically they can arrest you as a spy. This fellow comes walking up with dog tags and he said that he saw me throw it. When they looked and they saw the H on there then one of the farmers started to say, “Jude! Jude!” And he slapped me in the jaw pretty hard.

T: The farmer did.

A: Yes.

T: This is the one who had found your dog tags?
A: No. It was one of the others, but he clobbered me pretty good. But that was the only thing there. Then I had the dog tags. But even for a while after that they kept me referring to me as a spy.

T: Was the fact that you were Jewish, did that remain in your mind as something to be concerned about at different stages of your POW experience?

A: Yes. Later on at the camp, after we got into Stalag I, I guess we had been there less than a month. Apparently it was during the Battle of the Bulge, and apparently from what I understand, the Germans were feeling pretty cocky about turning the tide of the war and they were, you know, winning at that point. This one day down in formation, it had to be in January. We would be called out every morning for roll call. All of the POWs. And they would do a count just to make sure that nobody had gotten away. After the count was completed they started to call out numbers. In other words, each one of us had a number, like a four-digit number, instead of names. They said, “Stay here after the others are gone.” And they dismissed the rest of them.

Then they gathered us into a group and told us, you know, they would escort us back to our barracks. Get our things together, because you’re being moved. And so they did move us to another section of the camp, where they had a locked barracks set up. Once we got into that barracks we started to talk to each other, and we realized that we were all Jewish, and so we did have a sort of a ghetto setup there. One big barracks in the far corner of the camp, which we found out later was right next to an ammunition dump. But that’s where they kept us.

(1, A, 321)

T: Was that worrying, in a way, to know that you had, in a sense, been moved together with only other Jewish prisoners?

A: Yes. The ones who were really concerned I guess...I don’t think I was particularly worried, because I didn’t know too much about what was going on. But some of the others apparently had ideas and they contacted the [Allied] CO of the whole compound. Stalag Luft Number One was the first prison camp set up for officers. We had people there from Dunkirk, which is like seven years prior.

T: Yes.

A: So the [Allied] commanding officer of the whole camp was a Colonel Zemke. If you looked up his history, he was one of the fighter plane aces. He shot down more German planes than anybody else. But he was a POW. We did complain to him, and then Colonel Zebreski was the other one. The idea was to contact the Red Cross and this segregation, under the Geneva Convention, was not legal.

T: Yes.
A: To send a protest to the Red Cross about our being segregated. The only problem was, people that were in the know said, well, you know, that could take a couple of months before it gets through channels and everything. Meanwhile, what can happen to us? We did find out later, within the last couple years, there had been an order written by the High Command in Germany that we were to be sent to concentration camps, with the idea of being eliminated.

T: That was not made public to you then.

A: No. No. We just found out about it in the last couple of years. Been a lot of information coming out. But they do have the papers with the direct order for that.

End of Tape 1, Side A. Side B begins at counter 372.

T: Looking at your information here, it says that you arrived at Luft Stalag I on 30 December. That’s over a month after you were shot down.

A: I was in solitary. There was an interrogation camp. It’s called Oberursal. It’s right near Frankfurt, Germany. After I was captured it took several days of traveling in some of these boxcars until I got to Oberursal, which was an interrogation station for Air Force prisoners.

T: Right. Most everyone was funneled through there.

A: Right. And there I was in this little cubicle, and I think I described the food and stuff like that, on the website. I was kept in there and they kept calling me to interrogation, questioning me about...I was amazed at how much information, by the time I got there, how much they knew about me.

T: So they knew more than you expected?

(1, B, 385)

A: Oh, much more. They seemed to know everything about me. My home life. My father’s name was on the dog tag for who to notify in case of death. They knew we had a grocery store. They knew my mother’s name. They knew my brothers’ names. They knew where I had gone to school. And I was amazed at how much personal information they had about me.

T: How many times do you recall being interrogated by the Germans?

A: I was there what, almost a month in solitary. I would say [I was interrogated] an average of about twice a week.

T: And how did these conversations go? Was there kind of a pattern to them? As far as what they asked and how they asked it?
A: Well, you know, we were told name, rank, and serial number. That’s all we give them. And pretty much, you know, stuck to the book on that. The officer—that’s another thing we found out later. They had different officers for different categories of prisoner. In other words, as a navigator it was one type of interrogator, for bombardier there was another, for pilot there was another. So they used a specialist in interrogation. The fellow I had was very impressive. According to him, [he had been] educated at Oxford in England and he…I don’t know if you remember, do you remember an actor named Ronald Coleman?

T: No.

A: Well, very distinctive, beautiful English accent. He was a handsome actor, but beside that, the most beautiful voice you could imagine. And that’s the way this German officer impressed me. Beautifully dressed, you know, with the very elaborate uniform, and on the wall there was a big map of Germany and France and he had lines on there showing the battle lines, and he kept showing me this big bulge and he was saying how, you know, the American forces and the British forces were being turned back and slaughtered. If I would just cooperate with them I could become a German citizen and I could live in Germany, because actually they were going to take over America. Why would I want to go back there? It was that type of a situation.

T: I see. Now you saw the same fellow every time?

A: Yes.

T: So it really...you got to know kind of how he was going to question you, how he was going to treat you every time.

A: Right. It’s interesting also, it came out much later that these men, they have been identified as to who they are. I forget the name of the one that interrogated me. But they’re all here in the United States now, and they’re very successful businessmen and entrepreneurs and stuff like that.

T: No kidding.

A: Yes (chuckles).

T: Did this fellow ever make reference to the fact that you were Jewish?

A: Yes. Also to the fact that I could very well be a spy, because I really didn’t have the dog tags on.

T: So the fact that you might be a spy came up more than once.
A: Yes.

T: Were any threats ever made against you in relation to that?

A: Well, if I wouldn’t cooperate, you know, it would be one of these things who knows what could happen to you?

T: Yes.

A: And as a spy, they would be justified in, you know, eliminating me.

T: The time you were there, that really number of weeks you spent there at this facility, how did you pass the time? I mean, solitary confinement can be awfully lonely it seems.

(1, B, 423)

A: (chuckles) I was going berserk. Yes. You’re in solitary. You have nothing to do. There’s bare walls. A little cot and a little stool. On occasion I would rap one of the walls to somebody in the next cubicle, you know, and talk somewhat, but you never knew who was in the...whether they would be another German trying to get information from you. But the thing that was disturbing to me, day after day I could hear them bring somebody in, and I could hear somebody talking to the German after they were put into the room.

Then a couple days later there would be somebody else come in, and meanwhile, I was still sitting there. I wondered what in the hell is going on? I’m here and everybody else is coming and going. But they kept telling me until...the one thing that they didn’t know about me was that I had been in the 15th Air Force first. They thought that I had just come over to England shortly before I was shot down. And they kept telling me that the frequency of the radar had been changed, and they wanted the frequency so that they could jam it. Now unfortunately, I never knew the frequency of the radar before they changed it, so I had no idea what they were talking about.

T: But they were convinced you did.

A: Right. So that was one of the reasons that they told me that they were keeping me there.

T: Did they confront you with the fact that they knew you were a radar operator?

A: Yes. They knew that.

T: Because your stay at this facility was much, much longer than almost everyone else I’ve spoken to.
A: Yes.

T: You were there for weeks and weeks.

A: Yes. I mean, I think I figured out twenty-four or twenty-five days. Something like that.

T: But you did finally leave.

A: Yes. Actually got out of there Christmas Eve. Then I spent a couple of days in one of these boxcar things. You probably have heard about them.

T: By your information, it was a three day trip to Stalag Luft I.

A: Right.

T: On the map that's a bit of distance up there, but it's not generally three days. What do you remember about the boxcar journey to Barth?

A: Well, we were, you know, sort of packed in. The boxcar had like straw or hay or something on the bottom there. We had enough room that we could sit down, so it wasn't as bad as some of them where they piled them in where they couldn't even sit. They had to stand all the time. But they would stop from time to time and let us jump off the car into the adjoining field so we could eliminate and things like that. It was very heavily guarded. The odors in the boxcars were awful. We did get some rations along the way. You had a cup, and they poured some sort of sloppy stuff in there and that was your meal. We slept sitting up.

T: How many of you would you estimate, were in the boxcar?

A: Had to be fifty or sixty of us I would say, at least.

T: Was your train ever attacked by...

A: We had one attack. It was a fighter plane. That was one of the things about...later on in the war, you know, technically I think they were supposed to have markings on the tops of the trains so that if there was any fighter strafing or anything like that, they would be able to identify the trains underneath, if they were prisoners or Red Cross parcels or anything like that.

T: That's correct.

(1, B, 473)

A: But I don't know whether ours was marked or not, but there was one time when there was strafing going on. They did stop the train. Order us off the train into
there was an embankment there, and they just kept us there. It was maybe about ten, fifteen minutes. Then it was over.

T: So you were able to get out of the train when the strafing attack occurred.

A: Yes.

T: What goes through your mind at a time like that when...

A: It’s frightening, because you can hear the machine gun fire and things like that. I don’t think they came close to us at all, but you could hear that going on and some bomb blasts nearby.

T: You’ve mentioned already a couple of kind of frightening scenes. When you landed and were shot at by the farmers or when they confronted you with your dog tags. Now this. Even the solitary confinement could be unnerving. How do you deal with the different elements of fear and times that you were really scared?

A: Well, I used to say to myself that—you just sit there and think. You become very introspective. It did change my personality quite a bit I think. I think prior to the war, I was very carefree. Joked around a lot and nothing was too serious. In school, I guess I was an average student. Not too aggressive or anything like that. But I think that the solitary and then the prison experience afterwards...when I came back I was much more reserved. Right now I'm talking to you. I'm talkative. But usually I'm very quiet. And student-wise I became you know, a strictly A student. I guess I learned a lot from it.

T: To pick up on that thread, would you say that people like your parents or your brothers or your friends also would have noticed a change in you?

A: I think so. Yes. Yes. I became much more conservative and more determined to have a goal and to go for it and count for something.

T: So in a way, it sounds like you aged a whole lot in a very short period of time.

A: Right. And I guess in a way I did benefit from a horrible experience.

T: That’s a pretty optimistic assessment, or being able to sort of pull out the positive strand from something that, in many ways, was not very positive.

A: Right.

T: Is that your personality in a way, to look for the positive in things?

A: Yes. I think so. You know, right now, I am working part time even though I'm a retired physician. I took a job with Fort Dix where I do physicals on recruits.
Fellows that are enlisting in the Army, Navy, Air Force, things like that. It’s like a couple of hours a morning. Two or three mornings a week. So before this Iraq War here, I was very upbeat about these young kids coming in and enlisting. Mainly they’re enlisting because they can’t get jobs.

T: Yes.

A: So they’re going to make some money and they’re going to get some training. And now I’m starting to realize these poor kids are enlisting—mostly in the Reserves or the National Guard—but they’re going overseas eventually.

T: Yes.

A: The way things are going, they can get killed over there.

T: Let me get back on track here and ask you, when you arrived after three days on train at Barth and were sent to or marched to Luft I, in your own online story you mentioned civilians as you went through the station there. German civilians. That wasn’t the first time that you’d encountered angry German civilians.

(1, B, 530)

A: No. Whenever we were out in public we ran into civilians. There was always the same type of thing. We always had guards with us and we always had the dogs, you know, walking with us. But whenever we ran into German civilians there was always obscenities and spitting at us, and sometimes they’d throw stones. Stuff like that.

We had one horrible experience. Actually the day we were captured, when we had the seventeen kilometer march. Along the road as we came into this town, I think Redmal, there were three bodies hanging from wires. Afterward we assumed that they were probably airmen that had been hung. We saw that. I saw that and I put my eyes down and I blocked it out of my mind after that. I forgot about it for years until I bumped into one of the others, the fellow who was a navigator. We corresponded for a short while before he passed away and he reminded me of it. (***) clear in my memory again.

T: So you saw what was clearly American airmen had been apparently lynched?

A: Apparently. You know whether …who knows, I think I for one, just put my eyes down. I didn’t want to see it. But this other fellow said they were human bodies. Whether they were American or not, we didn’t know.

T: So there was a real sense of concern when German civilians were in the area that something bad could happen.
A: Oh, if we didn't have the guards and the dogs they probably would have strung us up.

T: In an ironic sense then, it seems like the guards and dogs were there more to protect you than they were to...

A: Yes.

T: To keep you there.

A: In a way we were thankful that they were there. But as I look back on it after this was all over, I sort of got the feeling well, who could blame them? You know? We were airmen. Dropping bombs, and we were killing and stuff like that. That they would be angry and want to get to us. If we were being bombed, maybe we would be the same way.

T: Did that occur to you at the time or just really only afterwards?

A: Afterwards.

T: That's the end of part one of the interview.

End of Tape 1. Tape 2, Side A begins at counter 000.

T: Today is 24 April 2004 and thanks again, Dr. Kuptsow, for speaking with me again. Well, I want to start by going back to where we concluded last time. You were just about to arrive at Stalag Luft I in Barth, at the end of December 1944. I want to ask a number of things about that particular location. When you first arrived at Stalag Luft I, can you recall the overall impression that that camp made on you?

A: All I remember is that we got off a train and there was a large contingent of us going in. We marched. I don't think it was too much of a distance and entered through these large gates. A camp surrounded by barbed wire with the guard posts at the different corners of the place. We were escorted in by German guards and the always present dogs.

T: You said ever present dogs. Were dogs part of the POW experience there at Barth?

A: I think they always used the dogs, and I think I may have mentioned it. Sometimes the presence of the guards and the dogs was a safety factor for us too, because civilians, I think, were more inclined to come after us than the guards would have been. But most of the time whenever we were being transferred someplace, there were always the guards and the dogs.
T: Now you mentioned in our first conversation, the civilians and interactions with civilians and a couple of rather harrowing experiences.

A: Right.

T: Once you got into the camp here at Stalag Luft I, are your experiences or confrontations with civilians over?

A: Pretty much. Yes. I don’t think we ran into civilians at all after that.

T: Now when you got to Stalag Luft I you were assigned to compound Number 4 and I know...

A: Walking into the camp there were, oh, hundreds and hundreds of American, and I guess some British, prisoners of war there, you know, that were talking and yelling and greeting us and things like that. I don’t remember some of the comments, but anyhow, it was like a huge welcoming party to get us into the camp.

T: Did you begin to feel a little more, I don’t know, is it at ease or relaxed once you actually got into the camp and saw other POWs around you?

A: Yes. I think so. In general, I would say that. The fact that there were so many that were in the same situation and you felt a little more secure when you were being herded around than just a small group.

T: Yes. Because the camp was large and there were hundreds of other prisoners around you now.

A: I think, actually, the camp had about eight thousand personnel in there. So it was pretty big.

T: Now the compound you were assigned to, Compound 4, as Stalag Luft I grew, that was the newest section of the camp, I think.

A: Right.

T: Can you describe the barracks that you were assigned to, as far as your quarters?

A: Well, it was a large barracks up on stilts. There were a couple of steps up into the barracks, and then we had the rooms. Now, when I was in that part of the camp I think there were twenty-some of us in a room, and the bunks were like three levels. So we were assigned a room and went into the room. There were already some personnel in the rooms, and we were assigned to a bunk.
I don’t remember whether we had cubbies or where we—we didn’t have much in the way of belongings anyhow. I don’t remember where we stowed our things. But anyhow, once we got in, everybody introduced themselves and we settled down. People had assignments. There was, for example, they may get a part of a loaf of bread. Now the bread that we got was, I guess you would compare somewhat to pumpernickel. However, we found out, and it was understood that at least half of the flour was sawdust, which made the bread quite firm. It was one man’s responsibility to slice. Get as many slices as possible out of the portion of bread, so that it may be about an eighth of an inch thick slices of bread that we would...everybody got a supply of that. The food that we relied on were Red Cross parcels.

T: As opposed to what the Germans supplied.

A: Yes. I don’t recall that they supplied very much of anything. In the beginning, I was only in that room, I think, maybe two or three weeks. The Red Cross parcels, I don’t remember how many we were supposed to get. Whether it was one a week or one every two weeks. But the Germans attributed it to the fact that the trains that were supposed to transport the parcels were supposed to be marked with a Red Cross on top. Apparently they weren’t doing that. So our fighter planes were shooting up their trains and destroying the parcels. That’s the story we got.

(2, A, 66)

T: Now, of the food the Germans supplied, you mentioned a daily bread ration. They gave a loaf and you split yourselves, then?

A: Right.

T: So the people in the room were responsible to split the bread up.

A: Yes. There was one person that was responsible for that. Another person was responsible for cleaning the room in general. Each one had to do their own bed and things like that. The beds, by the way, were just wooden slats and a burlap sack with, like, hay, I guess. You could fluff them up but as soon as you laid down on it was like a pancake.

T: Got it. The sleeping quarters, was it one person to a bunk or more than one?

A: One to a bunk but as I say, there were three levels.

T: So like a bunk bed, really.

A: Yes.

T: What was your job in that particular room? If everyone had a job.
A: I don’t recall. I think it’s one of these things where once you’re there you sort of worked into some category. They figured out what your specialty might be. One of them would have to clean up. There was a stove in each room which was used for both heat and cooking. I remember one of the fellows used to take the—there were cans of cream, dried milk. It used to be in the Red Cross parcels. You would take the can apart, flatten it out and then hammering it you could make a pan out of it, something like that to cook on. So there was one fellow that specialized in making up the pans and stuff like that.

T: It sounds like people were pretty creative in meeting daily needs.

A: Yes. They had to be and it was something that you sort of adjusted to out of necessity.

T: Now you are a person who grew up in the city, right?

A: Right.

T: A lot of other guys grew up on farms or in smaller towns. From your perspective, was a city person or a country person better suited to survive and sort of make do in a situation like that?

A: I think they [a country person] would have been. I don’t recall any of them that were from any particular area. Later on, when we moved to the other section, it seemed that most of them that I was in with were from the New York City area and so they were strictly city boys.

T: I know you didn’t spend much time, from your own record, in this compound before you were moved.

A: Right.

T: And that had to do with being Jewish specifically, right?

A: Right.

T: Can you talk about that? I mean, you mentioned throwing away your dog tags when you first hit the ground. How concerned were you really throughout about being Jewish and being held by the Nazis?

A: I wasn’t too concerned. I didn’t have a heck of a lot of information about what was going on. I don’t think most of us did. We got news from Stars and Stripes and things like that, but I don’t remember that we got a lot of news from the BBC or any of that. I don’t think most of us sat down to listen to these broadcasts. We certainly
didn’t know anything about the Holocaust situation. I think that all came out toward the end of the war.

T: Yes.

(2, A, 107)

A: I knew there was an anti-Semitic attitude in Germany, but I didn’t figure that, you know, I could be killed or something just because of being Jewish. I think once we were segregated, then the realization started to sink in a little bit more.

T: You had thrown your dog tags away when you landed.

A: Right.

T: So it seems that that might have been on your mind anyway.

A: It was on my mind only because we had been told to do that.

T: Really.

A: In other words, they advised us. If you’re Jewish and you’re going to be captured in Germany, why, toss away your dog tags. Now, I don’t remember who said that, but that threw a whole different picture into the situation because anyone captured as an enemy personnel was automatically then considered a spy.

T: Without dog tags.

A: Yes. So that it made the situation even worse.

T: This segregation at Luft I when you were moved to a different compound, was it made clear to you that Jewish POWs were being put into one location?

A: No. Because when they called us out, and we were out as a formation actually. It was like a morning roll call. They used to count us. I don’t remember whether they called us out by name or by Kriegie number. It was like a prison number that you had. And told to stay after the others were dismissed. Then told that we were being moved to a different area.

T: Which by itself might not have been all that out of the ordinary.

A: Right. Until we got into the building and then we realized that we were all Jewish. We started to check with other rooms. Found out that everybody in the barracks was Jewish. I personally wasn’t too upset about it, but I started to hear others who, you know, started to complain and say, “This is not legal. We have to protest this to
Geneva. We have to contact the American commanding officer of the camp to forward something to Geneva, the Geneva Convention for protest.”

T: From your perspective, did it appear people were more angry or afraid?

A: I guess it was a combination of both. As I say, I don’t think any of us understood how serious it could be. But they knew it was serious enough that maybe they were going to do something to us by segregating us.

T: Once you were moved into this new barracks compound in February, did your daily treatment change? Was it markedly different in any way from what you had before?

A: Well, in a way we sort of benefited. The reason I say that, in the first part of the camp, the first few weeks, each room had its individual food supply. Whatever it was. And it was their responsibility to take care of that and divide it up, and they did their own preparation of the food and things of that type.

Once we got into this other section, you had to remember this part of the camp had been in existence about seven years, since Dunkirk, when the British and French were first encamped there.

T: So a long time.

A: Yes. Over a period of time they had built a mess hall. Now, what they did then, once they had the mess hall, whatever food came into that compound was pooled and then there were cooks, people that had some experience cooking who prepared the food and everything for the whole compound.

T: Of which you were now part.

A: Right. So in a way, that was good. Now what happened subsequently, as we got past the Battle of the Bulge and all, the American forces were definitely winning the war.

T: Right.

(2, A, 165)

A: They were shooting up trains and all that kind of stuff. Red Cross parcels became very, very scarce. And there was very little food coming into the camps. What happened then, for example, the 4th Compound, they were pretty much out of food. Once in a while they would send in a horse and wagon, a big wagon that had maybe rutabagas in it or some potatoes or something, and they’d just move it into the center of the compound and the bottom of the wagon would open up and it would drop all this stuff, and then everybody would run and grab as much as they could for their own room or personal supply.
T: It sounds like the situation you left then became much more chaotic.

A: Yes. It got to the point where we could see, through the barbed wire, and I don’t remember whether it was Compound 4 or Compound 3 that we could see, but we saw some of the GIs actually going through trash and garbage pails trying to get food. We did see some physical assaults amongst the POWs themselves trying to grab something to eat.

T: So the situation had deteriorated, from your observation, to the point where there actually were physical like fights between prisoners for what food there was available.

A: Right. And yet we still, we didn’t have a lot, but the fact that everything had been pooled, and apparently they had accumulated a little bit of a surplus, we did have food. But we could not share. In other words, we could not send any food over to the other compounds.

T: In comparison you certainly had more food, but would you say that you had enough food or was hunger still an issue?

A: We never had enough. It was enough to keep you going. I think all of us lost quite a bit of weight while we were in the camp. There always seemed to be bread coming in, and they had coffee which was ersatz coffee. I don’t know what they made it of. But if you heated it up enough, it did the job. I think it was one of the coldest winters in German history, so anything that we could make hot was fine. Another thing, we had these stoves in the room. We had coal or wood to burn for cooking and all. Usually by evening the supply was pretty well gone. So overnight it got pretty cold. I remember, you know, feet hurting. I remember your socks were never really dry and used to sleep with the shoes on trying to keep warm. Once in bed, you got into sort of a fetal position trying to conserve some heat.

T: So being cold, like being hungry, was a constant it sounds like.

A: Pretty much so. Yes.

T: Let me switch and ask about religion here. There are chaplains and different people in different camps talked about chaplains being there and religious services. In either compound you were in, 4 or 1, were there religious services that you remember?

A: I understand that there were religious services. I never attended any. I don’t remember being invited to any Jewish service at all. Now, we did bump into someone this past weekend who mentioned that where he was, now he was not Jewish, he understood that one of this roommates was a very religious Jew and did
hold...now, he was not a chaplain or anything, but he knew enough to hold services on Friday night to others who were in the same barracks.

T: That’s not something you ever knew about when you were in camp though.

A: No. And considering that this was an all-Jewish barracks, I don’t ever recall hearing of any services there.

T: So in the all-Jewish barracks you were in, there was not a Jewish chaplain there?

A: No.

T: And there were no services that you remember in that barracks.

A: Right.

(2, A, 230)

T: Being together with a group of people that you had, in a sense, a common bond, all being Jewish, did that make your POW experience there any easier in any way?

A: I don’t really think so. Most of the time...well, as officers, you know, there’s no work duties or anything like that.

T: Right.

A: For NCOs they could send them out on work projects or something like that. Actually force labor on them. We’re supposed to be officers and gentlemen, so they treat you differently. So it was pretty much a boring existence. There was a library. Had a lot of the Pocket Books, the soft cover books that I guess Red Cross had contributed. So I did a lot of reading while I was there.

T: It sounds like you had a lot of dead time during the day to sort of, to take care of.

A: Which is a problem in a way, because all you can do is think and talk. And the talk was mostly about food. As I say, in that part there were fourteen in there. We had double bunks. Most of the fellows were from New York, and we talked about food constantly. And the New Yorkers always talked about the wonderful restaurants that they had and things like that.

T: You being from Philadelphia, was there a friendly competition in a way, that your restaurants were every bit as good?

A: Yes. But I hadn’t been around enough. I guess I was sort of secluded from things like restaurants. I never had the experience of running around to eat out and things like that.
T: Got it.

A: I think our family, see we had a grocery store which was open seven days a week, and it was a mom and pop store. Never had any help other than the sons. My father would open about four o’clock in the morning and work until about one o’clock the following morning. He’d go up in the afternoon and take a nap. My mother would take over. But we were down there in the area near the Philadelphia Naval Yard, and a lot of the people in the neighborhood worked at the Navy Yard. They had to be in to work early, so they would come in for their lunches and breakfast and things like that. Then later, once Prohibition was over, my father had gotten a beer license and we stayed open—you had to close like at twelve o’clock as far as the beer was concerned. Midnight. But by the time things were cleared out though, it was one o’clock in the morning.

T: It sounds like the Christians and the Catholics. We do the same thing.

A: Those were the days also…now, Yom Kippur…

T: Getting back to this routine thing and talking about food and all this. It sounds like in a way, maybe a little bit of work might not have been such an unwelcome thing.

A: It probably would have as long as it wouldn’t have been too strenuous. But if we had some sort of a detail to do, it would have helped out. But there wasn’t very much other than trying to keep the fire going and things like that.

T: You were a second lieutenant, but as an officer, that meant you were beyond the work detail requirement.

A: Right.

T: So other than talking about food and reading, it was a matter of staying warm and kind of being on the lookout for food, it sounds like.

A: Yes.

T: As the war progressed in that spring, you mentioned already it was clear the Germans were probably losing the war. What kind of rumors or news made the rounds in the camp about what might be happening to this particular camp?

(2, A, 295)

A: Well, that’s another fascinating subject. Every night after...in other words, we would be confined to the barracks. I don’t remember whether it was after five o’clock or six o’clock or something like that. But we had to be inside the barracks.
The barracks were locked, and you could roam from room to room up until maybe until like nine o’clock. Then you weren’t allowed into the hallway of the barracks either. Every night in each barracks, still to this day I don’t know how it was done, there was a paper that would be slipped under the door and it had the latest BBC news. Somebody had a radio, or access to a radio at least. But we got a report every single night on what was happening with the war effort. You know, any kind of scores of any sports that were going on.

T: So you didn’t know where this was coming from, but it was there.

A: It was there. It was something that we relied on. So we had a pretty good idea of what was going on.

T: So you could kind of follow the military situation.

A: Right. Now, quite a few times they would call us out in formation on the ground, and a bunch of the guards would raid one of the barracks. And they’d pull up floorboards and pull down some of the wall, the wooden beam wall, looking for the radio, apparently. The story was that they felt by bartering either cigarettes or the D bars or whatever they had, some of the campers had gotten, part by part, the radio and had been able to put it together and were able to get the news.

T: So this was nothing you ever saw, but that the news was being provided, it certainly existed.

A: Right. And it’s interesting because now, sixty years later, this past weekend we were talking about it. We still don’t know where it was coming from.

T: Does that mean that having hard news kind of took care of the rumor mill, or was that there too?

A: I don’t think there was too much rumors. In other words, we felt that we were getting news and we felt that we were winning. It sort of gave you a little bit of a positive outlook that someday, maybe we’re going to get out of this situation.

T: Yes.

A: Then later on when we knew that the Russian forces were closer to us, coming at us from the East than the Allied forces from the West. We used to have one fellow that every night you would hear him yelling out, “Come on, Joe!” Referring to Joe Stalin, trying to get him to get up there fast. Then we started to hear guns later on.

T: So you could hear the war coming towards the very end.

A: Right. I’d say toward the end of March, the beginning of April, we could hear the cannon fire and things like that. Then we knew we were getting close.
End of Tape 2, Side A. Side B begins at counter 378.

T: There was a rumor of a possible evacuation sometime in mid-April that the prisoners were told that we might have to march out of the camp.

A: Right.

T: Do you remember getting that news and the kind of reaction to it?

A: Oh, yes. It was very upsetting, because we had heard that others had been on the forced march. We had also heard about what happened in the Philippines [Bataan] and things like that when they started marching. We also knew from, like the day that I was captured and we were marched, that you didn’t have the luxury of when you get tired of sitting down and taking a breath because they were always poking you with the guns and telling you to keep going.

T: That’s right. You had a very specific memory of a long, uncomfortable march.

A: Right.

T: And that was something, from what I hear you saying, was in the front of your mind.

A: Right. We were hearing the gunfire and everything, there was talk that we were going to be moved south to one of the other camps which was several hundred miles away. We were told to take shirts and tie the end of the sleeve into a knot and then tie the tails of the shirt together so as to form a knapsack. And whatever we could put in there. Actually the sleeve would wrap around the chest or the neck to hold the thing up.

T: Like a backpack kind of thing or a duffel bag.

A: Right. Yes. And we were told to get ready with that, because we were going to be marched.

T: It’s, in a sense, I can see that this is disconcerting having to leave, but on the other hand, it seems to suggest that the Allies are getting closer and closer and that’s kind of a good thing. How did people around you see this? Was this seen as a positive thing or something to be concerned about?

A: Oh, it was a negative thing. No way did we look forward to any kind of a march like that. We were pretty well settled. We weren’t that far away from liberation and the fact that they would be marching us further south would just delay any liberation by weeks or months or years. Fortunately, the colonel in charge of the
camp was Colonel Zemke, and he was the highest-ranking officer in the whole camp. I don’t know whether you’ve ever heard of him.

T: Yes. I have.

A: He was an ace pilot. He stood up to the Germans and said, no way are they marching. Do what you want, but we are not leaving this camp.

T: Did Zemke’s response to the German commanders make the rounds of the camp that the prisoners were aware too of the situation?

A: Yes. Yes. We were told that we were going to resist. We had no idea what was going to happen, but we felt that we were safer standing our ground than getting out on the road where they could do whatever they wanted to us.

T: And does that mean the evacuation or the planned evacuation was then cancelled, or did it just never happen?

A: Well, I guess it was cancelled, because it never did take place. Then they told us be prepared to dig trenches, because we’re going to fight to the end. We were not going to fight to the end.

T: So the last couple weeks there, there was a lot of tumult around.

A: Right.

T: Was it clear that the Russians were going to get there before the Western Allies?

A: Right.

T: What kind of concern was there for you or other prisoners about the arrival of the Russians?

A: No concern actually. The Russians were Allies, and we were happy to see them come.

T: You mentioned earlier that you could hear the war coming before you actually saw anybody.

(2, B, 429)

A: Right.

T: How did that affect the mood around camp when it was clear that somebody was very close?
A: Well, there was a general feeling of excitement. That this is it. It's a matter of days or a week or something like that. We're going to be liberated. But every night you could hear the gunfire getting louder and louder, which meant that they were getting closer. We could even hear what sounded like small gunfire too. So it couldn't be too far off.

T: Do you remember the actual arrival of the Russians in your camp?

A: Yes. I don't know whether you read that part of my... Well, it was very exciting because, I guess the day before they arrived we noticed all of a sudden that there was nobody up in the guard towers, and we realized, hey, you know, it seems like things are, you know, they're gone.

T: The Germans just melted away?

A: They melted away. That day we were sort of free. We were warned: don't do anything because you don't know what's beyond the barbed wire. Let's wait and see what happens. We're this close to liberation. Let's not do anything foolish.

T: So once again, the safest place was behind barbed wire.

A: Right. Then Colonel Zemke went out and he headed east, I guess to greet the advancing Russians. I guess he had a detail with him. There was one fellow in the camp, who was Jewish by the way, who was fluent in Russian and he became the interpreter for everything. So they went out and they met the Russian, or whatever he was out there, to make arrangements for the liberation of the camp and the safety of the prisoners. So we knew that that had happened. By that time we knew that, I think, Hitler had committed suicide at that point. No. That may have come later. But when the Russians came in, they came in at night. That was very exciting. Most exciting evening, I think, up to that point in my life I ever had.

But they came in on the road right outside the camp and we were all lined up near the barbed wire there watching them come through. The ones who came in the beginning were Asian looking Russians. I don't know whether they were Mongolians or just where they were from. But very rough looking bunch of soldiers on horses. To me it looked like they were eight feet high, the horses they were on. What do you call them? Bandoleers?

T: Bandoleers. Yes.

A: Yes. Across them. They were shooting in the air and singing and everything. Then they would be coming through and then there were horse and wagons, and on the wagons there were some women. Apparently the Russian troops always traveled with women. I don't know for what reason, but use your imagination. Anyhow, as they would advance they would stop and the women would get out these little ocarinas or the harmonicas and things like that, and the bottles of vodka would pop up from the bottom of the wagon and everybody started to drink and
sing and they were having a good old time. That certainly got us in the proper mood.

T: I can see why you remember it fifty-some years later too.

A: But it was very exciting. We were all so happy to see them. Then it became a problem because historically when that was going on, suddenly Russia and the United States were not—over, I think, the Poland thing being partitioned. I guess history...well, you would be familiar with history at that point.

T: Yes.

A: But they were arguing about how to divide some of these lands that they had occupied. Also there were thirteen or fifteen days and it became a little hairy.

T: So in a way, the Germans were gone. Did you feel yourself to be a prisoner still or a free man?

(2, B, 484)

A: Well, we were warned, in other words, even after the Russians moved in. Now I know the Burgermeister of the town committed suicide. A lot of the men left the houses and a lot of them left their women behind and ran heading toward the west. If they had to be taken, they wanted to be taken by the Allies rather than by the Russians. Of course, the Russians were...they story was that these were troops that had been involved in Stalingrad and they were bitter and angry and they would kill Germans on sight.

T: Yes. Was it something that you felt you didn’t want to leave town at all, even out of curiosity, or did you actually ever leave the camp?

A: Oh, yes. We did. The day after the Russians got in, we all bolted. I imagine most of us bolted, into town. There was a flak school where they, I guess, taught them gunnery and how to shoot the flak, anti-aircraft. So we raided that building, and lo and behold, in that building we found sacks and sacks full of mail and they got around to sorting it. We were allowed, technically allowed to write, I forget, two or three letters a year—it must have been a month—home. Not a single one of our letters ever got out. In fact, I still have quite a few of them that I retrieved after they were sorted through. They located us and gave us back the letters that we had written.

T: So you found mail that was from the POW camp that had never been sent.

A: Never been sent.

T: Holy cow!
A: My parents never did get anything from me.

T: And now you knew why.

A: I never received anything from them either.

T: To be outside the camp, was that a nervous experience in any way? Did you feel less secure than you had in the camp?

A: I think it was just the idea of getting out and walking down the road and going into town where there were houses and things like that. It was one of these things where I was walking along with a couple of other fellows and an elderly German man came up to me and he kept saying, “Alles kaputt! Alles kaputt!” And lo and behold, he pulls out and he hands me a Luger [German pistol] that he had, for me to take. And I did end up with a souvenir gun.

T: So looking around the town, could you see the effects of the war at all in a small place like Barth?

A: Not too much, because I don’t think that they bombed that to any extent. I think by that time the Germans had just disappeared and there was no need for any fighting. We did have a situation where, as I say, some of the German women were left there and the Russians had no qualms about moving in with them and taking over the house and the women. I understand there were a couple of GIs ended up getting killed by going into town and trying to move in on... The odd thing was, as I told you, we always talked about food. Once we were liberated we found food in the town and the Russians supplied us with a lot of food that they had brought along too. So all of a sudden, the hunger was gone and the bellies were filled, and what do you think of next after food?

T: Well, young men probably go to women.

A: That’s exactly right. And that’s what happened. So some of the fellows headed into town looking for women. Some of them, as I say, had been there like seven years and so it was, I guess, a natural inclination.

T: Sure.

A: But a couple of them, I understand—I’m not certain about this. But I understand that a few of the fellows were killed when they tried to move in on a Russian who was already situated in the apartment or house.

(2, B, 543)
T: In the camp for those days, thirteen, fifteen days whatever it was, did it become tense to the point where you felt you weren’t quite sure when you were going to get out or how?

A: No. We knew that Zemke and Zebreski, Zebreski was the second in command, he was also a fighter ace. They were working by means of this interpreter to contact the Allies to come and get us whatever way they wanted to, whether it was by transport or plane or whatever. Come and get us out. So it was a matter of sitting tight until the arrangements could be made. But we had this tension about what was going on politically.

T: Right. Of knowing that as a background.

A: Right.

T: And yet after a couple of weeks you were flown out on airplanes.

A: Yes. It’s funny because I actually have a film that somebody took showing all these guys running—I think it took three days to evacuate the camp. They came in with all kinds of planes. They never let the engines stop. They landed the plane. The guys would rush onto the plane and they would take off. Just to be sure that they got off without any kind of interference.

T: Right. It sounds like a mass evacuation almost.

A: Right.

T: Now, was it just Americans being evacuated or anyone in the camp?

A: Anyone in the camp. I don’t know whether they had any priorities, how they set it up. As I recall, I think I was on the third day. But they did have it organized.

T: What possessions left that camp with you? What did you actually have to your name?

A: I really don’t remember. I don’t remember what uniform I had or anything like that. Some supplies came in from Red Cross. I know I never had anything that really fit because I’m small. If I had access to a real supply depot they would probably have my size.

T: Right.

A: But I wore whatever I got.

T: Well, it was a matter of keeping warm it sounds like.
A: Right.

T: You were flown to Camp Lucky Strike. Spent some time there and then were shipped back to the United States, right?

A: Right.

T: When you got back to the United States, do you remember when you first saw your family?

A: Yes. Well, it’s odd because I think prior to being shot down I had written something about the fact that I was sure I would be home before my birthday and we were having a party. As it happens I reached Fort Dix on June 23...

T: That’s your birthday.

A: Right. And as the train pulled in, it must have been late afternoon or early evening, but as the train pulled in they were making an announcement over the loudspeaker looking for Lt. Kuptsow. I thought, oh, my God, now what? I get all the way home and then something’s wrong. But they wanted me out on the boarding platform. So when the train stopped, why I went out and started to walk along the platform. All of a sudden I saw my brother and his wife were there and one of the officers from the Fort Dix, and apparently my sister-in-law is a very strong individual and the type if it’s impossible to be done, she can do it. She went and apparently they got to the CO of Fort Dix somehow, and I think my brother said he gave him a box of Cuban cigars and told him it was my birthday and things like that. He agreed to let them come on the platform and take me with them. And they took me back to Philadelphia, and lo and behold, I had a birthday party (laughing).

T: Super. Now you have how many brothers and sisters?

A: I had two brothers, one older, one younger. The younger one has passed away.

T: And no sisters.

A: No.

T: When you saw your brothers and your parents again, how much were they curious to know about your POW experience?

A: Not too much. They just, you know, told me to forget about everything. You’re home now.

T: Did you feel like you, in a sense, wanted to tell them more than they asked about?
A: There were times when I felt like I wanted to talk to them about it. Shortly after I got home. But once I...

T: The last couple things that I just wanted to conclude with here was to sort of get a sense of talking about things. How do you come down on that? Did you, as time went on, did your brothers or your folks want to hear more?

A: Not really. No. They didn’t push for it and I wasn’t exactly excited about telling them too much. I think the years went by and it was sort of in the back of my mind. I used to get some nightmares and things like that that I would have. In fact, I used to frighten my wife sometimes because in the middle of the night I would dream about falling and jump up in the bed suddenly. Then one man that I had seen who’s face was burned beyond recognition, I bumped into him one night while I was—not in the camp but being transported. He came into the room and the next morning they took him out. I just saw his face as he was leaving. I’ll never forget the faces. Apparently his oxygen mask had blown up while he was wearing it and he had fallen out of the plane. He had no idea how he got out of the plane or how he opened the chute or anything. He was in the same room with me overnight, but it was pitch-black in the room. But we were talking.

T: So you couldn’t see him until morning.

A: Right. And he said he was going to be sent back to the States because they didn’t have the facilities to handle the burn. They had done as much as they could.

T: Got it.

A: He was being repatriated.

T: The dreams that you had after the war, the one that you mentioned about falling, is that from the plane when you left the plane?

A: Yes. I think that was related to that. But there were an assortment of nightmares that I had over a period of time. And every once in a while I still get... I’m still a smoker. Whenever I have tried to stop smoking I get these recurring nightmares. I’m almost eighty-two now and I’ve been smoking for sixty years. If anything’s going to happen, it’s already in there.

T: That’s a pretty philosophical way to look at it.

A: But it’s kind of late to stop at this point.

T: Do you have dreams or nightmares that are connected to your time at Stalag Luft I?

(2, B, 663)
A: I don’t remember being specifically there. But some of them that I have I can relate to things that I saw while I was in captivity. Not a direct relationship. I can sort of tie it in to that.

T: When you have them anymore is it, do you find it’s prompted by certain situations or like conversations like this?

A: No. No. In fact, these conversations actually... I was shot down on November 26 of ’44. In 1994, which was exactly fifty years later—Thanksgiving was either the same day or the day before or after—but we always get together for Thanksgiving with the family.

T: Right.

A: I decided at that time to mention, you know, fifty years ago today, if things had happened differently, none of us would be sitting in this particular room. The kids all looked at me. Why? I told them, you remember that I was a prisoner of war. I started talking about being shot down and if I had been killed or something there would be no relationship as far as this house was concerned.

T: Sure.

A: And then I started to talk a little bit and then it wasn’t until a little bit later that this Mary Smith contacted me. She’s the one that made up the website.

T: That’s right. That’s right.

A: Yes. Her father had been on the same plane and—in fact, she was one of those that organized this last weekend. He had passed away and had never said much about it. As most of us did not. Then she was curious as to what happened. She found out that I was on the same plane, wrote to me and then I told her, well, I didn’t know him, but if you want I’ll tell you what happened to me and then... I love typing. I usually find that very relaxing. I sat down at the computer and started to write. This whole thing came out. And it ended up at that website.

T: So for you, you can really date the talking about it to fifty years afterwards.

A: Right. That’s when I really started to. Since then, I’ve gone to different groups and have spoken about the experiences. Then like you, I’ve had a number of contacts. I had a school in Leeds, England, that contacted me and I spoke to kids there at the school. I’ve gotten contacts from around the world actually.

T: As a medical professional, is there a therapeutic side to repeatedly talking about it?
A: I think it’s a catharsis. Yes. I think you get it out and as you talk about it, you remember more about what happened and you learn a little bit more about yourself.

T: Does it get easier, in a sense? The more times that you talk about it.

A: Yes.

T: Now you mentioned 1994. By that time you had been married nearly fifty years.

A: Yes.

T: Your wife Anita, when you were first married or in the succeeding years, how much did you talk about this POW experience with her?

A: Very little. Not too much. She knew that I had the experience. We never really spoke too much about it. She’s gotten more excited about talking about this than I have been. She’s gung-ho on this whole thing now. When we were with this group this past weekend—that, by the way, in a way was a sad experience because we got up to say things and I usually like to try to make light of the situation. Some of the fellows got up and talked about… Like there was one fellow. The plane was shot down. Six of his crew members were executed right in front of his face. They were shot in the back of the head. They were SS guards that did it. He actually was the only that survived that crew. He stayed in the service afterward. He is a full colonel. He is a pilot and he travels all over the world. He’s got a terrific pension and...

End of Tape 2. Tape 3, Side A begins at counter 000.

T: Talking about going back to Barth. Is that something that you’ve ever done or wanted to do?

A: I wanted to, but my wife wouldn’t go.

T: What would prompt you to go?

A: You know, there’s nothing left there. There are no barracks or anything. There’s just this rock.

T: Right.

A: There is a large chapel with a high steeple. You used to be able to see that. That’s it. You look at the rock, and you look at the steeple, and that’s your remembrance of the camp. But also I wanted to back to England to where our base was, in the little town of Nedemstay. I was there a couple of months. It was a little village and I remember one of the women in the village used to bring eggs to us and things like that. I had a bike there that somebody inherited. I ordered a pair of boots in the
town of Cambridge prior to being shot down. I never got back to pick them up. I’m just wondering whether they still have my boots.

T: So those were happy memories from England.

A: Yes. We were there at the time that the V bombs were coming over. A couple of times we got passes to London, and we used to go in town and these bombs would hit. I did have sort of a girlfriend there in London. She lived in pretty much of a bombed out area. I used to go in there whenever I had a pass and see her.

T: The last question I have for you actually is this: to think about, and I guess it’s a philosophical question in a way, to think about the most important way or ways that being a POW changed you as a person or changed your life. How would you answer that?

A: I think I’m much more reserved than I had been. I haven’t done this much talking in a long time. But usually I’m pretty quiet. I listen a lot. I don’t talk a whole lot. But I’m more introspective than I was, what I think was, prior to the war. I’m more cautious financially, and decisions that I make seem to be more cautious. But I think school-wise I turned out much better after the war than I was before. I was more determined to reach the goals that I had aimed for. And I think also I always considered myself a very compassionate physician and I never ran one of these mills where you come in and go out and make a fast buck.

T: Do you think that POW time really informed your career as a physician as well then?

A: I think so. Yes. I think I [have] more clemency for the feelings of other people. How different things affect them and the way I should treat them.

T: It sounds like you came home, in a way, much more mature than a typical twenty-three year old.

A: Right. I think anybody that has gone through a military life—especially if they’ve been under a war situation—you have to have it to some extent.

T: That’s the last question I have. On the record, Dr Kuptsow, thank you very much for your time.

A: All right.

END OF INTERVIEW
E-mail correspondence, addition of 01 May 2004

One of the things that didn't come out during our interview—the feeling of guilt. One of the expressions that became famous, "For you, the war is over," made the average soldier feel guilty. And it certainly was true in my case. The fact that I only flew eight missions was a concern. I felt that I had let the country down. While others were out there still fighting, I was sitting in a camp—relatively safe. That feeling of guilt was with me for the next fifty years or so.

One of my closest friends in Med School had flown in the Pacific Theatre, had completed fifty missions, then had come back to the States and was sent around the country boosting sales of US Bonds. Then when I went to the VA to sign up for medical benefits, lo and behold, they notify me that I am entitled to special benefits as an ex-POW. Why? Apparently, I'm considered some kind of a hero. But I only flew eight missions. It goes with the category. Then, I find out I'm entitled to some disability benefits.

It bothered me to some extent. It wasn't the kind of thought that kept popping up in my mind, but it did occur from time to time. As I look back, I think that is one of the reasons that I never talked about my experiences during the first fifty years. Now, I feel better about it. I have learned that only about one in three ever finished a complete tour. At our recent reunion, one of the POWs was shot down on his first mission. What the hell, I didn't do too badly. So the feeling is passing. Good riddance.