

BOHNY-REITER, Friedel
RG-50.030*0032

Abstract

Friedel Bohny-Reiter was born Catholic in Vienna in 1912. In 1921, she was sent to Switzerland on a Red Cross train. Friedel wanted to return to Vienna, but travel restrictions prevented it. After Friedel gained Swiss citizenship when she was 20, she remained in Switzerland to care for her elderly foster parents, who died when she was 24. She became a Protestant.

Friedel contacted the Swiss *Kinderhilfe* (Children's Help Society) in Bern, and the next day, they sent her to work at the French camp, Rivesaltes. The camp had 12,000 inmates: half were Jews, and the others were Spaniards and gypsies. Friedel says she saw great differences in survival mentality: Jews eventually gave up hope, but the Spaniards retained hope.

Friedel was shocked by the misery, hunger, and poor health conditions. People died like flies, she says. She and another Swiss woman prepared food rations, donated by American Quakers. Everything was a great struggle, but the work was very rewarding, she says.

She helped 43 people escape. She put one girl on the handlebars of a bike Friedel pedaled, and they sang as they passed guards. Friedel also made false passports, and once removed some names from deportation lists the camp chief had left on his desk.

She said the worst thing was that the Red Cross had promised to save the children, but did not.

After Rivesaltes was emptied, she saved a barrack's worth of food and wood, and contacted Quakers who helped.

She went to Chambon to become director of a refugee children's home established by August Bohny-Reiter (RG-50.030*0031), whom she married. She worked there until the end of 1944.

She was upset that Jewish mothers and children were refused entry into Switzerland. All countries in Europe should be ashamed for not intervening, she says.

She adds that her greatest joy is meeting some of the people she helped escape. The people are now grandparents in America and in Israel.

Tape I

- 1:32 Friedel Bohny-Reiter was born in Vienna in 1912. Her father died in World War I, her mother was alone, and conditions were very difficult in Austria during the war. As a child, Friedel was evacuated to the countryside where there was more food. After the war, in 1921, she was sent to Switzerland on a Red Cross train.
- 1:55 She had always wanted to return to Vienna. Two years later, she read in newspapers that all such children were to go back. But she was not included because her papers were lost.
- 2:15 When her papers were found, the Swiss police suggested she might as well remain in Switzerland. Her residence permit did not allow her to leave the country, so she did not see her mother for a long time.
- 2:50 Her mother came to visit her when she was 17.
- 2:90 Friedel did not have her own family, but the Swiss foster family was very good to her. She did not have an easy childhood. She felt lonely often.
- 3:24 At age 20, she received Swiss citizenship, and could travel freely. When war broke out, the connection with home was broken again.
- 4:00 She became independent, self-reliant, able to cope on her own. She did not want to be a burden to her adoptive family. She could never share her innermost feelings with anyone.
- 4:30 She always painted, and was interested in child care.
- 5:00 She did not want to leave her foster parents, who were old. She took care of them until they died when she was 24.
- 5:09 She went to Italy for a year as a nanny to children of a very rich family.
- 6:15 Given the misery in the world, she thought she could do something more meaningful. By chance, she got the address of the Swiss *Kinderhilfe* (Children's Help Society) in Bern. The organization asked whether she was willing to do any kind of work. She said "Yes."
- 6:19 The next day, she was sent to the French camp of Rivesaltes, to help a Swiss woman who desperately needed assistance.
- 6:53 It was a great shock for her, because she had no idea that such misery and hunger existed.
- 7:11 Another Swiss worker was there, and together they tried to help wherever they could. The other woman was in charge of distributing food from the American Quakers. They could not give people what they needed. The two Swiss women lived like the other inhabitants, except that they were not hungry.

- 8:13 She had the freedom to help.
- 8:55 The Swiss had not been asked to help. At first, the French would not let them in. They said that the Swiss could donate whatever they wanted without entering the camp. The Swiss did not agree to that. Things kept disappearing right and left, Friedel says.
- 9:30 Finally, the Swiss were permitted to live in the camp.
- 9:53 The health services were terrible. The Swiss women brought milk and boiled rice for the babies. Also, the women boiled 1300 rations for elementary age children, and then some for the adolescents. They tried to occupy the children who had nothing to do, and were wandering aimlessly around the camp. The women started a “*foyer*”, a child center.
- 10:18 The children had only the clothes on their backs. They received some toys from Switzerland. All this required some organization. The camp had 12,000 inmates: half were Jewish, the others were Spaniards and gypsies.
- 11:08 A barracks for women was created where they could sew and do crafts. Later, they got some food for adults.
- 11:43 A Jewish doctor helped, and some boys helped with the cooking, all of which required careful organization.
- 12:17 Everything was a great struggle. People had nothing, they came with cans, “people were grateful if we could get them spoons.”
- 12:38 The work was very rewarding. Men and women were separated, and the women were allowed to keep children up to age 12.
- 13:04 Friedel needed a new *laissez passer* (pass) every month. There were many very capable people in the camp.
- 13:54 Their own barrack was painted, they tried to maintain aesthetics.
- 14:34 Some Spanish children had never seen a bird, grass, or a tree. They planted sunflowers, and a Spanish gardener even tried to plant carrot seeds, although it was all forbidden.
- 15:12 When asked how it influenced her faith, she said that is why she had kept a diary, to reflect.
- 15:28 She could not do this work today, but at the time, she had so much hope and faith to be able to help. The Jews were so weakened; at least the Spaniards had hope. The Jews did not defend themselves, they had already given up. She did not have time to reflect.

- 16:50 It was possible to get out. One could get a liberation permit, but it was a long process. The Swiss needed help in the homes, but some people got free. That was the most beautiful moment.
- 17:20 The greatest joy is here in America, to see people as grandparents whom she helped get out of the camp as children. Also in Israel, she met with grandparents whom she was able to liberate as children.
- 17:35 At first, it was possible to get people out because they were needed as helpers. After summer 1942, it became impossible. She had to lie and swindle, she made false passports... There is a woman in the outskirts of Washington who was a child whom Friedel had on her bike's handlebars and singing to get her past the border guards.
- 18:29 It was all illegal. One had to be very careful, they would have been forbidden to work. The French helped, but they could have objected, and they did not.
- 19:17 Once, the camp chief left the deportation lists on the table so that she could see the names, and remove the names of people she knew.
- 19:33 Fifty years later, one talks about Swiss neutrality. At the time, one never thought about it, when one sees that it is a question of life and death, one just helps. She brought out 43 people.
- 20:13 She was there until Rivesaltes was emptied. At first, 6,000 persons disappeared, but new ones kept coming.
- 20:30 The women were taken out at night, in their nightgowns. The worst was that the Red Cross promised to save the children, but that changed from night to night.
- 22:10 First those under 16, then those under 12, then those under two were permitted to stay. Monsieur Dubois (Maurice Dubois?) tried to go to Vichy, and his wife (Eléanore?) went to Switzerland to see whether all the Jewish children would be permitted to come to Switzerland, but it was not possible. It was such a muddle, children kept coming and going.
- 21:40 After great confusion, finally all the children were sent back to the children's home.
- 22:37 Parents said that they were willing to die as long as they could save their children.
- 22:45 In the beginning, there was hope, but it kept getting worse until they realized they would all die. She does not know how she knew that.
- 23:21 She can't talk about suicides. She often waved to the people when they were leaving. She wished it had not happened. All of Europe should be ashamed for not intervening, not a single nation is exempted, from a humanitarian point of view.

- 25:00 The French were in charge, under direction of the Germans. The camp director was French. His hair turned completely white in one year. He could have helped, but he did not.
- 25:43 It was dirty work, and he knew it. There were barracks with food that disappeared immediately. Only some vegetables remained. It was not possible to care for everybody. Sick babies were taken to the *pouponniere*, the center for newborns. A Swiss nurse tried to save the babies by getting them mothers' milk. The babies were skin and bones, and they got some rice in the milk.
- 27:42 The French health service worked very badly.
- 28:05 The situation got worse in the summer, with the heat and the flies. People died like flies, from intestinal or digestive diseases.
- 28:42 There were Spanish barracks. The gypsy families stayed together—they were all miserable, she never saw any animosities among the groups.
- 29:20 There were great differences in survival mentality. The Spaniards managed much better. Many of the Jews were from northern Germany, and were used to a higher standard of living, and had no hope. The Spaniards always hoped to get back to Spain.
- 30:20 There was a young Jew who brought his violin to the barracks, and a very old Jew who played on his violin. She has a painting of that man. He died in the camp.
- 30:50 The prisoners were very isolated, they had no radio, no newspaper, they were very cut off. The Spaniards had a guitar, they danced and sang for Chanukah or Christmas, and they all sang together.
- 31:60 She grew up as a Catholic, but in Switzerland she became a Protestant. It was not important to her, she had her own religion that helped her a lot.
- 32:40 The camp was emptied, the Jews were all gone. A German officer commission visited the camp to see what the situation was. She had 25 helpers, some of them Jewish, one was a Jewish doctor, Dr. Schwammer (phonetic?) Friedel managed to save a barrack full of food and wood that was very precious. She was able to contact the Quakers in Perpignan, who sent a truck that moved all the supplies to Aisne. They packed all during two nights to save the food.
- 34:49 In the end, two Swiss nurses remained and with the last truck, she went to the railroad station in Rivesaltes. She noticed a Jewish woman hiding in a corner. She wanted to be left there, hidden, she survived. Friedel had to wait in Rivesaltes for a week until the railroad car could be organized to take all the food to Toulouse to the central office. She went along to Toulouse.

- 35:42 She stayed in the castle of Aisne and helped until she heard that there was a need for a director of a refugee home in Chambon. She worked there until the end of 1944.
- 36:09 Her (future) husband established one home there, then added another, then added an agricultural course and a carpentry school. In every house, there was a floor for Jewish children. In the last house, a Swiss woman who was in charge could not manage the task, so they wanted Friedel to take over.
- There were 55 children. One had a bad conscience when one lived in a house and remembered the people whom one had just left. She could not forget the woman who called out to her from the train: "Sister Friedel, don't forget us!"
- 38:13 She felt like a mother, but she had so little time. The children needed so little. One could sew 30 aprons for the children. With a new apron, the children could forget all the misery.
- 38:42 One always wondered where all the people were with whom one had worked. It was important for the mothers to be able to talk.
- 39:16 There were mainly French children who came for three months to be properly fed. But the permanent residents were all German Jewish children, and they learned French quickly. There were also Jewish workers from the camps. Chambon was a zone for Jewish refugees.
- 41:24 In Rivesaltes, she had not been afraid. In Chambon, she was uncomfortable. They had a bad system. The children were sent into the woods (when the police came to check). She was always scared that they would be found.
- 42:00 She married in 1942 (note that the interviewee later states she was in Chambon from January 1943 to the end of 1944, but she met future husband in Chambon). One always feared for one's people; one was never afraid for oneself.
- 44:00 In Chambon, one constantly made false papers.
- 44:59 In every house, there was one Swiss worker. From the end of 1943 to the end of 1944, things were completely different. Working in the homes was totally different from the work in the camp. She left because she was expecting her first child.
- 42:47 In Chambon, when the gendarmes were coming to inspect the premises, it was usually 3 A.M., and it was very scary. The children had been sent into the woods because they had a Morse code system that warned them in advance. She was never intimidated by the Germans, although one never knew what would happen.
- 43:25 The Mayor of Chambon handed out many false papers.

- 44:12 Her husband has an aquarelle painting. She could not paint any more because she had to do all the work in the house. There was one Swiss teacher in every house, and some houses also had a young Swiss assistant.
- 45:24 In the church, they celebrated Christmas and Chanukah.
- 45:54 She was in Chambon from January 1943 to the end of 1944. (note: see previous note, married in 1942 the man she met in Chambon) The war was ending, they knew about the American landing in Normandy, and then they were completely cut off for three months.
- 46:40 There were no travel possibilities. The children were still in Chambon. A substitute came when Friedel left. Eventually, 1,200 children from various homes went to Paris with her husband.
- 47:31 She did not work with the Maquis, the Resistance, but she knew who they were. She worked with the local Pastor (André) Trocmé in a home for wounded German soldiers.
- 48:56 In Lyon, Germans were still shooting the refugees.
- 49:20 All of them went into the woods. Chambon was declared an open city that the Germans did not enter.
- 50:51 Trocmé was a wonderful man: open, brave, the soul of the village, radiated strength, and was sent away from the village.
- 51:00 She was upset that Jewish mothers and children were refused entry into Switzerland. People told her that she was not responsible for the deportation; 850 people were in each transport.
- 54:22 The government closed the border. That was a horrible thing for her to contemplate.
- 55:00 They sang a lot -- Spanish, German, French songs -- it was easy to make the children happy, it took so little.
- 56:00 She started a school, but it was so difficult to get anything going.
- 58:52 She left with 50 children and headed to Berash (?). She knew somebody in Berash, and had been able to save a Jewish girl by sending her to Berash. The girl was a typhus carrier, and they were very angry at Friedel for sending them a typhus carrier.
- 59: She met her husband at the railroad station in Berash. They had to wait for two years to get a French visa.

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