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Copyright: Mélanie Péron acknowledges the USC Shoah Foundation for allowing her to transcribe into French and to translate into English parts of the testimony of **Micheline (Bellair) Cahen** (interview [27330](#)). For more information: <http://sfi.usc.edu/>

## ENGLISH TRANSLATION



Credit: <https://yadvashem-france.org/dossier/nom/3831/>

*Micheline Cahen, one of two social workers at the Beaune-la-Rolande camp in the summer of 1942, describes the departure of the internees to Drancy and then to the extermination camps.*

### Tape 1

Start - 18:05

Interviewer: So how did you end up in the Beaune-la-Rolande camp?

Micheline: Well, because the prefecture of the Seine, to which I belong as responsible of the housing centers in Paris and the suburbs, sent me a mission order to go to Beaune-la-Rolande to do social service, probably « quote-end quote », because, unfortunately, we couldn't do much, except talk.

Interviewer: And what did you find when you arrived?

Micheline: Well, when I arrived, I found half of those who had been arrested at the Vel' d'Hiv', the other half being in a camp further away, in Pithiviers. And I found all these people on straw, not really understanding what was happening to them. There were doctors, lawyers or furriers, shoe dealers, everything mixed up, men, women, children, babies, everything was in different stalls and in the straw.

Interviewer: And they came from where?

Micheline: They had been taken from the Vel' d'Hiv', it was Paris-the Paris region.

Interviewer: And then transferred to Beaune-la-Rolande. And how was the camp organized?

Micheline: Well, the camp was practically not organized. There were... yes, there were soldiers, gendarmes on each watchtower. We were well supervised. We couldn't get out. There were only two of us, a Red Cross social worker and myself. Two people to take care of these hundreds of people in distress.

Interviewer: And the camp was surrounded by barbed wire?

Micheline: Barbed wire, yes. All around with watchtowers at every corner.

Interviewer: And who was guarding the camp?

Micheline: In principle, the French Gendarmerie, but obviously, there were some Germans watching them. For example, the day the women were supposedly taken to Drancy but we saw that it wasn't true, one of these women, who was the wife of a great doctor and who had helped me as much as she could, that is to say, she too comforted people, she took care of a child, organized a small play group for the little ones, etc., and when she was called, before she went behind the barbed wire of the inner courtyard, I shook her hand. At that moment, I received a blow with a baton on my arm. I can't use it anymore.

Interviewer: But who hit you?

Micheline: A French policeman. Unless it was a German in disguise, I never wanted to know. I had only dared to offer my hand.

Interviewer: So what was your job inside the camp?

Micheline: There was nothing we could do but talk, cheer up, repeat over and over again, "This is only a bad patch. It will pass. France is France, it's not going to accept this." What could we say? And then, trying to invent games for the children but we had nothing, not a paper or a pencil. Most of the people had been arrested like that, without taking anything.

Interviewer: So when you arrived, there were men, women and children?

Micheline: Yes, there was everything. The whole family.

Interviewer: And then, what happened?

Micheline: They started by calling all the men one morning and making them go to the inner courtyard in front of the camp, a courtyard with barbed wire. And gendarmes were posted at every corner. And the men, not knowing what was going to happen to them, stayed there all day in the sun. The women calling them, the children shouting "Daddy, come here!" And, at night, because they always did that at night, they took them to the station. Mademoiselle de La Chapelle, from the Red Cross, and I followed. We saw that they were being put into cattle cars. And the gendarmes who were escorting them, because it was always the gendarmes, told us "We're taking them to Drancy." We left it at that. We saw the cattle cars leave and that was that. And we found out later that they were indeed taken to Drancy and then sent to work in Germany.

Interviewer: And what happened to the women and children?

Micheline: Unfortunately, I forgot to mention that what they meant by men was boys from the age of 18. So the women were left with the children, from babies to [17 years old]. And another time, two or three days after the men, they called all the girls between 15 and 18 who were left there. And the mothers were screaming. The girls were screaming too. It was always in the yard, in the open air but behind the barbed wire. They told the mothers,

to keep them quiet: "They will join their fathers. They will be in charge of making food. They will take care of their fathers .» Which was halfway plausible and calmed the moms down a bit. But, a week later, the mothers were called with all the children who were able to walk around on their own that is about 4-5, 6 years old. Again a day in the middle of July under the sun and again a journey in the night to the station. It seemed like they didn't want the locals to see.

Interviewer: And when they went to the station, they left on foot?

Micheline: Yes, of course. On foot.

Interviewer: And you accompanied them?

Micheline: Every time, yes. Each time, it was a terrible farewell. We had the impression, in fact one of the mothers told us - "I have the impression that by shaking your hand I am leaving France." And it was true. We understood afterwards, the UGIF and all the Jewish organizations, that they had been sent directly to the gaz chambers with their children. So we were left with the babies and the little ones aged 2-3-4 years old. And there was no material means to take care of them. It was a big deal to get a bottle, or they were served meals that they were not able to take on their own, or they were given meat that needed to be cut up into pieces, etc. We would have needed to be ten or fifteen people to take care of them. It would have taken ten or fifteen of us to be able to take care of them properly, and also to make them play, to make them forget that their mothers were gone.

Interviewer: And how many of you were there at that time? How many social workers?

Micheline: I was still alone with the Red Cross worker.

Interviewer: So there were only two of you.

Micheline: There were only two of us.

Interviewer: And how many children were there at that time?

Micheline: Maybe 75-80, little ones.

Interviewer: And what happened to these children?

Micheline: They also left in cattle cars. And according to the information we had, they were disposed of right away.

Interviewer: How long after the mothers?

Micheline: 2-3, 3-4 days. Everything was followed at small intervals. And when the mothers were waiting with their older children in the courtyard, it was awful to hear the mothers calling their children, the children calling their mothers. One can't describe it. I mean, when you've experienced it, it's horrifying. And I will even add something, when the camp was emptied, it was closed. So Miss de La Chapelle, from the Red Cross, and I went to take the train back to Paris. And the train, it was a Sunday, was delirious with joy. Everyone, all the people who were there were singing. They were Parisians who had been to the country, to Normandy, and who were happy and showed that they had brought back a chicken, cider, etc. It was overflowing with joy. This wagon was overflowing with joy wagon! Needless to say, we were crushed, both of us. And when we arrived in Paris, when we got off the train station, seeing French women sitting at tables with German officers, it also had an effect on us. Thinking about what we had just experienced (she sighs). You see.

End- 28:22