

Mehler, Conrad
RG-50.030*282
1 Videocassette
In English

- Abstract: Conrad Mehler, an only child, was born on March 27, 1915 in Vienna where his family lived during World War One. His father, a physician, had served in the Austrian army during the war. After the war, the family returned to their home in Bukovina, Romania. Conrad attended a university in Bologna, Italy, studying medicine; he did not experience discrimination there during the early Mussolini years. Conrad had to leave Bologna in June 1940 and was detained for several days at the border and in Bucharest. He was then sent to Bukovina where he worked in a hospital in 1940 and 1941, and there witnessed the deportation of thousands of Jews, including his mother. Part of this time he lived in the Chernivtsi ghetto. In 1944, he was sent to a railroad station where he labored on bunkers under brutal guards. In July, 1944, Conrad was able to go to Palestine where he served in the army as a doctor. In 1957, he immigrated to the United States.
- 1:00 Conrad relates his childhood and daily life. He was born on March 27, 1915 in Vienna where his family stayed during World War I. His father, a physician, was in the Austrian army during the war. In 1919, the family returned to a small village of 5,000 in the region of Bukovina. There were fifteen other villages in the area. Conrad attended elementary school in Romania. He lived with his grandparents in Chernivtsi while completing high school, which he finished in 1932.
- 2:14 Conrad lived in Chernivtsi, a mostly Jewish town, and experienced some anti-Semitism. There were some fights between Jewish and non-Jewish students. Conrad recounts one incident in which a Jew was killed by a Romanian. After he finished school, he lived in a town in which the population was half German and he had German friends. Conrad relates that when Hitler came to power, some students began ignoring him. This was his first, direct encounter with anti-Semitism, even though the Romanian government was democratic.
- 4:10 Conrad describes his university years: he studied in Bologna, Italy and did not experience discrimination, even though Hitler and Mussolini had signed an agreement pact. He talks about much camaraderie in Bologna and he feels he was lucky to live in a house where he was treated like a son.
- 5:31 In June 1940, Chernivtsi was occupied by the Russians, making communication with Italy from his hometown very difficult. Bologna had several hundred Jewish students from a number of European countries. Some unpleasantness began, such as beatings. Conrad states that it was hard to know what to do or where to go; he was blocked-in in Bologna. Some other Jewish students and he decided it would

be better to go back to Chernivtsi, but first they had to go to Rome. Conrad had an expired Romanian passport and needed to get a new one for the trip to Romania, where relatives lived.

8:39 Conrad arranged to be expelled at the Yugoslav border so as not to pay the train fare. He notes that the Italians were very “forthcoming” about this. All went well until some Iron Guard members boarded the train and made remarks about ‘taking care’ of the Jews. When the train arrived at the Romanian border, the Romanian police took their passports and made them leave the train. They spent 24 hours in the Jimbolia police station and were then released without documents, money, or luggage. The Romanian border police told them that they would be killed if they tried to return. The three of them began walking through the fields in the direction of Yugoslavia for a couple of hours until they heard dogs barking near a village and then found placards confirming that they were in Yugoslavia. At 4 or 5am, with no money or items to trade, they went looking for stores with Jewish names to perhaps get in touch with relatives in Bucharest. While walking in the village, the border patrol came, but they were not able to speak with them in Serbian. They were taken to the main station where a tall, blond Serbian policeman took them to his home to wash up and have breakfast.

13:00 The policeman took them to the station chief who was very friendly and had been notified that Jews were coming. The station chief told them that there was a Jewish man, Mr. Frankel, in the import/export cattle business, who would take care of them until they could find out what to do. Their colleagues who had left Bologna the week before were with Mr. Frankel. Conrad states that he phoned his relatives in Bucharest and learned that one of them was an officer in the Romanian army reserves and would be coming to the border to negotiate for them. Conrad notes that when he was in Rome, he had also gone to the Russian embassy; therefore, Mr. Frankel’s brother went to discuss this with the Russians. When Conrad’s relative arrived from Bucharest to take them back to the capital city, part of the group was not allowed to go even though they had valid Romanian passports; all of these people perished in the Holocaust.

16:00 After arriving in Bucharest, they stayed for a week or more in the police station while relatives were trying to get in touch with them. The authorities wanted to send them to an Iron Guard camp in Russia. It was finally decided to send them to Bukovina at the Russian border. Conrad stayed there in 1940 and 1941, working in a hospital.

17:35 Conrad witnessed the deportation of Jews from Bukovina to Siberia. There were three rooms in the hospital: one room with so-called capitalists, who were Jews from Chernivtsi. In May 1941, 5,000 were deported to Siberia.

18:40 Conrad describes being on night duty on June 22, 1941 in the hospital that housed many wounded Russian troops. He was supposed to go with the wounded as part of a medical corps as they were evacuated. He decided to stay in Chernivtsi because his parents and grandparents were there and he was an only child. He says that he never expected the Germans to wipe out the entire population. The

Nazis started shooting Jews at random as soon as they entered the city. This reign of terror, as Conrad calls it, lasted for a day or two. Conrad states that he stayed home until police arrived one morning to take him to clean streets or do other miscellaneous tasks. The rabbi and 100 distinguished members of the Jewish community were taken to the temple and it was set on fire. From there, the Jews were taken by the Germans to the River Bug to be shot.

21:50

Conrad notes that Jews could only walk on the streets between 10 am and 1 pm, wearing a Star of David. Because he was a physician, he was allowed to walk to the Jewish hospital which was still functioning at that time. In the afternoons, he did not go out because it was very dangerous; one could be taken to a labor camp or killed.

23:00

On a Saturday morning in October, Conrad reports that the Germans came to the Jewish hospital and told everyone that they had to move to the ghetto by 5pm. They were informed of the approximate location of this ghetto and were told to take whatever belongings they could carry. The ghetto was surrounded by Romanian troops and for a couple days nobody could leave or enter. For about one week, about 5,000 people were taken from their apartments. The mayor, Popovich, said that Jews were needed for some industrial work and therefore some could stay. People applied to stay. Already 35,000 of the 70,000 population had been deported. Conrad states that he was one of the lucky ones who were given authorization to remain. After three or four weeks, they returned to their apartment (which had been vandalized) and began to live in the city with some restrictions, such as: Jews must wear the star, Jews on streets only between 10 am and 1 pm, and never on Saturday and Sunday. After the first wave of deportations, the ghetto no longer existed. Some Jewish homes were now occupied by other people. Jews and non-Jews lived in the former ghetto.

26:00

In the winter of 1941, people between the ages of 19 and 50 were sent to labor camps in the area of Moldavia. Those over age 50 were taken to other camps. In June 1942 on a Sunday morning deportations in groups of 5,000 resumed. His mother was taken to the River Bug where the situation was terrible with no food and she died there.

27:49

Conrad describes what he witnessed during the deportations. He saw that the Jews were taken to a sports stadium where they were selected and brutally put on trains to Transnistria. Conrad says that he could not contact anyone, but went out without wearing the star to a Romanian lawyer since his mother had bona fide permission to stay in Chernivtsi; however, he was unable to secure any help. He tried speaking with the student in charge of his mother's group, but had no luck with this.

29:10

Conrad reports that in the beginning, the Germans evacuated all patients who were in mental institutions and they were deported or killed. Conrad could not keep in touch with this mother because she was in a group that was very isolated, although not all groups were as isolated as hers.

- 31:00 Life in Chernivtsi during 1942 and 1943: Conrad states that they were under the Russians for one year and that the Russians took the stores and all property from the people. They were greatly deprived before the Germans came. Daily life is described as very difficult with people living by selling jewelry, clothing, anything – no money was earned. They had to change currency from the Romanian one to the Russian ruble and then back to the Romanian currency when the Germans invaded; money had no value. Conrad says that he had figured the Jewish population of 20,000 could last about ten years if there were no further deportations with 400 to 500 dying annually from starvation and illness due to the bad living conditions.
- 33:05 In January 1944, he was sent to a railroad station in the Ukraine where daily transports arrived from the war front en route to Bukovina and other places. His work was to reinforce bunkers. All day he built while being exposed to the brutality of the guards who severely beat Jews, but did not kill them. They could be beaten and severely punished for any small thing.
- 35:00 Conrad says that he was sent back to Chernivtsi after a year, and was assigned to a large station. Many planes came from the front, signaling the German retreat. He was forced to work as a physician at the railroad station where only the commandant knew that he was Jewish. Learning that Chernivtsi was liberated by the Russians, he told the commandant that he had no money and wanted to be sent home. Since this commandant knew he was Jewish and was not sure what to do with him and did not need him there, he arranged for Conrad to go to Bucharest. Conrad adds that this was good because the situation there had become unpleasant with conflicts between the German and Russian officers. After a week in Bucharest, Conrad says that he decided to get on a small boat for Palestine. He took the boat to Constantinople and from there took a train to Haifa.
- 37:00 Zionist organizations arranged for his trip to Palestine, because he had been a member of a student academic Zionist movement in Chernivtsi. He states that he was one of the lucky ones to get a spot on a boat and arrived in Haifa on July 14. He stayed in Israel from 1944 to 1957, fighting in the War of Independence. He was a doctor in the IDF for 18 months. In 1957, he decided to go to the United States.
- 39:10 Conrad believes that people should know that those who lived throughout the war lived day to day, not knowing what the war would bring. They were always in danger of being beaten or killed. They were deprived of every right as citizens and were not considered human beings. Anyone who survived did so by sheer luck, not special skills. Anyone could point a finger at you and accuse you on spot of being a communist or whatever. One was deprived of basic rights.