

United States Holocaust Memorial Museum

**Interview with Frank Meissner
December 1, 1989
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PREFACE

The following oral history testimony is the result of a videotaped interview with Frank Meissner, conducted by Linda Kuzmack on December 1, 1989 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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FRANK MEISSNER
December 1, 1989

Q: Could you tell me your name please?

A: Frank Meissner, M - E - I - S - S - N - E - R.

Q: Where were you born?

A: In uh a little town of Trest, T - R - E - S - T. In Germany, it's called Trich. And it was a uh Jewish community that has been around for something like two or three hundred years.

Q: In what country?

A: In Czechoslovakia. And uh the town is exactly half way between Prague and Vienna. And it used to be a very important Jewish community. The way it was in uh Central Europe that uh Jews were mostly in the rural areas, and as the industrialization of Czechoslovakia, of Bohemia and Moravia, took place uh more and more opportunities uh started uh (cough) bringing about uh opportunities outside the rural areas and so gradually uh the real people with the guts would, leaved the little town and go to bigger cities in uh Prague or Vienna or Berlin. Some of them even would go abroad or to the United States.

Q: Let's talk about Frank Meissner though, and Frank Meissner's town.

A: Well, this was my town.

Q: Tell us about uh Trest? Tell us about your family first.

A: Well, in the first place uh the city was, has had a population of five thousand for years and years and years and it still does. And uh the community from its highest uh the Jewish community has dwindled gradually from something like four hundred to about uh seventy hundred (ph) in 1938. And our family has always been one of the important families in town and has almost looked like uh generation after generation; and the Meissners would be uh presidents of the congregation. Three or four generations that I know of - it's almost as if uh some couldn't avoid this opportunity and uh my dad was a uh industrialist that uh had a factory for making uh shoes, wooden shoes. And then when uh leather shoes became uh the thing to do he had to close down the factory and became in uh furniture. So uh my mother and father worked full time in the factory and I had a _____ whatever you called it, German uh lady that would take care of me, and my brother-in-law. I had a brother-in-law that was three years older by the name of Leo. So uh this lady uh took care of me till uh 1929.

Q: How old were you in 1929?

A: Well, I was born in 1923. I was six. I was just about ready to go to grade, uh to grade school

and uh the furniture factory went bust during the financial troubles. So uh we could no longer have uh anybody take care of me, and both my father and mother worked together. My mother worked as a uh secretary, working for my, for her brother that had a machine factory, and Dad couldn't uh get himself a new job, and so he became what is now-a-days called a uh househusband, I presume. Which was at that time very unusual. And uh because of the town was uh small we didn't have a high school, so when I was uh ten or eleven I had to go to the next town which had a high school. I would uh stay with a family during the weekend and come home, uh during the week, and come home during the weekend. And I wasn't a very good student. I was in fact a lousy student. I had problems all time and uh...with teachers and low grades and my father had to go to talk to the teachers to see what they could do and I never flunked completely...and just barely going from grade to grade. And at one point in 1930 ... '37, the decision was to be made whether I was going to go on to senior high school and the decision was that I would said Dad. And I said and I wouldn't. So he said you have to. So I said uh, I'll show you. Czechoslovakia at that time uh if one went or flunked one subject in the curriculum, you had to go a whole year around and so I said I'll show you and within two or three months I flunked out of Latin. And that was in 1937. And at that time I uh, it has already has become fashionable to uh let smart kids, teenagers to learn something with their hands because chances were that one would leave the country. So I went to work as an apprentice in my uncle's uh machine factory and uh then this uh _____ possibility came about.

Q: Can we hold it for a minute? Because this is a good place, I think, to ask about what it was like as a Jew in Trest. What was it like growing up as a Jew, particularly since your family was as prominent as it was?

A: Obviously in a little town like this uh you uh couldn't uh get away from being Jew, because everybody knew everybody else, whereas in bigger cities you could uh go pass by. So obviously in uh grade school I got beaten up and had all sorts of problems because I was Jewish. And uh we uh lived across the street from the temple and by that time uh the congregation was so small that we had to have uh mobilized everybody for the ____ group every morning. So uh I was mobilized and of course getting up at six o'clock in the morning was not exactly what particularly I was interested in. But my grandfather, my mother's father, used to live with us. He was a widower, a guy with lots of uh sense of humor and so he made it easier for me to make it easier to go to the synagogue in the morning. But five crowns (ph) a week kind of on the side - that was at that time quite a bit of money. Uh . . .

Q: Was your family very religious?

A: Well, I mean at that time Czechoslovakia had mostly religious. There was nothing in these uh little villages. There was nothing except uh highly kosher and things like that. Uh and obviously being a kid of my father who was the congregation president, we had to at least show that we behaved properly. And uh the congregation was very small and very together. And uh since most of the people from our town already had been the first generation that have left the town and for instance in Vienna, there was a _____ it is called, of Trest

which had at that time more Jews, two hundred, than the city of the origin. Just like uh the U.S. has more Irish than Irish has in its uh state. And so people were always very loyal to the place where they came from and in my, since my dad was president of the congregation, all of them would come and visit. And he also would be uh paying out uh I don't know what it is called - uh there was a great deal of loyalty to the uh young and old poor people that came from the eastern provinces and my dad had to help them, so we uh had quite a bit of both the western and eastern uh Jewish. By uh by our standards we were already the western Jews and there was always quite a bit of looking down on the eastern - the same thing that happened between the German in this country and the Russian - I mean every major congregation in the U.S. had these frictions. So that's uh basically the town.

Q: OK. So as a young man then, you decided that high school was not for you. You flunked Latin. Uh and you became an apprentice. Tell us about being an apprentice with _____ and what was it like?

A: Well, in - I was an apprentice in the lathe, uh metal lathe uh proposition and ...

Q: I don't understand.

A: Lathe.

Q: Oh, a lathe.

A: And uh at that time the apprentices of course were taking care of everybody else and with coffee and what have you and cleaning the uh shop on Saturday afternoons. So one didn't learn a hell of a lot. But there was one week in uh uh when one went to a uh school that by law one has to go and he taught all sorts of uh drafting and kind of a uh vocational proposition so that was nice. On Thursdays one could be away from the factory and uh learn something. Uh the factory had uh produced manufacture of equipment for uh bakeries and uh meat proposition - that was a very specialized factory. And the factory still exists. No longer in this machinery but now they make agriculture machinery. And last time we were there in Christmas it was a terrible mess. But, one at least saw that it existed.

Q: OK. So you were an apprentice, and what did you do next? What did you decide to do at this point?

A: Well, then this uh opportunity came up with the _____ so I went off to Prague for a little . . .

Q: Back up. Tell us what a HaSharah (ph) was in your town and how it worked.

A: There was no, there was no HaSharah in our town but uh we were put together in Prague to uh uh be uh prepared for going abroad. So we went for three or four months a school, a little school in Prague.

Q: How did you become interested in this?

A: Because I was always a uh Youth Aliyah, a Zionist, youth Zionist. Uh that was the only thing that I was interested in high school.

Q: Was there a large group of young Zionists in this school?

A: Well there were maybe thirty or forty of them in the town where I went to school and to high school.

Q: Can you describe what you did as a group, Zionists ...?

A: Well it was just like uh like uh a youth group would. And uh would go out on Saturdays and Sundays, and going out in to nature. And uh I learned uh Hebrew and knew about Palestine. My dad was a very uh important Zionist, so it came natural. Except uh I was the only one that did something about it. My uh uh mother had uh, we had several opportunities to go to Palestine but my mother just couldn't to get away uh from the the whole family and in uh - well, it was this way. I mean it was a major decision just like any other decision that uh American Jews that came from Poland or from Russia - some of them took and some of them didn't take an opportunity. And my mother has uh always going to the uh going to the cemetery. Very important. And when it came down to the uh major decision it was always she couldn't get away from the cemetery. And my brother-in-law (ph) was a electric engineer and in 1938 he was a real good boy, always a good boy. That was one of my problems that I, my dad always said why can't you be uh like your brother-in-law. I told him very simple, because I am not my brother. But he was, uh he got a job in Anssuan in electricity in Egypt under the English and uh he could have gotten a good job and good uh salary and mother would never had anything with it. I mean they just said _____ impossible to be that way, that long away from us. And my brother-in-law was the good boy so he stayed.

Q: This is your brother-in-law?

A: My brother, my brother, right. He was three years older. And so he didn't take the opportunity uh opportunity and uh eventually went to Auschwitz with the whole family. So there were always opportunities to get away in time which was not taken, opportunity was not utilized. I was the only one because I was the bad boy and uh I couldn't care less what my parents said.

Q: So you went to Prague?

A: I went to Prague for three or four months and then they uh uh helped us to develop a little bit uh kind of a uh farm proposition, learn some Hebrew and the basic idea was to go eventually to Denmark for several months, learn agriculture on uh farms, on individual farms, and then uh whenever the opportunity came to go to Palestine. So I lived on uh several agricultural

farms in Denmark . . .

Q: OK. Before we get to Denmark, uh can you describe what it was like for you in in Prague? What was the city like and what year are we talking about?

A: Well, I was staying with my uncle for six months, and we were just, there was sort of a uh vocational school basically and uh there were about uh fifty, sixty of us and all of them were then became part of the possible uh Alyah because there were always some people that had to be made uh prepared. In my case it was relatively easy because I used to work on my grandfather's farm but uh for most other kids that came from cities uh it was a little difficult because during the summer we were we were put out on the farms in Czechoslovakia. Just uh the same thing that we did in Denmark.

Q: OK. Let's talk about that. Uh you're in Prague. When did you decide, when did you go to Denmark and what was ...?

A: It's wasn't my decision. (OK. Tell me what happened?) By the time I was in this uh in this uh group of uh kids, it was just a question of when we could uh be uh exported to Denmark. By that time it was not uh my decision any more. I could of course have said in the last minute that I don't want to go but uh in October 1939, you just uh obviously you would immediately grab the opportunity.

Q: What was October 1939 like in Prague?

A: Nothing. By that time the World War II just started about two weeks I think it was, in September something. And things were, on the surface things were relatively normal. Of course uh the Jews were running around wondering how they could get out of the place. By that time of course uh for many of them it was too late. So the opportunity when grabbed. I mean it has never even occurred to me that I uh, that there was any alternative because that was uh a real opportunity to get away from my family. And since they were Zionists but didn't do much about it, I was the only one that did. As it turned out, I never eventually went to visit them (ph).

Q: OK. So it's October 1939. What did your group do?

A: Well they just put us together on the on, put us together, about thirty of us and uh we went by train from uh Prague to Berlin to Weinmunde on the on the German coast and went up to Denmark. It took about twenty-four hours. And of course we didn't have a clue where we would end up. We were taken care of for two days of this group of uh the International League for whatever you know. And uh then they distributed us to different farms, both in un Zealand (ph) and the main island and on other parts of Denmark.

Q: Who was in the group? You talk about distributing ...

A: Just people like me.

Q: From all over Europe?

A: No, this was in Prague. I mean uh actually ours was basically of young people from Austria, Czechoslovakia and Germany and this happened to be a group that on October 10 or something like this went from Prague to Copenhagen. And then there were other groups from Austria, from Germany, for all together about six hundred of these kids what uh over several years - we were the last ones. They were uh the Hehalutz people, that the older ones that already started ...to come to Denmark in about middle 1930'. And we were basically the last one and the kids were very young kids. I was 16, I was the oldest, they were kids like from 14 to 16.

Q: So you landed in Denmark where did you go, where you have take...

A: I went to a little place then on the island south of Copenhagen in a uh very small uh Danish farm, very uh very uh missionaries...

Q: I'm sorry?

A: Missionaries. And it was a small farm, and I didn't understand anything. They didn't understand anything. It was cold and I had to uh go into the fields in October and uh harvest sugar beets and things like that and for the first week it was pretty tough because still Sunday uh when they took me to the uh see the Danish minister, a Lutheran minister which spoke uh German, I really didn't have any way of uh communicate with them. But there were about uh ten or fifteen people that were in that region, with a bicycle get together, and we had a uh, a teacher who would go around and keep us together, so we had about one day a week to get together. So...

Q: Did the people on the farm, uh the owners of the farm, uh did they know you were Jewish?

A: Of course. I mean that was the whole proposition. And uh I on the second farm that I went to I really became part of the family and uh and the boy and the girl really became my brothers and sisters.

Q: Tell me about that farm? What were the people's names? What was the family like?

A: Well, of course uh being Danes their name was Nielsen (ph) though you couldn't tell from anybody else. And it was uh, for me it was a uh small farm, with very diversified agriculture - mostly uh dairy farming and pigs. This used to be uh the Danish export of cheese and uh butter and bacon. And uh in the good old days before World War II, they were bringing in feed from abroad, mostly from the United States, and by that time it was cut off, so then the question was how to survive during World War II because most of the Danes were not very enthusiastic about about switching exports from England which was now impossible, to feed

the Germans. So was difficult.

Q: The family's were, was named Nielsen (ph) and you said you were very close to them. What kind of things did you do with them?

A: Well, everything that they did. I mean uh working, whatever needed to be done on the farm, and of course they had small uh groups at that time uh - ten miles was a long ways and so there would be a community get-together around the church and they would have uh invite uh neighbors for dinner, things like that. And I was always part of it. As any kid, part of the family.

Q: Were you, can you - were you on this farm when the Germans invaded Denmark?

A: Yes.

Q: Can you describe the invasion?

A: Very easy. They had a uh, one had uh very primitive uh toilet actually above uh the manure behind the, in the cows and I was sitting there in the morning and, and all of a sudden I hear all those, all those airplanes wondering what the hell was that. That's how the Germans invaded Denmark. And the question was what do we do, and the answer from our group in Copenhagen that took care of us said uh just uh leave alone. Just uh don't uh . . .

Q: Let's hold and stop the tape please. (Technical conversation.)

End of Tape #1

Tape #2

Q: Can you describe the effect of the invasion on a Denmark farm?

A: I even never saw a German soldier. In '41, I went to a vocational school in Denmark. They had uh four or five months uh during the off-season when they would put, they would put together teach young kids about vocational agriculture during uh when the snow was on the ground and they could uh utilize their time in going to school. And the schools were very small, about sixty, seventy sch... uh seventy youngsters and I got scholarship and uh then had to uh work after the six months working on the uh agriculture school. They had that agriculture school, they had that agriculture school they had a farm and so I became the guy to take care of uh the hogs and the cows. It was of the few jobs in my life which I hated because uh I had to do it because I had to pay off for my uh school and there was no way of getting away from it. It was lots of work so in Denmark at that time one had to have a vocational school of this sort as a uh resident for turning up for the agriculture school. It was part of the uh requirement so I had to have this vocational school and uh the director of the school had to give me a uh a uh a good uh (pause) well, he had to certify that I was at the school, that I made OK and he just had me because I just had this uh, had to have this certificate. So that was in uh '42, late '42, early '43 and in uh the middle of 1943 I finally ended up starting in Agriculture College at the University of Copenhagen. I three years B.S. in Agronomy and uh it was in October, September, October '43 when uh I uh was a uh freshman and one day I got a call, not I but the President of the University got a call in the morning telling me that he should tell me that the Gestapo was uh on my tail and uh my landlady said I should never come back home again. That was at the time when uh the Germans have gotten after the Jews. Uh the Germans did it differently from what they have done in Central Europe and Germany where they uh got the Jews together in the center, in the center and then they would put the Jews together before they were to export them to concentration camps. Uh in Denmark, they couldn't get away with it because the Danes would object to it so the trick that the Germans did is uh picked the people at home so that one wouldn't see anything in front of the rest of the uh population. It just so happened that uh there was a German naval attache at the uh German uh ambassador, embassy in Copenhagen and he was friendly, knowing what uh was happening and let the Danish uh Prime Minister know what the Germans had in mind and that was on uh Yom Kippur and uh the Prime Minister let the Danish chief rabbi tell the people at Yom Kippur that go and tell them then to disappear because if they will be at home, the Germans will pick them up. So most of the people, the seven million, seven thousand people, the Danish uh Jews, were disappeared and the underground got them to Sweden. I think only about five hundred or so got uh went to Theresienstadt, most of them from our group because our group, uh we went, they distribute ____ the Danish congregation so we really didn't know what was happening. And uh so then I got this uh this uh uh the uh my lady where I used to stay called Copenhagen agriculture school and asked the President to let me know that I shouldn't get back home again because the Gestapo pick me up. So that was a chemistry class of a uh ... and the big plays where all the first-year students were taking Chemistry I, in this big theatre and all of a sudden the janitor comes to the President of the University who happened to be a teacher of chemistry

and tell him something and the President called me by name and I came from this theater, took about a half a minute uh wondering what the hell did I do now. And so he said your landlady called, and don't come ever back again. So I happened to, about two or three blocks from the university where a uh Danish uh uh Lutheran reverend whose uh whose uh young boy was a very close friend of mine, and so I went to the church and said what do I do now. So he uh made a couple phone calls and said uh everything is fine. Take your bicycle, drive uh south of uh a little fishing village south of the international headquarters of Copenhagen and a lady will take care of you. And uh by that evening I was in uh Sweden.

Q: Where?

A: In Sweden. That's how easy it was.

Q: Describe that trip. You were on your bike. Where did you go?

A: Well, I left the bike with the lady and she took me uh at night uh to the little fishing uh port and there was a tiny little boat for thirteen, there were thirteen people of us and they just took us over to uh to uh Malmö and took about an hour and a half and it was October - very rough seas. It was lots of people left there outside out, because the sea was very rough, and that was it. So by that time the Swedes already had uh uh prepared uh the need for putting the people together to uh take care of them.

Q: What, as you were on your bike going to to meet this lady, what were you thinking? What were you ...?

A: Not very much. All I did is took my chemistry books - that's the only thing that I had and I didn't have a clue what was happening. And on the several days and months and years after I have found out what really was happening, that the Danes have taken care of their Jews. And that I was one of them. And uh I still don't understand many of the things that happened. Everybody has his own stories, uh explanations, interpretation, and so uh by that time the Swedes already had their organization for uh taking care of the Danes and uh taking uh underground has taken about two or three months to get all the Jews across to Sweden and I was one of the earlier ones.

Q: What happened to you? What did you do when you landed in Sweden?

A: Nothing. There was a old grade school where they put the people up and uh I went to see, the same evening I went to see uh uh "Gone With The Wind." And then I have read that book and was fantastic. And then a couple days after (cough) came some recruiter from some uh sugar factories that needed people to harvest uh sugar beets and seemed like uh the work was pretty tough but they paid well so with a buddy of mine we went and signed or signed up and uh worked for about three weeks and then my buddy had a brilliant idea. Said look, since we, since we are uh students from the Agriculture College in Copenhagen why don't we offer our services to the Agriculture College in Upsala (ph) in Sweden where the agri... agi school was

uh located. I thought it was a idiotic idea. Who needed us? But I thought OK, it was worth ten cents and low and behold they said come on over. So that's how we looked or came eventually back to the University of Upsala and that I thought was really a good luck.

Q: What did you do there? What was your job?

A: Oh, I was uh working in a uh in a uh lab. (Pause - technical conversation.) So I was uh working in a uh feed (ph) lab. But that's OK. Was and at that time it was much easier to send uh uh food packages to my family. By that time they already were in Theresienstadt.

Q: OK. Let's pause here. You're talking about your family. Had you been hearing from them all these years?

A: Yes, every week I had a letter about what they were doing.

Q: Tell us what was happening to them.

A: Well, obviously uh the seven uh Jewish people in the in Trest gradually uh had their jobs uh - they couldn't continue them. Finally they uh took them and concentrated them from fifteen or so houses into little groups where the family would be able only to have uh two or three uh hou... places to get together. And every week or month there would be additional squeezing and uh people would have to give their houses away and uh uh gradually would uh have to go to uh Theresienstadt and take a couple of thirty (ph) uh kilos (ph) that they could take along with them, and then they would be in Theresienstadt for uh about a year and that in October or September 1944 I would, I found out that they went to Auschwitz and that's the last I ever heard from my entire family. My uh grandfather and my uh mother's brother, my brother and his uh new uh he got married - the whole family just disappeared. That was about uh October '44. So after (cough) from England, uh from uh Sweden I eventually ended up in the Czech exile government uh Army.

Q: How did that ____? How did that happen? This is October '44. You're...

A: It was uh, I was uh, the exile government said uh look, if you want a Czech uh passport, you have to volunteer for the government uh exile army in England. So I thought, well, how will they ever get me there, and it just so happened that they tried out at that time a possibility of uh getting some of the volunteers from Sweden to England, with some uh BOAC, uh British Overseas Airline, and so uh they tried and tried and tried, thirteen times after a uh getting to the un airport in Stockholm and never, never, never was there an opportunity to try this uh trick, and so I used to leave my luggage in Copen... uh in Stockholm because I never believed they would take us over. The thirteenth time they finally did. That's how I got to England in 19 uh September I guess 1944.

Q: What did you do when you landed in England?

A: Oh they uh went into some castle in Scotland. I didn't ever know where it was. So they debriefed us and then I went to the Czech Army and . . .

Q: Where?

A: Pardon?

Q: Where did they have the Czech army training?

A: They had it uh near London. South end on the sea. And then after a little while they wanted uh uh the Royal Air Force needed some people that could speak English and Czech so I volunteered for that and for about uh over a year or year and a half I was in the Royal Air Force, in the Czech uh part of the Royal Air Force and I since I didn't, already at that time I had problems with my eyes. The only thing I was good enough for was weather forecasting and they put someplace up in northern Scotland, about thirty or forty miles north of Inverness, and at that time by sheer chance and uh a captain that uh was in charge of uh education on the (cough) on the base made it possible for me to finish my my uh high school by writing or doing it by uh writing . . .

Q: I'm sorry. I don't understand.

A: The Czech uh school would uh, or the Czech exile government had a uh high school for the kids uh that uh belonged to the uh Czech uh ministers of the government, and uh so the captain arranged for me to uh do uh my communication long-distance and uh so eventually I got my high school degree. So uh that made it possible for me after World War II to to go back to the university. So then uh when the war was over in Central Europe in May 1945 I uh went back to Prague looking for my parents. By that time I thought maybe it would have been long enough time to, for them to come back, but they were not and uh a lady that was in uh in uh the mail room in the little city was a friend of our family's and she wrote to me and says, your folks have not come back and we have very small chances that they might be. So that was in uh May or June 1945. So that's the end of the story.

Q: What did you do at that point?

A: Well, I was uh, at that time I was in the Air Force, and uh decided there was no purpose for me to go back to Czechoslovakia. So I required to get to be uh taken (technical conversation), so I was demobilized in Copenhagen instead of in Prague, and so I was through in January '46 and immediately started going back to the University of uh agriculture, the University of Copenhagen and then the Danes of course took care of me just as if I were a Dane, and I got uh scholarship and all sorts of things. And then uh in part uh during the undergraduate work I uh worked as a uh uh a foreign correspondent to some Czech newspapers and did some work for the Ministry of Agriculture in Prague. Enough to make a little extra. And so I went

back in 1948 when I graduated from Copenhagen and the Communists came in.¹ I went back to Copenhagen and then eventually came to the United States.

Q: Mr. Meissner, thank you very much. We appreciate your coming.

A: Thank you.

Conclusion of Interview

¹ In Prague.