

United States Holocaust Memorial Museum

**Interview with Chana Mehler
December 13, 1993
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PREFACE

The following oral history testimony is the result of a videotaped interview with Chana Mehler, conducted by Radu Ioanid on December 13, 1993 on behalf of the United States Holocaust Memorial Museum. The interview took place in Washington, DC and is part of the United States Holocaust Memorial Museum's collection of oral testimonies. Rights to the interview are held by the United States Holocaust Memorial Museum.

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CHANA MEHLER
December 13, 1993

A: My name is Chana Mehler.

Q: When and where you were born, please?

A: I was born Secuiesc (ph), this was Romania, and I was -- with my parents, I'm the youngest of nine children.

Q: Can you tell us when you were born, please?

A: No. Okay?

Q: Very good.

A: I will just tell you the 24th of December. A Merry Christmas child.

Q: Very good, very good. Can you tell us a few words about your family?

A: Yes. I can tell a lot. I had a big family. I was the youngest of nine children, very spoiled. I was a happy child, and I was in school. I was a good student, not a perfect student. Had the help from all my sisters, everybody wanted to teach me. And everybody told me, "You can read that, you cannot read that. It's not for you at that time." You know that we couldn't do everything. And then I had quite a good life, and then I studied and I had good friends. And I was involved with Israel, with Zionism, and what can I tell you?

Q: What was the profession of your parents?

A: A businessman. My mother was a mother of nine children. She had a good life. We all had a good life till the trouble came. And my brothers were studying, my sisters were studying, and they were married. And they left the house, and then in '39, the trouble came. I mean, we were Rumanian and then we were liberated by the Hungarians. And in the beginning we were okay, but then started -- when Hitler started to move in, the business was my father had a refinery, an alcohol refinery. It was taken nearby, and we started to feel the pressure and the troubles and -- but in school time I never felt that -- you know, with good friends and my very best friend was from an Hungarian officer, the daughter. And when Hitler came, she told me, "You should know one thing. If the Russians will come, you help me. And if Hitler will come, I come to help you." And then on Friday afternoon, they started to tell we have to move that building the ghetto, and we had to change our -- I mean, our house and street fell in the ghetto. But on a Friday afternoon, they said this side, one side, this outside will have to move out, so we had to move out. And our neighbor from opposite house, a very fine lawyer, I went to and I asked him to change. He gladly did it. He got everything from our house, and we left

there just some luggages and whatever. In our house in the ghetto, all the family came to us from other streets. We were about 50 people, and when we went to the other side, we couldn't be so many together. And my friend, Olga, did come once asking if I need something to help me, and I said, "Listen, if I need some help, I'm sure you will be able to do it." And then over a weekend, I'm telling you very fast -- it goes too much.

Q: I told you I want to -- I understand you will chose your words. I want to ask you only a very short question. When did they enforce this ghetto?

A: It was probably 1944, you know. And we had to go, but it was '44 the ghetto started. We couldn't go out the windows to the street at all, they made it so we couldn't see anything. And we lived the life just what we had, left over food, as well was very short of everything. But I tell you, nobody was complaining. As around everybody was together. And we heard a lot of troubles, a lot of stories, and we just couldn't believe that. One Friday afternoon, I think that was Friday -- I don't remember the day when they came and said you be ready in the morning. That we are going away, and you can take only a small luggage. Everybody was taking a small luggage, and my father and my mother were both very upset but very, very brave. We all together, you know, went, being nearly _____ and we went on the street. And the Hungarian soldiers were down -- you know, with the big feather and they were standing and waiting. It was very, very troubling and frightening. And they took us, there was big line, a big crowd on the streets. This part of the ghetto probably was empty, and we went to the temple and we stayed there overnight. In the morning, it was still dark, in the morning they started to take us out in -- is that _____? You know, outside from the temple, and they started to see what we have, but we throw together and they threw out everything what was not supposed. I had a little ring and, you know, souvenirs; it was all taken. And we went to the train.

Q: I want to interrupt you for one second.

A: Sure.

Q: And to ask you if you remember in the ghetto wearing a Yellow Star of not.

A: No. No, we didn't.

Q: So . . .

A: No, I don't think. No, we didn't have the Yellow Star. We went to the train, and all the group, the family -- my brother was there and my sister, and my father and my mother. Some cousins, some friends. And we tried to stay all together in the same train, you know. And we were lucky that we would get in, that they pushed us, you know, that we were all together. And we arranged to -- I don't want to make it too frightening and -- you know, I just tried to be strong now that I can talk about it. And I don't remember when this train started to move. Everybody started and tried to arrange a corner on the floor,

and I remember that we had to choose, talking if we will stay together. If my parents need, we will work for them, and we should stay together. I had some shoes, ski shoes, and some summer shoes. And I remember I wanted to put up the summer shoes. My mother said, "Don't do that. Put up the good shoes. You never know when you need it." And I was lucky enough to come home with that shoe. For that I will tell you another story. And we came to Auschwitz after very hard road. I don't have to tell you that people were not very happy with each other, but screaming. They were looking for a corner and my father said, "I'm not eating. Let the children have the food." For two, three days, he didn't touch almost anything. We got to Auschwitz, we didn't know what Auschwitz is, but we got to a stop after three days and nights. We got out seeing only soldiers and big dogs. And we tried always, and we stayed together -- my father, my mother, my sister, my brother, myself, and a cousin near us. And then a lot of men in the striped suits, they who were walking, you know, they were prisoners of the thing. And they started to separate us, so the men stayed together, the women together. We were young and we stayed near my mother and my sister, and right away when the officer came and they cut us off, thinking and being assured that we see each other later, you know. And then we started to march, and we got into the camps. It was very, very horrible. We didn't know where we are or what it is. We just -- big SS soldiers with the dogs near us. And they took us to a sauna, and I didn't see my mother anymore, but my sister was with me. And they took us in and they told us to take everything off. We were very embarrassed, very young, and just couldn't do it, you know. And we had our pocketbook, and in the pocketbooks was very important, our papers, our identities. And I remember I had a little chain on my neck with a picture in it. And we were standing there, and the SS men came with the dogs. And one of the SS men -- no, as matter of fact, it was not an SS man. It was a young girl from Slovakia who were already the kapos. And she said, "You don't need that," and took it off from my neck. This fell and I wanted to pick it up, this was very dear to me. And then one of the soldiers with the big boots, then I looked up and there was the dog and the soldier. I never saw that again. Again, but this was not so important than the identity card. And we both looked at each other, and my sister said, "What we will do? What will we do without them?" Anyway, when we went to another corner and they started to cut our hair. They cut our hair and -- you know, it was just unbelievable one part of my hair came down. The other part of my hair came down. And till I got out, my head was like that, you know. We don't know anything, and we just didn't know where to put our hands. We were so ashamed and embarrassed. And let me not cry. And then we went to another room, and they gave us -- they gave us to put on, it was made from -- it was like a dress, you know. Gray. I don't know what it's called in German. A sack, I don't know this in English. And we were all in the same dresses, and yes, I forget to tell you. When we came after the sauna, after we were cleaned and cleaned, you know, after they had -- we find our shoes. It was a lot of shoes there, and my sister and I, we looked. When we left, we put them in a corner, so when we came out we saw the shoes. And this was lifesaving situation, you know, to have your own shoes. Anyway, yeah, they put us in 925, I was always near my sister and my cousin. We started to march, and there's hundreds of women and hundreds of people, it was incredible looks to see something like that. But when we started to march mainly an SS man with a big

German dog, and outside where already the other prisoners were standing in a line and seeing us coming in. And I was marching and I was crying, and one of the people, one of the women screamed to me, "Don't cry, you cry. You cannot cry here. You are not supposed to cry here." I don't remember the face, but it was a young girl, I remember that. But she screamed at me, and she said, "Don't you ever do that." To _____, you know there's an expression in German. And I never cried after that for a long time. When we came to the camps, we were looking for our parents. And they were already the kapos, and they said, "Move, move. You have to arrange yourselves." And we said, "Where should we move? We wait for our parents." "Your parents, what are you talking? Your parents are dead." And they showed us the chimneys, and we said to them, "Are you crazy?" And we were so sure that they want just to give us back that we still home and they were already such a long time there. And then we went in in the camps, and we got in our blocks, you know, and we got to be arranged. I will make it short, and then come back to that. And in the beginning we were not so lucky, then we had the place on the bottom and it was terrible. The rats and mouse and dirty. Then later on when they moved us, we got already on the top, and this was okay. It was tolerable. And then we stayed about like that in what do you call that? _____, a couple of weeks, till they adjusted. We got adjusted, and you probably know already from so many other interviews, the zählappell, the getting up in the night. The 3 o'clock coffee and then a piece of bread and then -- you know the other stories from other people probably.

Q: Well, you know we know, of course, about Auschwitz, but . . .

A: This was Auschwitz, yeah.

Q: . . . but you can chose to tell us whatever you want about . . .

A: Yeah.

Q: . . . the concentration camp is Auschwitz, you know.

A: Thinking about other, it was we were not sent away in the factories. We were staying there, and in a way, we were lucky. And after a couple of weeks, we started to war. To go to war was in the morning, we marched with music. And I had very nice little kapo near me, and she liked me. I was lucky. And she said, "I want you to help me when we go through the main door" -- not door.

Q: Gate.

A: Gate. "You should tell me when it's right, when it's left. I don't want to get in trouble." So she was always staying near me and I was always saying loud, "_____", "so adjusted their feet after my feet and after my voice, and she was very sweet to me. Very nice. She didn't beat me, she didn't make me troubled, this was good enough for me. Outside we were working just to make us work, to keep us busy carrying stones. The

stone was almost bigger than myself. And I remember it was a -- this was in the summer, July, and it came the SS people, I think the SS lager came to see how we are doing. And we were carrying the stones, and we had the kapo, a German woman, who wanted to show off that's she's very strict with us. And our Slovak people, not a very strong girl and carrying the stone, she came over me. She said, "Fast, _____." And she hit me with a stick, so that the stick broke on my back. And near me was a very strict little Holland woman, she was much older than me. And she was very nice to me, she said, "Get up fast. Take your stone and walk." This was my -- you know, I was lucky. So I did and a couple of things like that happened in Auschwitz. And this was in the summer in July. And the other thing happened, once we were walking and doing some -- in the fields some work, and the airplanes came and we were all looking up, hoping that they will bomb the camp. And we're looking up and seeing the camp, and an SS men saw us and he started to scream, "Do you think your help is from there, from the plane? No. Your help is from that. You see the chimneys? You don't go out from here. You go there." But remember we do what we have to do. And then for punishment he told us, "You will be punished now." What is the punishment? So when they give their lunch this soup, we have to walk kneeling with our cup for the soup. And to think we kneeled, and we all walked kneeling till we got the soup. And this was the punishment of that lunch. And since then -- and I have a girl who works for me and she wants to leave, [inaudible] I tell her . . .

Q: I understand.

A: It's okay. And then this happened. This was so many now -- and then in August another thing happened to me. One of my friends told me, "You know, after this soup, you can go wash your cup." This was a very big thing. There is a bathroom, and we went there. Nobody saw us. "You just to there and wash your cup." So I told my other friend, "Come and go. Let's go wash our cup." You know, the food stays until evening. It's hot _____, so we went in, and we saw a bathroom. We didn't tell, we didn't see soldiers. We didn't see nobody. We went in, we washed our -- to wash our cups. And suddenly, from the side, two soldiers that was not SS, was Verma (ph) soldiers who were better than SS, came in. And they stayed like that, and they started to scream at us, "_____?" What are you doing here? And I spoke German, the other would not. And I told him that my friend told me I can come here and wash -- "Who told you that? This is not your place." And he started -- we're standing near the wall, and he started to hit us. He hit once for me, and once hit me out here, a tooth, and I fell and he hit me here. And the kapo was looking for us, she didn't see us coming out with my sister. And that was on a Saturday and then the kapo was a German woman. Her name was Annie, she as quite decent, you know. Very decent, and she came out. She saw us standing there from me with blood already, and she said to the SS man, "Give them to me. I finish them off." And the SS men threw us out, and she had sticks and she started to hit us, the SS men should see that she takes care of us. And all the girls were very upset having us back, our life was saved. And this was a Saturday before the big holiday for the Jews there, a holiday. And they told me, "Don't worry. This is a good sign. You'll be all right." This was the sign.

Anyway, then what happened -- what happened after that? Yes, this I like to tell you that story. I was working outside carrying the stone with another friend of mine. We had such from wood made specially, and near me was a woman, a young girl. And my good shoe started already to fall apart, and came off the bottom and I had to fix it with something. And she said to me, "From where are you?" And she said, "I just came here from the other group. I should be able to see somebody from my home town. The men were working there, too." And I said, "From where are you? She said she's from Poland, and she's from Kraków. And you've probably heard Kraków from Poland. Did she live there now? And I said, "You know what? My sister-in-law was from Kraków. And I told her who she was, she said, "I don't believe it. I knew her very well, the family." And she said, "You know what? If you are from that family," she said, "I work for the shoe department. Bring me the shoes, and I will fix it for you." And she told me what number she is, and when I came back I had to bring the shoes and I had to have other shoes to wear. My sister found for me other shoes, and may I take my pocketbook? My handkerchief.

Q: Sure.

A: And I brought her the shoes. It's okay? Sorry. And she said, "You'll see, tomorrow night I bring back your shoes." Meanwhile, it was Yom Kippur. You know what it is? It is Holy Days, and we promised ourselves that we will not eat, that we will fast. Maybe we fasted anyway almost every day, but we will fast maybe somehow we get some help. And I remember I had a very sweet friend. She was from my home town, and we were in the same class. She was very pretty blonde, brown eyes. And she had some wounds on her knee and they didn't let her go to work, and they put her in a separate block. And I asked her, "Would you please keep my soup, and in the evening I come to pick it up?" She said, "Gladly." And in the evening, I picked up the shoes, she was still there. And I picked up the soup, and we were standing in line, and this lady, this young girl came. And she brought me the shoes, my shoes, and it was the holiday evening. And she said, "I'm glad you have the shoes. Every day shoes you have to go home," she told me. And I said to her -- and I was crying, I was very impressed. And then the summer in August my sister found somebody in the cell a small scroll, must have been you know when the Jews put in the morning prayer. And it was written in -- we knew Hebrew. We learned at home in my parents' house. It was written "When God will take us out from here." And when my sister saw that, she said, "You see that? We are going home. We will go out." And I said to her, "Look, don't be stupid. People read the numbers. Don't ever go out. It's impossible. They won't let us out. They don't want the world to see us, the numbers. It's impossible." She said, "Don't be like that. Don't be like that. I want to talk to you, but this we have to say and with that, we have to go home." And you know what? Through all the troubles, all the saunas, all the places we kept it in our mouths. We came home with that, and we came home with the shoes. We said to -- from Auschwitz that made the transport, yeah -- how was it? We came back from war, and the whole lager was under -- outside. And we said this is some trouble that we cannot go to our places. And it was -- first, yeah, this was once that they were hanging a girl who tried to escape, and the whole camp had to see that. She tried to commit suicide, she cut her hand. That didn't work. And they

hanged her, and we had to see. Everybody had to watch that. And the next day they said the orchestra is sold, they don't play anymore. And we knew when the orchestra is taken - - is off, then they must take us away, too. And that happened. The next day we stayed in the zählappell in the big place, and they said we are not supposed to go back to our blocks. We all go to the sauna. And we went, we gave up our clothes; we gave up our shoes. We were sitting there on the stone floor, hundreds of girls, and we all started and tried to be together from home town or friends. And one of the girls was singing beautifully, she was singing and then the SS men heard her sing. And he asked she should sing again, and the whole block, the whole group was standing on the floor. It was cold, it was already October, November. October, November. And she was sitting there, she was singing. People were crying, and -- but, you know, we didn't think this was our end. Somehow we didn't, you know, believe it. And then after a while, we had the sauna and we started going out from the sauna. And we are getting our stuff back, you know. We were saved, we were singing. And we had to go to selection, you know. So one side we carried our stuff and we are naked. In one hand, we had to be like up, and we were checked if we are clean, or we don't have some wounds. You know, things like that. They were taken away right away. And my sister went through, my friend went through and I came. And when I came Mengele was on the commission, you know. Mengele, another doctor, another nurse, you know, were a group who selected who should stay and who should go. We didn't know where we go or we go, but Mengele stopped me and hold me, you know, with my hand. And started to turn me, he wanted to see me. Meanwhile, the doctor spoke to him, and he turned around to answer her. And when he turned around, I run. And meanwhile the others came. Otherwise, I wouldn't tell you none of the stories, probably. And then it was wonderful, very, very well organized, who went through. And we came and then who couldn't come and who was selected, they were put in another place. And we just heard the screaming: mother from daughter; sister from sister. It was a terrible, terrible frightening situation. Still we were not sure that we will go. And when we march, we saw the train already there, that train. And we went, the group was always tried to be together. I'm almost finished. And we went to the train. We sat, and everybody had his piece of bread. And everybody wanted to keep whatever they had. And they were fighting with each other. The girls, "I want to sit here. I want to sit here." And then one SS man, it was not an SS man. It was a Verma (ph), a young man who came in, and who said to them, "Don't get upset. Sit down. Find your place." He came and gave everyone a piece of bread with margarine, the Verma (ph). And he said to us, "Be quiet. You don't know if you go or you're to stay here. You will know you are almost safe when the train will move." And that made them little bit, you know, quiet waiting the train should move. And after a while, it really moved. And we went -- I don't remember how long -- we went to Germany, to Hannover. We came to Bergen-Belsen. Bergen-Belsen was a terrible situation, there was no crematoriums, but people were just dying and the typhoid. I make it short, and I see it's a little bit too long.

Q: Take your time, please.

A: And it took forever to tell. And we went there, and we didn't do anything in Bergen-

Belsen. There was no work, no nothing. And I have another story, but my sister was in the one camp near -- in Bergen-Belsen, but she was in the camp with her husband. You know, Eichmann was supposed to get medication and drugs, and for this group of people, they were deported from Prus (ph) now in a Kastner situation. My sister was in that group from Kastner, my father used to give money for Israel. So she used to live in Prus (ph), and she was supposed -- she went to -- instead to go to Israel, they turned to Bergen-Belsen. Well, you probably know that story. And we were in Bergen-Belsen, and Bergen-Belsen was very bad. Typhoid broke out. The Hungarian transport came, the last transport from Budapest. And then we said, they asked us where are your parents and where -- we said, "Our parents? From where are you coming? Who has parents?" And they spit on us and they didn't believe it, just like people don't believe it here either. And they said, "You know what? You don't have a God. You don't believe in God if you talk like that, you know." And this group of people died very fast. They were very upset, very desperate. They didn't go to the saunas, they didn't wash themselves. And right away, they brought in the lice and the typhoid to Bergen-Belsen, and they died like no other. Like flies. And then I myself got the typhoid, and I was in the _____ and the shoes and it was still in my mind I have to keep them. My sister kept this little scroll, and I didn't know what's happening to me, but the shoes were under my head, you know. And in the morning, this very sweet Hungarian woman was near me. She was dead, and you know what? I saw her soup still there, I was very hungry. I was drinking her soup. And then from the typhoid, I didn't hear very well. I was quite sick. My sister was told from one of the girls, "I don't think you should wait for your sister. I don't think she will ever come out." I came out. And then they liberated -- yeah. It was the liberation, and the night we heard screaming. And I didn't -- people told me, "Don't you hear something? Some screaming?" And I was deaf from typhoid. And in the morning, my sister came. She was swollen, very swollen from hunger. And like her face was like very big, and she couldn't close her shoes so very swollen were her feet. But she brought me a soup, and she said, "We are free." So I said, "What are you talking?" And I remember she said, "I made you a soup, a potato soup." Her whole face was black from the cold, but from the tears -- so two days later when I started to be able to walk, I went to the fence and I saw, then I believe. And I saw the English soldiers coming in. There was a group of Yugoslav soldiers, there were very nice and very kind. And I couldn't walk, he took me and he said he put me on the bus, that we've changed the place. We were very sick, very full of lice. And the man, the English man came dressed with the DDT to help us. Not too many were helped, many died after the liberation. They started to eat fast. They were liberated from Bergen-Belsen. My sister, who was in another place, looked for her husband and while she find us on the list. And she took us from Bergen-Belsen.

Q: Where did you go from there?

A: From Bergen-Belsen I went to Gelsenkirchen. I don't know if you heard about it. That's a rule _____, she was working there, you know, and she knew the place. She had another story, but she's not here anymore. She died. She cannot tell her story. It was a very, very special story, hers, too. And she took us there. What I told Sarah before that I

wanted to work and I started to go to learn to be a nurse. And I stayed in Gelsenkirchen, I went to eat at the _____. And I met there the kapo who was -- who helped me, but she looked worse than me. She had, you know, blonde hair. She didn't have teeth, and she came to eat there and I recognized her. And I said, "You were my kapo." And then she was suddenly very frightened, and she said, "But I was good to you." So I said, "No, you were not good to me." And then I told my sister that I didn't give her any -- I didn't want to. I said, "She won't be helped, and I won't be helped. Let her" -- my sister was very -- almost killed me that I let her go. And after that we stayed in Gelsenkirchen for a while, and I went to Israel on the boat for three weeks. I stayed in Italy, very hard, too. And after three months I had to stay the rest, you know, from England. It was Palestine. And then in Palestine, I got out, it was not easy but I was very happy there. I used to have a very pretty voice, and I had to sing for the girls in the evening, about 70, 80 girls. And it was quiet and I would sing, and the English man came and courted us there, too. And then after three months, I left, came back. And I had cousins and a year later I met Conrad, and my good lifestyle to begin.

Q: So when did you come to this country?

A: In this country, we came in '57.

Q: And you never went back to Secuiesc?

A: No, I didn't go back. This is what I wanted to say. But my sister went back, and she went to the ghetto to the house. And she find there my diary; she find there letters who are really documents, and I have to do something about it. I never went back, I never wanted to go back to the stores, to nobody. But now that I'm almost more dead than he is, I said I have to go. Have to go to see. It takes a lot of energy, and it's not so easy. All my friends went back, but the rest -- they went back. They went to our street, they brought me the pictures of our house and our places. I have it here, but somehow I really have to go. I think I will if I have the energy. I don't know, we'll see what's happening. And thank you so much . . .

Q: I thank you very much.

A: . . . for listening. It's another sad story. I don't know what my children will tell about it, and mainly I did it for them.

Conclusion of Interview