

United States Holocaust Memorial Museum
Archives

Oral History Interviews of the
Kean College of New Jersey
Holocaust Resource Center

Interview with Mila Bachner
July 9, 1987
RG-50.002*0072

PREFACE

On July 9, 1987, Mila Bachner was interviewed on videotape by Phyllis Ziman-Tobin and Bernard Weinstein on behalf of the Kean College of New Jersey Holocaust Resource Center. The interview took place in Union, New Jersey and is part of the Research Institute Archives of the United States Holocaust Memorial Museum's collection of oral testimonies.

Kean College of New Jersey Holocaust Resource Center created a summary and time-coded notes for the interview. The reader should bear in mind that these finding aids attempt to represent the spoken word in the recorded interview, yet have not necessarily been verified by the interviewee. The finding aids should not be used in place of the interview itself.

Rights to the interview are held by the Kean College of New Jersey Holocaust Resource Center. The United States Holocaust Memorial Museum houses a copy of the interview as a result of a contributing organization agreement with the Kean College of New Jersey Holocaust Resource Center. Details concerning the Museum's rights to use and reproduce the interview are contained in the contributing organization agreement.

Summary of the
Interview with Mila Bachner
July 9, 1987

Mila Bachner (nee Zagorski) was born in Chrzanów, Poland on March 15, 1927 to an Orthodox family. She was the fourth of six children. Mila remembers some Antisemitism before the war, especially in remarks such as "To Palestine with the Jews." Her maternal grandfather was attacked and killed by Poles in 1936. After the Germans invaded Poland in 1939, her family tried to escape eastward, but were forced back into the Chrzanów ghetto. The town was very close to Auschwitz concentration camp in Poland where most of her family was murdered. While in the Chrzanów ghetto, Mila was forced to make coats for the Germans. In 1942, she was taken by train to the Dulag transit camp in Germany and then sent to Nova Sol concentration camp in Neusalz, Germany (Nowa Sól, Poland). She remained there for three years. In 1945, Mila was forced on a death march to Flossenbürg concentration camp in Germany. Shortly after, she and others were marched to a railroad station and thrown into a cattle car and travelled for eight days without any food, water or bathroom facilities. They arrived in Hanover, Germany, near Bergen-Belsen concentration camp where they were liberated by the British in mid April. Mila weighed 50 pounds at liberation. She stayed with a German family before being reunited with her only surviving family member, her brother, who had been in Mauthausen concentration camp in Austria. They

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emigrated to the United States in March of 1947. Mila has three children and three grandchildren.

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**Time-coded notes of the
Interview with Mila Bachner
July 9, 1987**

01:01:00

Mila was born in Chrzanów, Poland on March 15, 1927. Approximately 8,000 out of 18,000 people in her town were Jewish. Besides herself, there were five other children in the family (three brothers and two sisters). She thinks that her older sister might have survived if she had not married. Her parents were Orthodox and married her off. The children went to public school and Hebrew school. Her father was a cattle and horse dealer. Mila was the fourth of six children. She remembers her grandparents.

01:04:00

She relives her family memories in her dreams. She often heard Antisemitic remarks such as, "To Palestine with you Jews." She also remembers remarks about ritual murder. She knew that these were false accusations. Her father told the children that Poles attacked him many times, but he was strong and was able to fight them off.

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01:07:00

She remembers her maternal grandfather being attacked by Poles in 1936. They found him with six bayonets placed around him. He was paralyzed with fear and died of it. In July 1939, Mila knew that they were in danger. She perceived that her parents were worried. People were glued to their radios. This is how she learned that Germany had invaded Poland in September 1939. She could not accept the extent of the destruction. Their town was not very far from Berlin, Germany. This was one of the reasons that they were so surprised by the attack.

01:10:00

They were also near the town of Auschwitz where her older sister, Malka, had won a beauty contest before the war. The family temporarily escaped eastward, but were forced back to Chrzanów, where a ghetto was formed. On the way back, they saw Jews who had been shot. In the ghetto, three or four families shared an apartment. The Germans spread rumors that Jews were carriers of diseases. This made it easier to destroy them. The parents' business was taken away.

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Once, her brother Chamek was home and said that the Nazis were rounding up boys. He was trying to hide but was taken away. He later died in Gross Masselwitz concentration camp in Germany. Moniek, her other brother, was in Mauthausen concentration camp in Austria and survived. Mila made coats for the Germans.

01:16:00

Her mother was taken in a round-up of older women. She and her younger sister Meshelle were together. Women who were less comely or attractive were taken for transport. Guards were their "angels," deciding who would live and who would die. The Gestapo man was a giant, and he ripped off her mother's sheitel (traditional wig) with a bayonet. It left a gash on her head. Her mother was thrown into a pile with other women. He ordered her and her sister to go home but they hid. They followed the transport from afar and saw the women taken on an open cattle car.

01:19:00

They were only eighteen kilometers from Auschwitz concentration camp in Poland. They already knew about the crematoria. One Friday, she had to go to work, but she feared that they would all be slaughtered. In the factory, there was a commotion. She remembers another round-up shortly afterwards, one in which Malka

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was taken. At that time, she saw Auschwitz written on the trucks. Her sister could not get her baby carriage on the truck. The Gestapo man threw her on the truck.

01:22:00

Mila was assigned to a factory making coats for German soldiers. Her younger brother and sister sensed what would happen. Her brother said that she would be "the mirror of the house." She was taken by train to the Dulag transit camp in Germany. Dr. Franz Novak selected who would live and who would die. She thought that being sick might help her, but Novak thought that she was healthy, and this may in fact have saved her life.

01:25:00

She was brought to Nova Sol concentration camp in Neusalz, Germany (Nowa Sól, Poland) near Breslau (Wroclaw, Poland) in 1942. She says that the women supervisors there were worse than the men. One of them made Mila read a sign that said, "It is more important to do one's duty than to live." She saw living "zombies." Prisoners were ordered to keep clean without having enough water. They were always hungry. She tried to keep a semblance of Jewishness and of pre-war memory.

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01:28:00

Hope kept them alive. One day in 1945, the Lagerführer told them that they had to evacuate to make a hospital for German soldiers. During these three years, she looked better than other prisoners, and they beat her out of jealousy. The work was extremely hazardous; it could have cost a hand. She remembers once having to work with a rusty knife. She asked the supervisor to test the sharpness of the knife. He did; on her finger.

01:31:00

She feels that they lost everything but their soles. In January, they began a death march to "nowhere." They were "left to the mercy of God." Sometimes, German farmers took pity on them. People's hands and feet were frozen, and they were shot along the way. She slept with pigs and cows, and she often envied the animals.

01:34:00

They walked until late March. She remembers her younger sister and brother. Her sister did not want to leave her brother or father. All of them died in Auschwitz. The marchers went through

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Potsdam, Germany. She saw Hitler Youth who threw rocks at them. They came to Flossenbürg concentration camp in Germany. She jumped off a truck with a friend. They were free for a while and a German woman gave them food, clothing and shelter.

01:37:00

At this time she wondered whether there was a God. She was fatalistic. The Czechs made them undress and take showers. She had pictures with her. German captors wanted to take them. They pulled and beat her, but she held on to the pictures.

01:40:00

Conditions in Flossenbürg were terrible. There were daily hangings. There was no food or water and no bathroom facilities.

01:43:00

She often sees herself among the dead. She got clothes off of dead bodies. They were ordered to march to a railroad station and were thrown into a cattle car. They spent eight days without food, water or toilet facilities. There were 200 children in one cattle car. The doors would have been open for air if cattle were being carried in the railroad cars but not for Jews. They were

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thirsty but a Nazi guard threw water out instead of giving it to them.

01:49:00

They arrived in Hanover, Germany near Bergen-Belsen concentration camp. They were taken to a "hospital." She knew this meant certain death. She knew that she was deathly ill. She was assigned to pull dead bodies to the crematoria. She was feverish. Her stomach would not take food, but she drank hot coffee, which burned off her fever.

01:52:00

The British came in mid April. Mila weighed 50 pounds. "Hitler should have taken all of you," a British soldier told her. She told him, "God wanted me to live, so I'm here." He looked ashamed, she recalls.

01:55:00

She still believes that God wanted her to be there. She wondered why she survived, but her daughter reassured her. She believes she lives for her children. She speaks freely with all of them about the Holocaust. Her children encouraged her to testify.

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01:58:00

Mila's feelings during liberation: She remembers that people behaved like wild animals. Many who were treated as "subhuman" acted "subhuman." But she could not kill a chicken, even to eat. Everyone was for themselves. She walked into the first house near the camp. A woman there told her that she was no longer a prisoner. The family kept her in the house. The husband would measure her to see if she had gained weight. A daughter and a granddaughter lived with them. There were two daughters in the family; both were married to SS men, neither of whom returned from war.

02:01:00

At first, they kept her from the table because they feared that she had tuberculosis. but when she was better, they made her one of the family. She spent just a few weeks with them. She was also with two other friends. One friend tried to cross the border into Austria. She came back, telling Mila her brother Moniek was still alive.

02:04:00

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Moniek came a few days later. He knew nothing of what had happened to his family. He took Mila and her friends to the camp where he was incarcerated. They had to cross the border secretly.

02:07:00

She and her brother were inseparable. She was in a hospital and did not trust the doctor whom she thought might be a former Nazi. She thought he might kill her. She did not allow him to touch her.

02:10:00

She got the address of an uncle in the United States. This was her father's brother. The uncle made affidavits for them. They arrived in the United States on March 3, 1947. She can appreciate America after all that she had suffered. After five years in the country, she met her husband. He is also a survivor. They have three children and three grandchildren.