United States Holocaust Memorial Museum

Interview with Max Schmidt
December 14, 1993
RG-50.030*0279

PREFACE

The following oral history testimony is the result of a videotaped interview with Max Schmidt, 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.

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.

MAX SCHMIDT
December 14, 1993

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

A: My name is Max Schmidt.

Q: When and where you were born, please?

A: In January '31, 1909 in Czernowitz. At that time, the Austrian-Hungarian Empire.

Q: Could you tell us a few words about the background of your family and about your childhood?

A: Well, my father was a house painter. My mother was a housewife. I had two more brothers, and our -- my _____ has been somehow cultural because my father was very much interested that we should learn and read a lot of books. One of my brothers is a lawyer, my oldest brother was a -- my middle brother is a doctor. And I studied in engineer, so the cultural values of my family was very high. And he was only a house painter, he worked only during the summertime. Winter in Germany was very difficult, and as a painter he couldn't -- well, that is -- I didn't encounter anti-Semitism until I became a student at the university in Brest in Czechoslovakia. There the German students were extremely anti-Semitic, and they had been carrying here a swastika, a small swastika in the lapel, but we did ignore them. The professor was also anti-Semitic, but if we responded, we made the exam. So they had to give us all the good grades. But, in general, we had difficulties over there as Jews. The great thing was it was in Czechoslovakia. When I studied, the President of Czechoslovakia was Tomás Masaryk, and he was a great man. One employee in the directorate of the university told me expresses verbally, as long as there was a picture of Masaryk, as long as Masaryk lives, you and I, we can live, too. When he is gone we will have trouble.

Q: Interesting. When did you return to Czernowitz?

A: I did return in '37, and I did have trouble finding a job. Although Czernowitz was in the majority Jews and as little industry as it was there, but we couldn't get a job. Very, very difficult, because there were many authorities, they make the difficulties. Then I went to Bucharest. In Bucharest I couldn't find a job. Whatever I did, I wrote every day, but Jews, no. As a Jew, no, I couldn't get a job. Finally, in my last year before the war, I did find a job with a Romanian/Italian company, which make artesian wells, you know. Budoi (ph) was his name, he was a nice fellow. And I worked with him and when Bucovina was occupied by the Russians, I had to leave and I went home.

Q: So when did you reach Czernowitz?

A: I reached Czernowitz in '40. And from '40, I worked under the Russian regime in a factory.

Q: Did you witness any deportations done by the Russians during 1940?

A: Oh, yes. Yes. Just right before the war or the outbreak of the war, the Russians deported a lot of Czernowitz people which had been before well-situated, good situated. Had companies or he was a lawyer, even a tailor. They took a tailor. There was one tailor, a Social Democrat, they took him.

Q: You are talking about Jewish people?

A: Jewish people, yeah. And of Christian people, they took very, very, very little.

Q: Can you estimate how many people were deported from Czernowitz, a rough estimate?

A: Well, at that time probably 5,000 and 7,000. They took from the province, also. And they made it, from the province, they made everything of Czernowitz, it's Czernowitz.

Q: But when you say 5 to 7,000, you are talking only about Czernowitz, or about the whole occupied . . .

A: It's about the whole . . .

Q: About the whole?

A: . . . because that is only the people who were good situated, the Russians. They didn't touch other people. The Romanians touched everybody.

Q: I understand. Can you tell us what happened to you, and to your family once the military operations started in June 1941, the military operation done by Romanians and Germans against Soviet Union?

A: Yeah. I was at that time -- my parents were dead. My brothers were in America. I was the only one in Czernowitz, and I was married. And when I -- when the deportations began, they deported me, my wife, my mother-in-law and two more sisters-in-law.

Q: I would like you to tell us a few words, in a few words what happened to you before the deportations. I mean, because Czernowitz was occupied by the Romanians sometime in June, and you were deported sometime in October, if I'm correct. So I would like to know what was the life at the beginnings of the ghetto in Czernowitz, your life . . .

A: Life was very bad. Life was very bad. We couldn't get -- we didn't have any work to do. We couldn't do, but we were taken out for forced labor. I was taken out by my hair, and to clean the street. There was a big park in Czernowitz, Folksgarden (ph). What we had to do is clean

the park. We did all kinds of forced work, forced labor, but we didn't get paid.

Q: Do you remember when was the Yellow Star introduced in Czernowitz, if it was any?

A: The Yellow Star, yeah, the Yellow Star was. But it came about two months or three months before the deportation. In fact, I was in an office when they told me to come, but I didn't have the Yellow Star. He told me "Where is your Hakenkreuz?" I said, "I have no Hakenkreuz." He said, "You need a Hakenkreuz." A Yellow Star. And by -- he didn't punish me, but it was some, I would say, a rarity. Because other people have been very much punished when they didn't carry a Yellow Star.

Q: Could you tell us what happened to you and your family when the ghetto was sealed and when the deportations started in Czernowitz?

A: Yeah. Well, we -- when they started, every day they eliminated one or two streets where we have been before. And they pushed us more and more to another part of the city, which was in old time inhabited by a lot of Jews. This is not _____. And they pushed us every day, they closed the street. I lived, for example, close to the National Theater. One day they came in and said, "_____. You cannot live anymore here." And we had to take whatever we could take by hand and leave. So that was two or three days, and then they sealed the ghetto. And we were in a very small place, and about a day later started evacuation. They drove us to the railroad and we had -- and the wagon without anything. And we couldn't take anything, only what we can carry.

Q: So you were deported with your wife, and who else?

A: My wife, my mother-in-law and two more sisters-in-law of mine. And then we went to Mogilev, we came to Akaki.

Q: This was a crossing point?

A: Yeah. Akaki (ph) was the first before. Akaki was still Romanian, and then came the Dnestr and then Mogilev and we were in the Ukraine. And that was a very bad view that we have seen from Akaki, because before us there are other people already. The Yelets (ph) from four parts in Bessarabia, in Bucovina.

Q: And did you meet these people from Yelets?

A: No, I didn't meet because when we came, they were driven further. They were driven further, and we were only about a day and a night. And then the next day they started to drive us. It was raining all night, it was a very cold, and you couldn't walk because it was a morass. And they drove us, we got hit -- I got hit by a Romanian soldier here and there and to let go my package. And I let go, but my wife asked him "Look, I want to have this one. Give it to me." So somehow he gave it to her. And that package was my documents, my certificates from the

university from my diplomas in engineer. And then we were walking, walking; suddenly, I fell because I slipped and fell into -- it was hole. But I got up to here, and I knew I couldn't get out. My wife wanted to reach out for me, but she couldn't, she was pushed further from me. Because she couldn't stop, she was walking. Somebody, probably a man, gave me his hand and pulled me out, so I came -- I was saved. I couldn't even thank him, I didn't know who it was because he was pushed, you know. We were so driven and hit by the soldiers that we couldn't even breathe.

Q: This was where?

A: In Akaki.

Q: In Akaki.

A: They pushed us towards the Dnestr. My wife already knew that I'm dead. But then later I did find her on the shore of Akaki, and we went over at night and in a barge. Some people before us and after us were _____ in the barge. They turned the barge, and fell in the cold water and they drowned. We somehow survived. Later on I did find my mother-in-law and my two sisters also. They survived and were already in Mogilev in a shack, in an old house. It was -- the house was uninhabitable, but it was there, so we started -- we had been united. The next day I heard that there was somebody who would make work for -- working for the government. Looking for workers. Workers who know their _____, so I went to see this man. When I -- in order to come there, I had to go to a places, to streets I didn't know. But I saw that the Romanian soldiers and Ukrainians were banded together and robbing the people they met in the street. And I went and zigzagged not to meet the people, and I came to the Dnestr. But there was a big house, and they told me this is the house of the rabbi (ph), and there is Yegendorf (ph). I entered this building and I asked a woman, "I want to speak to Yegendorf." She told me "Yegendorf is not here, he will come and then you can talk to him." And I didn't know him. I said, "How should I recognize Yegendorf?" She told me, "He has a white collar, he is always white collar. It's nice." And so I recognized him. When he came from the Prefect, he told me then he came the Prefect. And I told him who I am, what I do and I would like to do. He said to me, "All right. Come tomorrow 7 o'clock in the morning."

Q: You were an engineer, correct?

A: Yes, I was an engineer. I still am.

Q: I'm sorry. In what?

A: Mechanical engineer.

Q: Mechanical engineer, okay.

A: And so next day, I came and we all went to see this Timisoara (ph). And he went along at my

side, and he asked me, "What can we do here? What can we do here and here?" And I said, "It's very difficult, but we have to do whatever we can, and we will do." He said, "All right." So that was the beginning of my relationship with Yegendorf. He made me -- I have this document as a _____, the chief engineer. Chief engineer was a Mr. Bingerstratts (ph). He was the, how shall I say, the son-in-law of a very rich man from Radom, who was on the _____. Yegendorf was also on the _____. So this Bingerstratts was made chief engineer; I was his deputy. So we started little by little, we started to build up this Timisoara. Yegendorf was in the beginning a nice fellow, but the more power he got the more he became brutal. And he was intellectually a lightweight, but there were people around us, which certainly you know, there was a Dr. Kessler (ph), a lawyer, from Donetsk (ph). He was a very, very clever man and a highly intelligent man. Kessler was his alter-ego for Yegendorf. If Kessler proposed what to do, Yegendorf signed and said, "I did it." And so it went with a lot of penchants in the Timisoara. People did a lot of things to survive.

Q: Can you explain how come this Timisoara (ph), this foundry, was created? What was the interest of the Romanian authorities to create the foundry and why they wanted -- why they went ahead with this idea?

A: Well, so far as I know, there was a lot of people, the prefect of Mogilev had some people around himself that were Jews. Yegendorf had some people around him that were also Jews. And they made business, one group with the other. In order to make business and that it should be something we make work for the benefit of the country, so it was war. The Timisoara (ph), which could repair cars, tractors, and do other things, was very important for the Germans and for the Romanians. And besides, the great motive of this, I believe, was people -- the Romanians, the Prefect, the Major of the gendarmerie, who was -- they wanted to make business; they wanted to get rich. And my personal opinion is that this is our luck, because we could corrupt them with money and we could stay there.

Q: So if I understand when Mogilev was practically a huge ghetto, which had this foundry, this Timisoara (ph), as the main industrial unit?

A: Yeah. The Timisoara (ph) was there when the Russians had -- after they were done. When they left they destroyed a lot of this. Now, Yegendorf and Prefect Bayona (ph), who was, by the way, an Austrian-Romanian, he was serving in the Austrian Army during the First World War. Yegendorf was a lieutenant of the First -- in the Austrian Army of the First World War. So they had a common language. They both spoke German, and they both understood each other. They made it in order to have a hinterland. To provide for the army, for the force or whoever. And we did a lot of things for the army, for the Romanian Army and for the German Army. The Germans came in and gave the order and we did it. In the beginning we had our difficulties because we -- there was not instruments. We had to begin from zero. The first hammer we made, I remember there was an old man by the name of Bloan (ph) Schmitt. And he took a piece of iron and two bricks and put a fire in the two big bricks, and put the iron in the fire. Then with another brick, he hammered this out and we had the first hammer. So we made instruments and we made instruments for our lathe machine, for our planning

machine, for our blazer, the Timisoara (ph) infected was a -- have a molten, the iron started to work and we did a lot of things over for the government, for the Romanians. And, by the way, some people made money, the big ones of the Romanians.

Q: If my understanding is correct, some of the Jews from Mogilev were deported later from Mogilev to Szydlowiec, am I correct?

A: Yes.

Q: Can you elaborate on this? Can you describe to us what happened?

A: I can only tell you that one day we had a lot of some -- in my department there was about five Mogilev Jews, workers, real good workers. And in order not to be deported, they had to be working in the Timisoara (ph). And so we had a lot in other departments, some Russian Jews. But the majority was deported to Szydlowiec or other places.

Q: Did you witness those deportations?

A: No, no.

Q: Can you tell us a little bit more about the life in the ghetto, day-to-day life about how was the ghetto business conducted by Yegendorf and so on?

A: It's difficult because I didn't -- I haven't been in the city, in Mogilev. My work was always with Timisoara (ph), but I heard Yegendorf was -- they had formed committees. And Yegendorf was the President of the committee. And the committee had some people from other localities, sometimes from _____, from Soroki, Domnitsa. In the beginning was Domnitsa and Mogilev, but then he went to Szydlowiec with his people. There was another Mr. Cotts (ph), an engineer from Soroki, and he became a member of the committee. And that was one man who was against Yegendorf. Yegendorf and Cotts were two _____. Yegendorf, when he didn't like something or somebody, he just resigned. And the committee was dissolved and then the Prefect gave him another shot, make another committee. And he did another committee with other people. Yegendorf was a manipulator.

Q: Manipulator.

A: Manipulator. And Cotts was a strong personality and didn't accept everything with Yegendorf. Yegendorf also wrote -- he resigned from a committee and wrote to the Prefect that the next committee the Prefect has nominated is not doing the job. They are doing just -- they are caring only for themselves. They make business from the committee, and neglect the benefits of the other people. It was a lot of accusations, a letter is there. In the book from Yegendorf he is mentioning this letter, that Yegendorf denounced a committee and wanted to have the committee annulled and given to him again. So that was the policies in Mogilev. They made outside of city, they made somehow as -- a collective workers who could work

like all kinds of, how shall I say, shoemakers. Carpenters. And they started to work, and Cotts was informed, was the President of these ateliers. And Yegendorf and Cotts were harassing one and the other and impeded a lot of work. Then a lot of people made business, they got their own collections to the gendarmerie. As they made business, they made stores, and they sold bread, cake, whatever. And they were very ingenious in making business. And, of course, at one time it was not thought it was a ghetto. It was just a business, but then came the other way. And they started to harass the people. We had the Jewish Police in Mogilev, that was not a very friendly people.

Q: What were they doing?

A: They were police, and sometimes they abused the people. They abused by making money. They arrested people and people paid them, and then -- so I do not know very well about that because I was not active in that. But I heard what they told me was going on down in the city.

Q: So you stayed most of your years in Mogilev in Timisoara (ph) itself?

A: That's it, yeah.

Q: Can you . . .

A: I really was in the Timisoara (ph) and not very far from the Timisoara (ph) was a building where we lived.

Q: I understand.

A: Yegendorf lived in the same building, and in a smaller building and he was living like a king. When he left his apartment, he was accompanied by two bodyguards. Nobody could talk to him, and he went to the office. In the office, he was king.

Q: Can you tell us a few things about your most difficult months or years in Timisoara (ph)?

A: Well, it was in the beginning. The beginning was very, very difficult because we didn't have anything, and we didn't know what to do. I mean, we had to work, so we made whatever we could. Ingenious, we have invented a lot of things to make instruments and then with one -- the moment I had one lathe at hand, we started to repair another. So little by little, we became a very well organized factory, because we had a lathe and then the Timisoara (ph) -- as such and then we had one department we made smaller things. It was run by another colleague of mine very nicely. He made all kinds of screws and blades and so forth. And that was what we had to do.

Q: I remember reading at a certain point about a statue which was built in Mogilev.

A: I don't know about that because it was done in very great secret. There was an architect, _____, who made the design, a statue, a cross. And they put the cross on front on a very high place, but I cannot tell you more about that because everything was done in secret. I couldn't find out. I was working in the lathe department, and I didn't know what's going in the carpenter department, because they made it over there. Mr. _____, an architect, and Yegendorf.

Q: Can you elaborate a little bit on Yegendorf's style of administration and his style on dealing on one hand with the Romanian authorities, on the other hand with the Jews interned in Mogilev?

A: Yeah, that I can tell you. Yegendorf was a very good organizer. Very good. He knew a lot about administration, but he was not a very good engineer. And he was a man who knew so much, but when somebody came around who knew a little bit more, it was his -- he was an enemy of Yegendorf. Couldn't exist anymore. We as engineers, we were all young engineers, we know all the engineers always likes to talk about his days when he became an engineer. He never talked to us, he always dealt with us as in facto. You are in this department, you do what I tell you. He came around and my people made lighters, you know. And he went around and looked. And one day he caught me, but I didn't tell him what's going on. And he said to me, "What are they doing here?" And then I had to tell him they were lighters. And he was very angry, he said, "You do this and you sell it, and then I have to defend you. The gendarmerie will ask about it." I said, "Mr. Engineer, he is hungry. He doesn't do it all the time, he did it once." So when he caught somebody with a lighter, he punished him very severely.

Q: How?

A: He said, "If you do it one more time, you lose the apartment. You lose your way in this building. You cannot live with us. And you lose the Timisoara (ph), and that means that." And he was not shy to threaten us with that. He was very severe, but, by the way, he was a good organizer. He dealt with the gendarmerie and the Prefect. I believe his people from the Prefect who were Jews, and Yegendorf's people around him who were Jews, they made business with one each other. And that was a big thing. They also paid money. For example, they bought big jewelry for the women of the Major, diamonds. And so they corrupted, and that was the way it went on. Sometimes he was very courageous, Yegendorf. When people attacked us or beat some Jews, he said, "You cannot beat these people because they are mine." One officer, Romanian officer, beat him and made him sick, but he was -- I must say that this officer was very severely dealt with by the Prefect. But he was courageous, he was a good organizer, but he was not a good man. Man with compassion, that he was not. And he always, always had in his mind was "I am number one." And he met people from Odessa, from the government, talked to him and he was by -- want so much influence that he made a scheme. He made a proposal, how to organize the Jews in grand scheme, in the whole of Ukraine to repair the industry and all the workshops and to make them workable. And that was he should be on the top of that, and we should be his servants. Now, I didn't know about

that, only when I saw the documents. That in my mind made him very low. This is war -- I don't want to use it -- but it's like a war criminal because in times of war then your friends are your enemy. But what we had to do under the impression, under the pressure, we had to do, that is one thing. But when we voluntarily do something, this is different.

Q: I understand. Can you tell us about your experience toward the end of your stay in Mogilev? What happened when the Russians came, and how did you come back from Transnistria to Czernowitz?

A: Well, Yegendorf, it was a time when _____ was at odds with Antinesco (ph), and Antinesco sent him to Mogilev. Federman (ph) -- that we have, Federman was in Mogilev, and he talk only to Mr. Yegendorf. And he wasn't even visiting the city. Federman wasn't visiting the Timisoara (ph).

Q: You never saw him in Mogilev?

A: No, no. I saw him once when he into the apartment of engineer Yegendorf. Well, and then finally when Federman went back, we thought that now a lot of things are regulated. But one day, one day I came to there and Yegendorf was gone. Yegendorf secretly left. Federman worked out . . .

Q: His release?

A: . . . his release. And Yegendorf and his wife left Mogilev secretly. And we were -- suddenly we were without a leader. You see, how bad he was, how good he was, but he was a leader. And it's like a father, the son is like the father. Suddenly there's no father, he left. And everything was very -- in a very bad situation.

Q: So he left without any warning?

A: Without anything. Not saying a thing. And a couple of days later, we say the Germans had opened a big storage place. They had storage over there with sugar, flour, bread, everything. And they opened the doors and told the people, "Take whatever you want." My wife was also at that time left and went over there to take some sugar, some -- whatever it is she can take. And all the people went to take. Suddenly, the German _____ came and started to shoot. A lot of people there were killed. Happily my wife was not wounded. And then they started the rumor, we saw that the Germans started to leave in cars. Well, there was -- I saw one car full of Romanian soldiers halted by the Germans. They forced the Romanian soldiers to get out, they got into the car and left. That I saw from the Timisoara (ph) on the highway. And so it was, it became a situation without -- they're shooting from all sides. From Soroki, from Romania they were shooting. And they were shooting from our parts, from the Mogilev. Then we saw on a mountain some people, and we were told these are the partisans. In a day the partisans started to work, and the Russians came in. The first group of soldiers. It was 4 o'clock in the morning. We were very lucky. We went to welcome the Russians.

There was an officer, a Russian officer, a lieutenant. He said to us, "You are guilty that we have a war. You are a guilt -- because we don't want a war. We fight for you because we want to save you, but you are guilty." And that was the first greetings from the Russians, where the whole world thought when they will come we will be liberated. We will be free. The first thing was this anti-Semitic remark. And they started to take people from us to mobilize people.

Q: To draft them in the army?

A: Yes. In the army. And I had to work. I couldn't leave. I wanted to go home. They told me, "You cannot leave. You have to work here. I will tell you when you can leave." And they never told me. So we were like forced labor, it was not very nice. And every day they came for us. It was finally I sent my wife before, she went home. I started to work over there, and then one day I decided whatever it will be, I go home, and I was lucky. My wife went to -- in Czernowitz, there is a factory where I was working before. And they gave her a letter that they need me. It was already under Russian regime. They gave her a letter that they need me, and I should be sent home from Mogilev. And with that letter, I went home. I came home and started to work over there, and after a couple of months I got sick. I got the trembling, I couldn't work. They made me an invalid for the time being. Then after I got my release from the hospital, they told me I started to look for getting out. Lucky I went to _____. They permitted us, whoever wants to leave can leave. So we made my publication, I went to Romania. I went to Bucharest. And there I started to make connection with my brothers. In the meantime, Yegendorf was also in Bucharest. He lived in a house of the Police Commissioner, Monalesko (ph). And I went to see him, he received me very friendly and said, "Well, everything will be all fine." And he told me had two daughters here, and he told me when I want to get in touch with my brothers, I should give him a letter, and he will send it to the daughters and they will contact him. So I gave him, but my brother contacted me before that. And that was it.

Q: When did you leave Romania?

A: I left Romania in '49 -- '48.

Q: Was it difficult?

A: Yeah. I had difficulties, but it was very difficult to get a job over there. And I met in the streets, I felt that I'm not welcome. Everybody saw, once I heard once, "Gendarmerie, gendarmerie, gendarmerie," and then the Communists were there in power, but I didn't have good luck. So I prefer to leave.

Q: When did you arrive to this country?

A: In this country, I arrived in '51. I went -- my brothers made -- because I couldn't get right away to America, I had to go to Cuba. In Cuba, I was three years of working over there,

different kinds. And then I came to the United States.

Q: Thank you very much.

A: You are welcome.

Conclusion of Interview