

United States Holocaust Memorial Museum

**Interview with Sol Schindel
April 9, 1991
RG-50.031*0065**

PREFACE

The following oral history testimony is the result of a videotaped interview with Sol Schindel, conducted on April 9, 1991 on behalf of the United States Holocaust Memorial Museum. The interview 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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SOL SCHINDEL

April 9, 1991

Q: The desecration?

IW: The house we had belonged to ever since we were children. We went back to the apartment and told my parents what we had seen. We were horrified.

Q: You lived on the sixth floor, right? And what did you see?

IW: We saw SS men knocking on our door.

Q: They were in uniform?

IW: No, I shouldn't say that, they were not all in uniform. They had as I recall hired/used convicts from neighboring towns to do the demolition, so it was a combination of the both, they just let them loose giving them hammers and tools, and whatever else, and hacked everything to pieces.

Q: And then you said...

IW: Well we had the stores gone, so we had no income in that direction anymore. We had to supplement our income besides the rent which we took in from the building, we had a nice size apartment. There were also Jewish refugees streaming into the town from all neighboring small towns. And so we decided to use two of the rooms that we weren't using, like the dining room and another room and we sold the furniture and made extra bedrooms, and we took in extra refugees from these towns that stayed...away from us...

Q: In 1938 you were 12 years of age, right?

IW: Yes.

Q: Did it ever occur to you that there could possibly be any other...or specifically...

IW: Not originally, I didn't see anything I just didn't see anything.

Q: Did you fantasize about it?

IW: Perhaps I fantasized, but it was something that was unavailable just didn't exist except for the people who could get out.

IW: As I said, we were to be collected at the railway station. We had to surrender our keys. There was a heap of nothing but keys all keys to the apartments they had taken. They had sealed our apartment off as we left. We took what we could carry. And on the train we were guessing where they were going to take us: To the east would mean Dachau. If it goes to any other

direction we didn't know where. And as it headed down south-west from Anheim we came to the French-German border where the train stopped. We were each allowed 100 marks per person.

(BREAK IN TAPE)

IW:continued on in different parts of Spain and Portugal until we reached the Portuguese Border. There we were Put on buses to Lisbon. In Lisbon, we were housed approximately a week before the transport to the United States.

Q: In light of what you said earlier about the hopelessness, the fact that you were on a train going someplace, did that sense of hopelessness seem to change?

IW: Yes, for the first time I really believed that

(BREAK IN TAPE)

IW: Yes I am on the list here, and we all had to wear an I.D. tag on the boat, and on the way over and I was No. 82. I also still have the ID. Here is my name and the list of children. Of course it was my maiden name. I'll show you my tag: No. 82, Silberman Hannenoah and then my birth day, June 221926 from Reichstag concentration camp, father and mother in Germany. That's a misprint, they were not in Germany, they were in Reichstag. Then it says, "Stranded in Camp." It should read, father and mother came from Germany, stranded in camp. In closing I would like to show you the tag I had to wear when I to be afraid of anything. Everybody said we are going to work on a farm, we are going to work on a farm. And I as a little boy had different thoughts. I didn't really like the rumors that I was hearing, but what could I do, if we go, we go. Still, We saw a lot of German SS at the time...

(BREAK IN TAPE)

IM: So he hit me over the head with some kind of rubber hose and I almost passed out, but I managed to carry on, and I saw my sisters then, I didn't see my mother, but I saw my sisters, and so I told my father I saw my sisters. Then they marched us into a barrack. It was a regular barrack. It was not Auschwitz, it was Birkenau. There were two camps, Auschwitz and Birkenau. Then we had already met all the haftlinge. The first guy I met: we wanted to know a little information, where he was from, how long he had been here etc. This was the first solid information we got about what was going on. I was constantly looking for a guy who told me I was 18, I somehow wanted to see him again. And then I saw a guy who looked a little bit like him but it didn't turn out to be, I never saw this guy again. I walked up to him and said to him "What is going on here?" "You see this striped uniform? The 50% who have this striped uniform have a chance at 13:58 surviving." "And the other 50%?" "Phew, gone." He said " I have already been here two years. These guys already knew the rules. Other people had only been there a short time. Some 2 or 3 or 5 days. But this was the most miserable of places...

(BREAK IN TAPE)

They were on rails pushed by people, which they keeled over, and I could see them left and right filled with bodies, with people. I was there for about two weeks with my father. I had no appetite to eat they gave us a little warm potato peel and a little piece of bread. I couldn't eat even though my father wanted me to. I just observed, and all the time, I felt I couldn't speak to my father because I didn't want to hurt him. I was the oldest son, and I couldn't speak.

(BREAK IN TAPE)

Three weeks and the last one died because of the sudden shock from the extreme change in conditions.

(BREAK IN TAPE)

2W: We brought out different people, and they got out, they were able to get out, and I don't know what happened to them. Whether they survived or not.

Q: How old were you at the time?

2W: I was 16.

Q: The refugees had been able to flee the Germans, so they had no experience under them?

2W: Not all of them.

Q: So you had begun to hear personal experiences?

2W: Oh sure. They were fleeing the Germans before they had occupied the cities, so their experiences were just running away from them.

Q: If I understand you correctly, it was a period of hard times, but not of great anxiety?

2W: There was some anxiety because we didn't know what was going to happen. But look, when you are that age you cannot be too overly anxious. I don't think that 15 or 16 year old realized what the danger was. They just took it step by step. I don't think I had a sleepless night because I was worried about my future.

Q: The family conferences?

2W: They remained the same. And they were worried, discussing whether they should go into Russia. It was all talking. Nobody did anything. Then we came to the point when the war broke out, which was in 1941, the Germans started the fight with Russia and two days later they were in our town. I remember one incident when I walked out, it was day, and I was not afraid, I met some German soldiers patrolling the street where I live. He asked me who I was, and I said "Ein

Jude", and he said he felt sorry for me. That was my very first encounter with a German. And again by virtue of my looks, not looking Jewish, I was made supplier. On the scavenges, looking for food and stuff. I spent the first month looking to see if stores were open, looking for bread.

Q: What did the Germans do?

2W: The started off by gathering up all of the men. My uncle was taken, and his son, my cousin, was taken. They came to the house, not the Germans but the...

(BREAK IN TAPE)

...I got there and Simas Mabirus was one of those open homes that took in stray people. She had a house full of people over.

Q: But you didn't know this, and wandered straight in there?

2W: I didn't know at all. But they were the ones that practically took everybody in, whoever that came to the city. They took you in, or if they were overflowing, they arranged it so that another family would take you in. And they took me in. The family consisted of a mother, father and a brother. One brother lived far away in another city, and was already married. He ran away to Russia. I stayed with them for quite a while.

Q: We are now at the end of 1945?

2W: We are at the end of 1945.

Q: How big a town was this?

2W: Oh, a very small town. One street. A village in a forest. The whole community could have got up and walked into the forest and saved themselves. There were no Germans, the few policemen in the town were all people we knew and didn't bother us.

Q: Did the people in the town know what was going on in the outer cities?

2W: No, they had no idea.

(BREAK IN TAPE)

Q: But there was a some anxiety?

2W: Sure, there was a lot of anxiety, but a lot of anger more so than anxiety, because here we are fighting together, but you (the Polish) still hate us. The Polish were killing Jews just as much as the Germans were. In fact one of the girls who was caught by a group of the Polish party while on a mission was tortured.

Q: One of the girls from your group?

2W: Yes my group. Where were we?

Q: Russian deserters taking over?

2W: Then it was the spring of 1944, and we were liberated, and our part was taken over by the Russians.

(BREAK IN TAPE)

IM: "Jahvol," that's me. So there was a German master standing there pointing at me saying "This is the guy." He said I was goofing around. So he pulled me out and gave me twenty-five lashes with a metal filled rubber house. That was also a time when I felt "This is it," because after the tenth one I didn't feel anything anymore.

Q: Was it on your back?

IM: No, on my behind. But I managed to survive. Another close call that we had in Melk was a bombing raid on a Jewish fast day. We were on the day shift at the time and we heard bombs going off nearby, so we came back to camp.

Q: What month was that in?

IM: It was July 1944.

(BREAK IN TAPE)

IM: We were very lucky, because they gave us the chance to go to another camp, and probably another work detail. This is what was in the back of my mind.

(BREAK IN TAPE)

1M: Can you imagine the emotion and feeling when you could go through the gate, with a big sign "Arbeit macht das Lieber," without anyone pointing a gun at your back. Some of us who really had the strength to roam around went wild, we went into the German barracks and we found guns. We were basically looking for food, but we found guns. The feeling of being able to walk around free without any guards. We stumbled across an Oberstundfeer of the camp who had probably several people for breakfast and lunch and dinner. We stumbled across him in the woods, wearing civilian clothing and carrying two suitcases, and we recognized him. And he knew who we were, we were still in the clothing (uniforms). We started drawing a gun on him saying, "Remember this is the guy who killed so many people," and one friend said "Take care of him, shoot him," and the other said "No you shoot him," and we argued back and forth for ten

minutes but no one really had the nerve to shoot him. So we took his suitcases and we picked him up and gave him to the American authorities, which either meant a short prison term or who knows what. We don't know whether he was liberated again or what, but we just couldn't do it.

Q: Nobody could shoot him?

IM: There were a few. Really the Russian prisoners were tougher, they took care of a few. But we really couldn't. And I really can't think today as I reflect back on it whether I should have or shouldn't have.

Q: You couldn't kill?

IM: And couldn't kill the murderer that we witnessed killing every day for the fun of it.

27:16 (BREAK IN TAPE)

Q: What sustained you in Melk?

IM: Basically what sustained me was hope, hope that there is war going on and this war can't go on forever and as long as I can survive somehow then I may come out of it. We came to Melk about 18 to 20 boys.

(BREAK IN TAPE)

3W: Target shooting at Jews. I remember, they tied a girlfriend of mine to a tree and target shot at her eyes just for amusement.

Q: Did they kill her?

3W: Sure.

Q: What else do you remember about the ghetto?

3W: I remember that we had as I mentioned the Judenrat, and one of the obligations of the Judenrat was to supply the Germans an allowance of workers everyday that they needed...

(BREAK IN TAPE)

3W: I was the only one that came through the transport with pictures and it was a very unusual situation to have been in.

Q: Out of this group, how many survived?

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3W: Out of that group of about 50 people, I am the only survivor. Out of my whole family, 76 people, only four people survived. One of the most trying moments was when I had to say goodbye to my mother and grandmother, and 30:05 brother. I remember this was the leader of our people the evening before we left, I said goodbye, I had to smuggle out in the morning from the ghetto.

Q: You made the decision?

3W: We had to go. I felt I wanted to join the underground.

Q: The Jewish underground?

3W: The Jewish underground in Cracow.

Q: So you one day decided that that is what you wanted to do?

3W: I had an Aryan look. I didn't look Jewish. For instance he had an Aryan look, but he had the misfortune of having one leg shorter than the other, so he would have been easily recognized. Even if he wanted to join, they didn't want him, because he would have been recognized. And anyone who looked definitely Jewish could not have joined because it was very hard to be disguised.

(BREAK IN TAPE)

3W: I was hidden. The first day my father hid me under the stairs with another 20 people. And the Germans rechecked to see that there weren't any people hiding at all, but they didn't find us, otherwise they would have shot us all. The second day my father was up the whole night making a hiding place up in the attic, and made a double 31:46 wall, and put feather beds and other things to disguise the smell of human beings. I hid there with ten other people, and my father said "I don't trust these Germans, if they are not going to have enough people, and there were 15,000 Jews in that town, and they are not going to have enough people, then they are going to cut off a whole wing. And sure enough, they cut off a whole wing, and then they took my father in the last day of the deportation.

(BREAK IN TAPE)

3W: I felt frightened, very much alone. I was as alone as everybody else was who were in the same shoes. I lived in Stajisk in a room with 500 women around me, and I felt good. Somehow this was a comfort to me.

Q: What was the importance of Stajisk to you?

33:15

3W: The importance of Stajinsk to me was that I got no contact with another Zionist group. In Piotcuf I was not living with people with my background. They behaved very well, and were very considerate. In fact, I have to say that when they rescued me they not only used my money, but they used their own rings. It was like they all got together and wanted to rescue me as a matter of principle.

(BREAK IN TAPE)

3W: ...An American P.O.W. working for him from a Polish background, and the next morning he came there and we were talking, and while we were sitting outside he expressed his fears that the camp would be liquidated before they come in and I didn't disclose that I was Jewish. She was so involved with the fight, "the enemy is coming," and the children were still praying for the welfare of Hitler and the winning of the war, when they knew that the Americans were outside their door. And she didn't give me anything to eat, and I slept with the pigs, and shared the potatoes which tasted very good to me. The next morning sitting on a hill with an American soldier outside the door I saw the American 5th army walk in and I was liberated. In the gymnasium, one of the languages I had learnt was English and so I could communicate a bit. They wanted me to be translator. And when the war ended, all of a sudden I realized what had happened. I already had a friend who had run away before me, and so I ran off after her to the ?triangle?. I went back to the Tikham camp hoping that maybe I would find her. And then I stood by a German family. Those American soldiers took over the administration of the whole Biern village.

(BREAK IN TAPE)

3W: I was just crazy about him, and he was crazy about me too. He could bring me into a store and buy me anything I wanted. I remember when he bought me high-heels when I was 12 years old. People in Europe just didn't do that sort of thing.

36:40

(BREAK IN TAPE)

2M: I was a stamp collector and I was going to visit a German officer to exchange stamps. "Exchange stamps on a day like this?" I don't know about a day like this, but all I know is that I have to visit this German officer, and I mentioned the name...

(BREAK IN TAPE)

2M: We came to the village, and suddenly there were police looking for a grandfather and a grandchild. I was sitting with the farmers who didn't recognize me as being Jewish. Suddenly there were some shots fired and they came across some other Jews who were hiding there. The farmers were afraid to hold me there, and I went into the field...

(BREAK IN TAPE)

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Q: You mean because you entered the army?

2M: Yes the fact that I entered the army, and that I made myself older (than I was) and that I knew German, I became a translator for them, I ?stymied them?, got away from them. But that was 1945, and at that time I was 15 years old.

Q: How did you get reunited with your father?

38:20

(BREAK IN TAPE)

4W: ...Out of the ghetto. And my husband asked if he could help us. He said he would like to find some Polish people who would maybe help us and take us in, but that was supposed to be for some big financial reward. We did not have any money, but we knew where some wag buried in the ghetto in Lublin. So these people were willing to help us out, and keep us for a little while.

(BREAK IN TAPE)

Q: How did it feel back in 1942-43? Did it feel like it was going to ever end?

4W: No it didn't. When we were in 1944 in a small town, first of all, we knew that the Russians were advancing. It was a fact, because they were in Warsaw. Then we knew it would be only a matter of weeks or months before the Russians would come. It was just a matter of surviving until the Russians would come. Now when the Russians came, they did not believe that everybody was Jewish, so we had to find a Russian who spoke...

(BREAK IN TAPE)

Q: When you came to the ?wagon? and you knocked down the door, and you saw your mother, what did your mother say when she saw you?

5W: She was shaking and she said something like "I am going to take you back home." I promised the officer that I would go with her...

(BREAK IN TAPE)

5W: And they would have classes on the holocaust, for the children of the Holocaust survivors. Myself I don't want to look back because I become very sick, if I see a movie. When I was in Washington I said to myself when we came to the United States, we came like immigrants: nobody paid any tribute, no one paid any recognition.

40:41 (BREAK IN TAPE)

3M: ...and they shot them right over there in the graves, and buried them there in the camp.

Q: Did someone tell you about that afterwards?

3M: Yes, some came back, and they told us what had happened. Nobody came back? When they liberated the camp, that was after six weeks, they took us back to the ghetto. When we came back to the ghetto, it was divided into two parts, the East and West. The East side used to go out to work...

(BREAK IN TAPE)

3M: So I am giving up, so I went up to the head of the camp the next day, a Jewish guy by the name Greber and I told him I couldn't work anymore, that I was sick. So there was a French doctor, and he told me I could stay a couple of days to get my rest, so when I came back to the Frei Greber told me I had to clean the bed, I couldn't even walk, my feet were swollen and everything. So I said "Greber, I cannot do it." So he beat me almost to death.

(BREAK IN TAPE)

Q: How much longer did you stay at the camp?

3M: I stayed there at the camp, and after that he took this picture of me, and he said "If you ever survive I will hold this for you." I was there about another 4 or 5 weeks, I was smuggling cigarettes and some other stock into the camp by myself. I got caught near the gate, and that time they didn't play around, it was a man by the name of Byretski...