

United States Holocaust Memorial Museum

**Interview with Siegfried Warter
December 14, 1993
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PREFACE

The following oral history testimony is the result of a videotaped interview with Siegfried Warter, conducted by Radu Ioanid on December 14, 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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SIEGFRIED WARTER

December 14, 1993

Q: Would you be so kind to tell us your name?

A: My name is Siegfried Warter.

Q: Would you also tell us when and where you were born?

A: I was born in _____, Bucovina on the February 16th, 1926.

Q: If you could tell us in a few words something about background of your family, the profession of your parents.

A: The background of my family? My father was a cattle dealer. We were pretty well off. I had a sister, and we had a very nice life.

Q: If you could tell us in a few words something about your years in school and the atmosphere in the school.

A: When I started school, it was a public school. There was no discrimination. After a few years, discrimination started against the Jews with anti-Semitism. Beginning when the Russians occupied the Bucovina. At that time, we were chased out of school. They formed -- there was one way that they took us together, and they asked the Jewish boys and girls to step -- they made a lineup, and they asked the Jewish boys and girls to step out of the line. And they told us that as of that time, we are not allowed to go anymore into the Romanian schools.

Q: This was during the Russian occupation or after?

A: It was right after the Russians occupied the southern part -- yes, the southern part of Bucovina.

Q: Would you tell us if during the Russian occupation you witnessed any scenes of deportation of Jews to Siberia?

A: During the Russian occupation, they did not take us out anywhere.

Q: Would you elaborate on what happened to your family once the military operations -- to you, of course, once the military operations against Soviet Union started?

A: Once the war started against the Russians, they Jews in our place were considered like spies. Now, we were not to -- we were not allowed to work. We were not allowed to travel too much from one locality to another, except with a permit from the gendarmerie. We also

experienced a tremendous amount of anti-Semitism; it started. The Germans also went through with their army to the Bucovina to the Russian front. And right after the Germans attacked, there was an order that came down to us that we are going to be evacuated. We did not know where. It was on a Thursday morning that we knew that we are going to be evacuated. The following day, Friday morning, the army came in with their machine guns. Surrounded us, and we were given the order to go to the railroad station. There they had lined up already cattle cars, and as a family -- I think it was the middle of September that we were evacuated. With as much as you can carry, we didn't have too many things because they did not allow us to take a lot of things with us. So we were dumped then into a cattle car, about 60, 70 people with the little bit of belongings that you could take. And when we left on that Friday morning, we did not know where we were going, except in passing Czernowitz, that you recognized the station. And we went to Bessarabia, and we were asked to disembark in Hataki (ph) . That was the place next to the Dniester, to the River Dniester.

Q: That was the crossing point?

A: It was the crossing point.

Q: When did you leave Hataki? What happened to you in Hataki?

A: In Hataki, you could see from Hataki to Mogilev, the hill. And on that hill, you saw thousands and thousands of people going up that hill, like a continuous convoy going up that hill. In Hataki itself, it was raining. It was -- the mud was impossible to -- if you put a foot down, you couldn't drag it out from the mud. And you were standing there in the rain for about a day and a night, until they had only two of these pontoon bridges that could take about, let's say, maybe 100, 150 people across to Hataki. Because a lot of people were -- died. I myself bearing the _____, I don't know until today who he was. He grabbed me to dig the grave, and today, the person was dead. There was robberies going on because on the other side, when we came over to Mogilev, you had already Ukrainians there, which were very, very much anti-Semitic. And there were robberies going on and killings and beatings and shootings, so we thought we cannot stay here. We would like to go further, and that's why when we came over, one of our family, one of my uncles, knew that -- he has a local permit, so he went to the Romanian Kommandanturen, and he was asking for a permit to leave. The day after he leave -- we didn't know. We had to be dependent on them to let us know where we are going. And so they gave us a permit to go to Moldova. So we were about 150 people that formed a convoy to go to Moldova, and we were escorted by two soldiers, two Romanian soldiers, which took us there. The trip lasted about two days and two nights. And when we came to Moldova, he says this is the locality. It was a small, small little village which was occupied by Ukrainian Jews and also Gentiles. But the inner of the village was like a ghetto, and that's where they chased the Jews and that's where they put us in.

Q: Let me ask you something, please. The Jews, the local Jews, are these Ukrainian Jews from Morava or local Jews from Morava or Jews deported from other places of the Ukraine to Morava?

- A: No, those were the Jews living in Morava. They all wore the yellow star. They put on yellow stars on them. And they were not allowed -- we were not allowed to walk out from that ghetto. They never gave you permits to walk away from the ghetto, and we settled in there with them. Life was really -- was peculiar. You didn't know the beginning that is going to happen. They wouldn't let you work. You had to eat, so you started to sell whatever you had from your possessions. You started to sell. I was -- there was no place where to work. The Jews, the local Jews, had some money. They had some money left over, their gold. We came with what we could grab in the last minute, so we did not have any rubles or any currency that was good. We only had Romanian drays and we had some gold, some -- we had a few diamonds. We had some watches, which slowly, slowly we started to sell and to be able to live.
- Q: Before I ask you finally to describe to us the day-to-day life in Morava, I would like you to go back for one second to the crossing of the Dniester. Because, if my understanding is correct, you witnessed also the Bessarabian Jews from Enest (ph) where . . .
- A: Yes. We witnessed -- we witnessed Bessarabian Jews and people in Mogilev. We were there and we were right next to the Dniester. And in one evening, they came in with their valiants, with horses. They chased them from one place to the other. Those Jews, it was a tragedy. We still had something to wear, but they did not. They were, I would say, three-quarters naked. Rags. And the soldiers were beating them, _____. The children were put out because they could not take the children, so they left them with us. I mean they left them with the people that were there. Said, "Please take care of my child." Three-year-old, four years, five-year-old children which couldn't go any further. It was a frightening situation. At that time we thought that in case we can get a permit, we'd be able to walk away and not being chased like they were chased _____.
- Q: Let's return to Morava. And I am kindly asking you to describe for us what was the daily life in Morava? I mean what were your relations as deportees with the local authorities?
- A: Well, the local authorities were the Ukrainians. Many of us were Ukrainian. We also had, on our part, we had a Jewish organization _____. So when they needed something, they asked the organization to provide it. Like, for instance, during the springtime, they were asking for people to go to work. And the Germans were providing a list that they needed 500 to 1,000, 1,500 people. So they came and they said that from Morava, they needed to send 500 young boys. As it were, we had to provide those 500 young boys. So it was a very hard thing for the Jewish community to go around and say, "Look, you have a boy. I want him to go to work." Which we did not know if they are going to come back. Because they took us all the way down to the roads. The _____ was at that time in _____, and they're _____ and _____. During the springtime, it was not so bad because it was not cold. But in the wintertime, when you have to be there, I mean three-quarters of the people died from hunger and from starvation and from cold. That was during the springtime. And at the end of the summer, they sent whoever remained, whoever was not sick, came back. During

the wintertime, they took us out and cleaned the roads, so that the roads could be opened for the Germans to bring their supplies. At one time, we were taken out to _____, it was a little place where the railroad was passing. They had a lot of activities with _____ there, so they had to cut the woods around the railroad, around the tracks. So they cut up the -- they cut the woods out for about 100 or 200 feet away from the tracks, so they should be able to see. This is the type of work that we had. And cleaning the roads, which I was there. I worked from early in the morning till late at night with one piece of bread. And I have seen with my own eyes like people were just standing there, and within a minute you saw them falling down and being stiff, because it was -- the temperature was 20, 25 below zero. So I was just lucky, I had some good clothing. And then I was young. Just young, that is good to do -- do whatever. When I came home, the depression had set in. I had seen so many people that did not come home, and they would always ask me, "Did you see this boy? Did you see that boy?" And I knew that he is dead, but how can you say that to somebody? That maybe they took him away and he's going to come home. But it was a frightening situation. The life in the ghetto proper was a -- you were living with hope. I personally am an optimist. With every day that passed, I said maybe God will help. Maybe something will come of it, and maybe somehow we will escape. But during the wintertime, we suffered tremendously because during the wintertime, you had the sickness. Typhoid fever with spots, that was tremendous. It took about two weeks if a person got sick with that sickness. Which I was sick with it, I was sick for two weeks with about 104 temperature, 105. And then there was like a crisis, and if you remained alive, a lot of people developed all kinds of sicknesses with their eyes. Even I have a complication of the inflammation of the veins on both legs. And I was sick for about six weeks during the wintertime after that. And thank God I escaped and I came through. Doctors didn't have any medications. "The only medication," he says, "I could give you is pray. Pray to God. I have nothing to give you. If you are strong, if you have a strong heart, you'll be able to live." And that advice, what can I tell you? Thank God I came through it.

Q: How many people do you estimate were in Morava, local Jews and Romanian Jews?

A: Local Jews and Romanian Jews together, we have about -- I would say about 2,500.

Q: From which -- how many Romanian Jews?

A: The Moravian Jews were about 1,500, and we were about 1,000, maybe more. We were mixed up, we were partly from our hometown, _____. We had quite a few people, we have some people from Sojava (ph) . We had some people from _____. And that was about it.

Q: Can you think about any other dramatic or particular incidents that you witnessed in the ghetto of Morava?

A: The particular incident that I witnessed in Morava, I mean that always comes to life in me was two incidents. One, that you were taken one time out to work on the tobacco fields.

They had a lot of tobacco. And there they lined us up, and we were all young kids. There they lined us up after work, and they beat us. Gave us a tremendous beating.

Q: Who beat you?

A: The Ukrainians. We could not go to complain to the Romanians, because if we will complain, then the authorities, the Ukrainian authorities, which were very anti-Semitic, would kill us. So we didn't say anything. We took the beating, and that was it. And that went on for days. Every day, every day. Another bad incident that I came through was they asked us one day to bring our bulletins. You know, we had identification cards. To bring the bulletins into the police station. Anybody that is not bringing in, is not coming in with a bulletin to be signed by the authorities will be shot. So I said, "I have to go." My mother was crying. She said, "Don't go. Whatever will happen will happen." I said, "Look, I must go." So I went, that was late in the afternoon. And as soon as they got them, about 500, 600 people they made a circle to their soldiers. That was the Romanians, and they beat them. They hit us with daggers. Then they sent us down to go to Mogilev. When we came there, there was about 2,500 people gathered together from our town, from Jelenia (ph) , from Shagala (ph), from whatever town, whatever they had there. And they were going to send us away to Gruenwald. Then from Gruenwald, to send us away to the Germans, specifically to Nikolayev to build a bridge. And we knew that any person that went there from before never came back. So what I did is plainly, we were all sitting in a yard surrounded by fences. Somehow my luck was that I saw an opening in the fence, and I jumped out. And I went back to Mogilev, but they didn't know -- they didn't know. They did not have any notification that I left when I came. And that was the only thing that saved me. I had cousins, I had an uncle that went there, did not come back. They never came. Because you had to -- with the type of food that they gave you, you got sick. And after you got sick, the Germans shot you because they were very much afraid of having sick people, they feed their soldiers. And that was the end of that little incident.

Q: How long did you stay in Transnistria?

A: In all we stayed from 1941 to 1944. In 1944 the Russians liberated us. They went through, there was about two days and a night, there was fights between the Russians and the Germans. And then you saw the Germans pulling back. I think we were lucky that the Germans pulled back, we could not -- they could not handle the SS. Because at the end of the German pullback, the SS always went and they always destroyed the towns. Somehow weird, it seems to me, that the Russians were too powerful and they chased them too fast. And they couldn't stop, and they didn't have any time to go around at that time. When I saw the first Russian in the village, I didn't recognize that it's a Russian. I just thought he was from the partisans that were fighting. They came in so fast, and there was machine gun fire that we sat all in the basements of the homes there. That we were just lucky that it just happened, and they liberated us. After the liberation, the Russians came down. They formed an army barracks, and said to us that we should come there to be examined. Because they wanted to take us and to sent us back to Russia to -- I would say an amount of military

exercise. And they put us back in the front. So, but we formed right away detachments of boys and girls, and they left the localities, going towards Mogilev. And from there, we came to the cattle car train that was also the army train. Then we came back to _____. I came back, from I weighed, I lost maybe half the amount of weight. I came back I weighed maybe 70 pounds.

Q: Then you stay in Czernowitz or did you go back to _____?

A: We stayed -- I stayed in Czernowitz about eight days, and I experienced in Czernowitz a gathering by the Russians, which they grabbed young kids. And they sent them away to the hinterland because they wanted to train us to be soldiers. They sent us to the Polish front. But I left Czernowitz, too. I was not that old, I didn't understand. We left Czernowitz, and we followed the front to Mehalin (ph). Mehalin is close to Sirets (ph). There's a Gibba (ph) Sirets, too. It's about 45 kilometers from Czernowitz, and there we went already over to the Romanian side, where the Romanian authorities were in charge. So there I was waiting for my parents to come, because they came about four or five weeks later.

Q: Did already the Romanians switch sides at this moment or not yet?

A: The Romanians switched sides, yes. Yes. The Romanians formed a different government. They switched sides, and we could not go home because the front was in retreat. So as soon as we heard that a locality was liberated, we went a little bit closer. Until I came back to my hometown that was in 1944 on Rosh Hashanah. There was nobody in town. It was a deserted town. There was a few people living with the rest of the people from over the mountains in that place.

Q: Did you find your house?

A: No. Our house was burned down. The properties that we had was all burned down. It was in the center of town. It had burned down. But we moved then into a house that was -- that the people left. They left for Germany. Those were Germans, and we took the house over. And we lived in that house. My parents, myself, my sister, until 1945. Then in 1945, we -- in 1946. In 1946, we made applications to come to the United States.

Q: Was it difficult to leave Romania?

A: It was -- no, it was not so difficult. But we were within the first to have applications and to come to the United States. And in 1946, we came here. That was in June.

Q: Is there anything else concerning this period in between 1941 and 1944 that you remember and you would like to describe to us?

A: Well, the remembrance that I have with the most -- most peculiar remembrances that I have was the typhoid fever that hit us during the winter. The houses were marked with crosses, so

that nobody should go in because it's very infectious. And at that time, I would say, 15 to 20 percent of population died. And you could not bury them because it was too cold, the ground was frozen. So what they did is they took up the people in the cemetery, and they dumped them on the cemetery. They left -- and the bodies remained there till the springtime. In the spring, they made graves for a hundred people or 200 people, when the government took over. The wagons that went around taking together the bodies where they have people running around with wagons just taking together the bodies, that was the most -- how should I describe it? The most painful picture, when people were worse than animals. They take care of animals, but they didn't take care of people. And thank God we survived. Thank God we came out from our hometown. We had about -- from the population, we had about 60 percent that died, that had died or killed, that did not come back. In Bucovina, we had about 500,000 Jews. From those 500,000 Jews, 60 percent died or were done away with. The rest came back. After we went _____ some of them came here. Very few came here. The majority was living in Israel.

Q: Thank you very much.

A: You're welcome.

Conclusion of Interview