

United States Holocaust Memorial Museum

Interview with Conrad Mehler
December 13, 1993
RG-50.030*0282

PREFACE

The following oral history testimony is the result of a taped interview with Conrad Mehler, conducted on December 13, 1993 on behalf of the United States Holocaust Memorial Museum. The interview 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.

The reader should bear in mind that this is a verbatim transcript of spoken, rather than written prose. This transcript has been neither checked for spelling nor verified for accuracy, and therefore, it is possible that there are errors. As a result, nothing should be quoted or used from this transcript without first checking it against the taped interview.

CONRAD MEHLER

December 13, 1993

Beginning Tape One

Question: Would you tell us please, your name?

Answer: My name is Conrad Mehler.

Q: Would you tell us where -- where you were born?

A: I was born in Vienna, March 27, 1915.

Q: Would you be so kind to tell us a few words about your childhood, where you lived, and how was your day to day life during your childhood? Also, a few words about the background of your family.

A: My father was a physician. He was, during World War I, in the Austrian army as a physician and therefore then, when the war started, the family went to Vienna from Chernowitz. I was born in Vienna during the war, and stayed in Vienna til 1919. After the war we returned to -- to Bukavina. My father was a physician in a small village, which -- the name of is [indecipherable]. This was a community of 5,000 people, and he was serving the area of 15 such villages, so a population over 50,000, it was in the area of Suceava, which was the topic of this [indecipherable] in that time. I went to school in Romania, first in [indecipherable] at the primary school, at the elementary school, the four grades and then I went to the gymnasium in Chernowitz where I stayed with [indecipherable]. I finished high school in Chernowitz in 1932, made the baccalaureate, and during the -- my stay in Chernowitz there was some anti-Semitism in the schools, but some of it being [indecipherable] with a minority Jews, so it wasn't felt too badly. There were some fights between students. It was -- one element which I remember was with one of the -- during the baccalaureate, one of the st -- Jewish students was killed by a Romanian student dur -- while we were waiting for the results of the baccalaureate, which was --

at that time was [indecipherable]. It was a very famous, very well known, anti-Semitic group, [indecipherable] and there was a big funeral for [indecipherable] [indecipherable]. I -- after I finished my schooling in Chernowitz in 1933, Hitler came to power in Germany. But being raised in a village which had -- half of the population was German [indecipherable] population, I had German friends from school, which we were together [indecipherable] and as soon as Hitler came to power in Germany they stopped talking to me and they stopped chasing me and they stopped knowing me. So it was the first encounter where the influence of the Nazi regime had an effect even before Romania -- while Romania was still under the government, the democratic government that had nothing to do with Hitler, but the Germans beca -- stopped talking to me and ignoring me [indecipherable]. I went to study to Italy where the situation, even though it was a [indecipherable] regime, for the Jews there was no discrimination and I had very good experience in Italy. During all my studies, even when the -- when the Hitler-Mussolini pact came into effect and they wanted the Jew -- th-the Jewish professors were eliminated from the -- from teaching and from [indecipherable]. And we were supposed to go at the end to the exams separated from the Gentiles, but the Italians refused to do it and so we went together, because there was always a very good, spirit of camit -- camaraderie. It happened at one time, they had [indecipherable] students in Bologna and they want -- they made a big fuss and so on, so the Italian students went with us again th-there. So they were really very nice, all the time. I was lucky enough to live in the house of a -- of a [indecipherable] and with his family that I was really like a -- like a son in their house, so there was no problem during my stay in Italy. In 1940, Ch-Chernowitz was occupied by the Russians. I think it was 28 of June, 1940, and we were left in Italy without [indecipherable] with -- with our hometown. There were, at that time in Bologna there were several hundred Jewish students [indecipherable] school, from all over Europe, from

Poland, from Lithuania, from [indecipherable], from Hungary and so on. We were studying in Italy -- in -- in a foreign country was because under Romanian universities there was no more scholarships and you couldn't be accepted [indecipherable] when you were accepted, you were beaten up and so on. There was a lot of -- unpleasant to be studying there, so therefore many studied in Prague, in Italy, or in France, some in Switzerland [indecipherable]. So, we are talking still about 1940, Chernowitz was occupied un -- came under the Russian [indecipherable] and we were blocked in Bologna, we didn't know what to do. We had to go -- to go back to Chernowitz, to stay in Italy. Italy was already the pact with Mussolini - Hitler and it was already war against [indecipherable] together with Germany against France and England. So we decided, two colleagues who were in Bologna at that time, to go back to Chernowitz. Everybody consulted us, and said it would be better to go back to Chernowitz instead of staying here where there is [indecipherable] anti-Semitism and danger. So, I went with another colleague to the main embassy in Rome, to take care of my Romanian passport, which expired during my stay in Italy, and got a new passport, in end of July of 1940. And came back to Bologna and a group of other colleagues decided that we are leaving and we are going back to the -- to Chernowitz, to Romania. We -- I went with another colleague, and a group left a week before us, to Bucharest. We stayed in ca -- another couple of days in Bologna. We arranged in Italy that time they should expulse us, expulsion from Italy to the Yugoslavian border so we didn't have to [indecipherable] and so on. They were very nice, the Italians, they were very forthcoming, and we s-started -- and we started our [indecipherable] back to Romania. Everything went [indecipherable] went -- went okay til we came to some -- I don't remember exactly the place where the tra -- i-i-in the train there came the Iron Guard, members of the Iron Guard who were out of Romania in Germany, and came back [indecipherable] the regime in Romania changed, so they came back to Romania

in the train. They started going with their [indecipherable] coming back from Italy, they started to make remarks with, we are going to take care of you when you come back to Romania. We didn't mind, we didn't pay much attention to it. Anyway, we didn't have a -- much choice, we went -- we were supposed to go to Bucharest, and to Bucharest we had relatives, and so we figured we [indecipherable] to Bucharest and from there we will see what -- what will happen further, if we should go to Chernowitz or not. We came to the border, to Jimbolia which was the border and from there we were supposed to go to [indecipherable] which was the first big city, but [indecipherable] in Jimbolia, while we were waiting for the train to proceed, was who -- the - - they came back, they took our passport and said we have to come down, we cannot enter Romania.

Q: Who took your passport?

A: The border police.

Q: Romanian, or Yugoslav?

A: Romanian, Romanian. We was in the Romania [indecipherable] border it was the Romanian, [indecipherable] was the Yugoslavian part of the border. So we -- they took away our passports and they said you cannot proceed because you are communists and we cannot let you in, and they took away our passports and arrested us and kept us in the -- in the police station in Jimbolia, and they -- it was 24 hours, after 24 hours they decided that we have to leave Romania. They took away our documents, our passports, our luggage, everything, and at midnight some [indecipherable] which is the border patrols of the Romanian, took us with the order that's if we try to return to Romania, we will be killed. They have orders to shoot us. So we started, my friend and I and the third person who was with us, started to walk through the fields in the direction Yugoslavia. And we were sure that they are going to shoot us as soon as we got in the

fields, because they said they have orders to shoot us if we tried to return to Romania. So we wandered through the fields for a couple of hours, til we heard barking of dogs, and we knew that we are in the vicinity of a village. So we continued to walk into this village, and we found there this -- there were in the village, letters on the stores and so on, so we knew we are in Yugoslavia. Start wandering at night and were around four or five o'clock in the morning, and without documents, without anything, without money, without any means. Started walking and we are looking for some names which would sound Jewish, maybe a store or [indecipherable] that we could get some [indecipherable] and maybe get in touch with our relatives in Bucharest, which were at that time still in Bucharest. While we were walking, wandering through the village in the early morning hours, there came a border patrol who spoke only Serbian, and we couldn't communicate with [indecipherable] with him and he took us to the main station in [indecipherable] these border villages, and there a blonde, tall Serbian guy from the border police came and greeted us, and took us to his home and let us wash up. We were dirty from the walk in the field. And told the wife to prepare a breakfast for us, and kept us there til noon because the next day to the main -- main town with this to -- the border there, was Belica Chachinda. And he kept us there til noon time and then he took us to Belica Chachinda where the -- where the station chief was already notified that [indecipherable] Jews are on the way to Belica Chachinda. He came, he treated us very friendly, he said, you -- we will take you, there is a Jew, a Mr. Frankel, who was in the import export business for cattle, and he will take care of you for the moment, til we find out what to do with you. And really we came to this Mr. -- Mr. Frankel, and found that our colleagues who left a week before, they were all there at his house. And so we stayed in the house of Mr. Frankel, and we started [indecipherable] what to do next. In the meantime we telephoned to Bucharest and we got in touch with relatives of ours, and one of the

relatives was in the -- in fact in the reserves and the officer in the Romanian army in the -- Romania, still stationed somewhere in -- in the vicinity of -- came through the border to start to negotiate what to do with us. So it lasted another week or so. In the meantime the brother of Mr. Frankel went to Belgrade to talk to the Russian embassy. Yeah, I want to m-mention that when I was in Rome on the Romanian passport, I went also to the Russian embassy -- to the Soviet embassy in Rome. The police knew, the Italian police were notified that I am going because I wanted a visa to Romania, to Chernowitz. This he didn't give me, but he said he notified the [indecipherable] in Bucharest, was that we come to Romania, they would take care of us. They never did, it was just a story, nobody did anything. But our relatives arranged our return to Bucharest. So part of us went back to Bucharest. Another part, four of our colleagues were not allowed, were not permitted again, had to go back the same -- same through the fields to Yugoslavia. Even though they had the same passports like we did [indecipherable] all valid passports, Romanian passports, Romanian citizens. So [indecipherable] of these friends, all of them perished during the war, in Yugoslavia. We don't know exactly what happened to them, maybe it was the partisans or whatever where they ended up on their own, were killed in Yugoslavia during the war by the Germans. We came back to Bucharest, we were supposed to go to our families when we came to Bucharest, but we were arrested immediately at the -- at the station in Bucharest, and taken to the police station sec -- security and stayed there for a week or 10 days. Our relatives tried to get in touch, we couldn't get in touch with our relatives, and the didn't know what to do with us. They kept us there for a week or 10 days. They wanted to send us -- in that time there was a camp of the Iron Guard, it was still -- there were some in the -- in -- in a camp. They wanted to send us for political prisoners, but finally they decided to send us to the border, to Bukavina, which was -- in that time people could walk over from [indecipherable]

Romania to Russia. There was an agreement between Russia and Romania and so many were sent over the border to -- to Russia. And so I came to Russia, and I stayed there from '40 to '41, worked in the hospital, the central hospital in Chernowitz.

Q: Let me ask you one question relating to the year during which Bukavina was under Russian occupation.

A: Yeah.

Q: Did you ever witness deportation of Jews from Bukavina --

A: Yeah.

Q: -- to Siberia, or --

A: Yeah, yeah.

Q: -- wherever --

A: Yeah.

Q: -- by the Russian authorities --

A: Yeah, often.

Q: [indecipherable]

A: Around -- see, I worked in the hospital, and they had three rooms where people, they [indecipherable] capitalist Jews from -- from Chernowitz were imprisoned and were deported to Siberia. There were many deported to Siberia. Started in May 1941, many Jews were deported to Siberia, I would say probably 5,000. It was ju -- even during -- when the war started already, when the Germans already started the war, they were still transporting people from the railroad station to -- to Siberia.

Q: Can you tell me please what happened to you and -- and your family once [indecipherable] operations starting in June --

A: Yeah.

Q: -- on June 22nd, 1941.

A: Yeah. I was on my duty in the hospital when it started, and the hospital had a lot of wounded Russian troops and so on. We started immediately evacuating the Russian troops, the Russian wounded patients, and I was supposed to go with the Russians, the medical corps to -- they vacated to Sebastopol. I decided to stay because my mother was living in Chernowitz, my grandparents. I, being the only child and so on, I decided to stay in Chernowitz. As I said, I take a chance if the war [indecipherable] with the army only to stay [indecipherable]. I never expected the Germans to annihilate whole populations, and I stayed in Chernowitz. I s -- I went to the hospital, but after -- and immediately with the entrance of the German and the -- the Romanian occupation force, they started at random to shoot Jews in the periphery of Chernowitz, that is, in the outposts of Chernowitz, and it started the regime of terror immediately. I went still a day or two to the hospital, but then I found it too dangerous even to walk the streets and I stayed home and police came in the morning to take me to work, to clean streets or whatever, and it started immediately [indecipherable] the grand Rabbi of Chernowitz, Dr. [indecipherable] very well known to me, and his children, with his [indecipherable] the son was a friend of mine, was a rabbi from [indecipherable] in Bucharest in [indecipherable]. And his father, and other hundred Jews were taken to the temple in Chernowitz, and they set fire to the temple, and they took the rabbi with the hundred people who were distinguished Jews for Chernowitz to the river Prut where they were killed, where they were shot, all. This was in the beginning also, the beginning of July. I --

Q: This was -- this was -- I'm sorry -- this was an execution done by Germans, or by Romanians?

A: I suspect it was by Germans. Because this was -- I was told in that time, and was told by my friends after the war, which was [indecipherable] to me in Tel Aviv after the war, one of the sons. So the rabbi and the distinguished Jews were killed at the river Prut, by the Germans. Walking through the streets in -- was a -- we started -- I don't remember exactly the day when we started wearing the Jewish star, and then we were only from 10 to one, we were allowed to walk the streets. Being a physician, I could walk to the hospital, to the Jewish hospital, it was still functioning at that time, and could walk to the hospital and back, but i-in the afternoon we didn't go out because it was very dangerous, too. People were killed or taken away to different labor camps [indecipherable]. So, this probably was between June and [indecipherable] and around October I would say, I came in the morning, it was a Saturday morning, I came to the hospital, to the Jewish hospital, so the director of the hospital which was Dr. Neuebenham got the order from the authorities that the Jews have to be by five o'clock in the ghetto. There was no other order, only a spoken order. There were no notices. And so we were told approximately where the ghetto is, and we had to take whatever we could with us, belongings, and we went to the ghetto in Chernowitz. The ghetto was immediately surrounded by Romanian troops and you couldn't go out or in from the ghetto, you were not allowed to move, only in the ghetto. And after a couple of days they started deporting, they started to take streets, took the sa -- the people from the houses, from the apartments and directly to the train stations. They took 5,000 a day. And this went on for weeks or months [indecipherable]. After a week, the mayor of -- of Tel Aviv -- of Tel Aviv -- of Chernowitz, Dr. Popowich, [indecipherable] Popowich said he needs Jews bec-because the-there is nobody to [indecipherable] to keep the industry working [indecipherable], so he needs Jews who are valuable for the industry to stay in Chernowitz. We started to apply for authorizations to stay in the -- in the city. This was up from already 35,000

from a population of 70,000 who was deported to Transnistria. I was one of the lucky ones who got the authorization to stay from the [indecipherable] authorizations I got from the governor of the -- Chernowitz who was [indecipherable]. I got authorization to stay in Chernowitz with my family and so after three, four weeks, we return to our apartment, which was -- was vandalized and so on, with -- d-during our stay in the ghetto, and we started to live in the ghetto, in the -- in the town. We made the distinctions with the Jewish star, with the distinctions, the only five days a week to go out from 10 to one, and Saturday, Sunday, no Jew were -- was allowed to be on the street.

Q: So should I understand that once the first wave of deportations ended --

A: Yeah.

Q: -- the ghetto wasn't sealed any more?

A: No, it was not, no more ghetto.

Q: I understand.

A: It was -- it was not any more the ghetto, I mean, Jews were living there, but ya -- others could go back to their homes. Some were -- couldn't go back to their apartment because it was taken away, but whoever was lucky got their apartment back. In this way we started [indecipherable] this winter in Chernowitz by -- this was '41, and then they started to send people between 19 and 50 or whatever years to labor camps in Romania. They were mostly in Romania, the labor camps, in the Moldavia area, and young people were -- up to 50 were taken to different labor camps, every time a different group of people. In June or July 1942, one Sunday morning they started again to deport people from the houses and they deported the 5,000 people, 5,000 Jews. [indecipherable] them was my mother, she was deported.

Q: Where -- where were they deported?

A: My mother and most of these people were deported to Lvov. [indecipherable] Lvov, and there were horrible situations there. She was in a -- a stone group or whatever they call it. There were two locations there [indecipherable] but there was also surrounding there, yeah they have terrible situations, there was no food, nothing [indecipherable] and she perished there [indecipherable]

Q: Can I ask you to elaborate? Describe to us what did you witness during these days of deportations from June 1942. What happened to your mother, and what did you see during those days?

A: I didn't see much, they -- there was not much to see. They were taken to the Maccabee [indecipherable] and they were selected, brought to the train station and sent to Transnistria. Sure there were a lot of brutalities and so on. My personal experience was in seeing my mother [indecipherable] one of [indecipherable] to stay in Chernowitz. So, there was a student who was in charge of, which was going with the group. He didn't want to listen at all, and there was nothing you could do. I couldn't contact anybody, I had some acquaintances, lawyers, Romanian lawyers which I wanted to a -- I-I went out without the star on this Sunday to try to reach somebody, I couldn't reach anybody. So it was just a situation which we couldn't -- I couldn't see any brutality [indecipherable] because whatever happened at the -- at the sports arena, I didn't witness.

Q: Let me annou -- a-ask you another thing about the same [indecipherable]. I remember seeing the documents about the deportation of the mentally insane people from Chernowitz and since -- Jewish people from the -- mentally insane Jewish people from Chernowitz and since you are an M.D., maybe you remember something about this incident.

A: Yeah, they immediately -- it was in the beginning they evacuated the whole mental institution, and all the patients and sent them away. They were deported or killed somewhere

near the river Prut, or maybe over the Dniester. I couldn't say exactly where. I really [indecipherable].

Q: Were you able to keep in touch with your mother? Were you able to communicate with her?

A: No, no, I was not able to. I couldn't get any communication with her. And I [indecipherable] there were Romanians who went through [indecipherable], but I couldn't get in touch with her. They were very much isolated because there were other Jews from the south of Bukavina and from Chernowitz who were deported the year before [indecipherable] and other towns, which were already organized and had some communication with Bucharest and with Chernowitz. I couldn't [indecipherable] nobody, or not to my knowledge could communicate with these people who were at [indecipherable]. There is one [indecipherable] some Germans would [indecipherable] there over Lvov. They were killed over Lvov.

Q: Can you describe to us how was your life in Chernowitz during the years '42 - '43, the day to day life of the Jews.

A: Day to day life was very difficult. Nobody [indecipherable] and I have here to add something. We were a year under Russia, and so when the Russian came there were -- all the stores were -- were taken away from the population, so there was no private ownership. So the people were already deprived a year before of all their property. When -- I'll give you an example. If you had 10,000 lei in 1940, you have to change it for ruble. And then when the Romanian came back you changed the 10,000 -- the lei for one -- for one ruble. One ruble then became one lei, so you lost all your money. So people were deprived of -- lost all the -- the [indecipherable]. People who are living [indecipherable] lost, selling jewelry, clothing and whatever. So it was -- nobody earned money and it was the population [indecipherable] which at that time I figured out even if nothing happens, if [indecipherable] there were 400 or 500 deaths just from hunger and from -- from

illness. So it would have lasted another 10 years or whatever, then the population would then disappear.

Q: When you are saying four -- 500 --

A: Jews.

Q: Yeah. But every year, or --

A: Every year, yeah. No, no, I'm not talking about killings.

Q: I understand.

A: Killings were extra [indecipherable]

Q: This was mortality.

A: Yeah, this was mortality rate because of bad conditions.

Q: So what happened next to you?

A: To me, I remained in Chernowitz for awhile, then I was sent to one of these labor camps. It was Hellestend. And then later on, in 1944 -- 40 -- '44 January I was sent to [indecipherable] which was a railroad station. The daily transports from the [indecipherable] from the Ukraine came through this station to Bucharest or to other places.

Q: Could you -- could you -- I'm sorry, could you describe to us your daily life in the Hellestend [indecipherable] this forced labor detachment what you were supposed to do, what you did?

A: What I was supposed to do --

Q: What was -- were the rations --

A: -- we were working at -- at the bun -- bunkers. We were supposed to reinforce the bunker.

There were, oh, I don't know, 500 [indecipherable] at one place, and we were day by day, going out in the mornings to the evenings to work at the bunker. We were exposed to the depravities of the -- of the guards, which was basically what happened. Nobody was killed, but we were beaten

up and different punishments, but nobody was really killed, as far as I remember, but there was very severe punishments. For every little thing you would get 25 beatings and some were very severely injured.

Q: What happened after you were in this forced labor detachment? Did you --

A: I came home, I came to Chernowitz.

Q: You were liberated?

A: No, not liberated. [indecipherable]

Q: They sent you back.

A: They sent me back after a year or so, and then, as I said, in January 1944, I got another assignment to -- to the station [indecipherable] it was a big station in the time where many names came from the [indecipherable] in the defeat of the Germans.

Q: And there, what kind of for-forced labor did you --

A: No, there was no forced labor, I was forced to be the physician at the railroad station.

Q: I understand.

A: And only the commandant knew that I am Jewish. The rest didn't know. There was a small village and there was the headquarters of the Germans there, and all kind of troops [indecipherable] troops and all kinds of --

Q: What had --

A: And --

Q: Yeah, I'm s -- I'm sorry, go ahead.

A: Yeah, and I told -- Chernowitz was already liberated by the Russians again while I was in [indecipherable] and I told the commandant that I have no money and I cannot support myself and he should give me permission -- and he didn't know what to do with me because he did not -

- he didn't [indecipherable] to be there [indecipherable] because there were [indecipherable] the Romanian officers and German officers and I was called to [indecipherable] so it was a very -- how should I say it? The situation was very unpleasant. And so he gave me permission -- he gave me -- to go to Bucharest to arrange my situation. And after a week in Bucharest I decided not to go back and was able, like many others in that time [indecipherable] I stayed in Bucharest and there were small boats going from [indecipherable] to Palestine.

Q: This was when, do you remember?

A: '44.

Q: Which months?

A: Was still war.

Q: Which months roughly, do you know?

A: I know exactly [indecipherable]. I stayed from April 19 -- 1944 til July. I remember exactly. I went [indecipherable] and the train was [indecipherable] four days and four nights in Haifa.

Q: How -- how -- I'm sorry to go back for one second, but --

A: Yeah.

Q: -- how did you arrange to leave? Which organization did you --

A: Zionist organization.

Q: Do you remember the name?

A: Yeah. I was -- I was member of a academic society in Chernowitz. It was a student organization, which was connected to the -- to the [indecipherable] Zionist movement. When I came to Bucharest, I was on the list from Chernowitz [indecipherable] Zionist [indecipherable] member of this organization, so I was one of the lucky one who got the -- the place on one of the boats. There were only a few boats going. I came on the [indecipherable], it was the biggest boat

[indecipherable]. I remember exactly the date when we came to this [indecipherable] again was the 14th of July, the Bastille day. So we came on the 14th to Haifa [indecipherable]

Q: What happened next to you? How long did you stay in Palestine?

A: Palestine I stayed from -- from '44 to [indecipherable] '57.

Q: So in '57 you decided to come to United States?

A: Yeah. And I was in the army in Israel [indecipherable] the Independence War. I was a doctor in the army for 18 months. I served with the -- in the defense forces [indecipherable]

Q: Is there anything else that you would like to add concerning your wartime experience?

A: Well, the main thing is, we were living day by day not knowing what the war is going to bring you. There were -- we were always in danger to be beaten up or killed by walking in the street. [indecipherable] every -- every night as a citizen. We were a nobody, a no person, this was really -- and when -- whoever survived, it was sheer luck, it was no -- no special skill or whatever. It was just sheer luck. You could have been killed every day, everybody could have arrested you, everybody who ever wanted could point the fingers that you are a communist or whatever [indecipherable] you didn't have any rights, put it this way. There was no rights. We were deprived of basic rights.

Q: I want to thank you very much.

A: Thank you.

End of Tape One

Conclusion of Interview