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Box 1, CD 1

In this interview, Nina Ghilaș, born in 1931, describes a Jewish camp set in her village of Edineți during the World War – the village was situated in the Northern part of the country (this area is now part of the Republic of Moldova, or Ukraine; there are two towns with the same name in both countries though the one in the Republic of Moldova seems most likely). She talks of a local Jewish camp and of the burials she witnessed, and discusses how she and her family hid two Jewish families who managed to get out of the camp, and lastly, of the haste in which they were taken out of the village after a few weeks.

[01:] 00:31:20 – [01:] 31:39:12

Interviewer: Please tell us your name and surname.

GHILAȘ: Ghilaș, Nina Alexandru.

Interviewer: What year were you born?

GHILAȘ: In '31.

Interviewer: Where were you born?

GHILAȘ: In Volcineț (the village is situated near the border of Ukraine, a few kilometers northwest of E583, now in Herța County), in what used to be Briceni County.

Interviewer: When the war started in 1941, where were you?

GHILAȘ: I was in Edineți for many years; I live here now, my parents did during the war, and when the war started we were all here.

Interviewer: Where there any Jews in Edineți back then?

GHILAȘ: There were many Jews back then; a lot of Jews... streets full of them. Edineți was a pretty big town, and they mostly dealt with small businesses, little shops, one or the other. They were small businessmen, so yes there were a lot of Jews in Edineți.

Interviewer: Did you have any idea as to their fate was when World War II began?

*GHILAS:* When the war started, all of them were taken from their homes, all of them were sent away; the houses were deserted completely... the doors, the windows... no house was left inhabited. And those that did not make it out were gathered here, they surrounded a space here on the outskirts of the town, and because our house was one of the last, they opened the Jewish camp right across from us.

*Interviewer:* Can you tell us who gathered them?

*GHILAS:* Well... I did not see any Germans, I only saw Romanians. Afterwards there were Germans, they were bombing when the war started, they were bombing [*meaning they were shooting at houses*] if they did not see any icon in the window [*'icon' is used with the meaning of the Eastern Church: a representation of some sacred personage, as Christ or a saint or angel, painted usually on a wood surface and venerated itself as sacred*] they would shoot those looking outside. You were supposed to have an icon in the window meaning you were not Jewish so they would not shoot at the house.

*Interviewer:* Did you personally witness as they gathered the Jews?

*GHILAS:* No... the houses were empty... we were children, we would run through the town and see the empty houses; feathers all over the place, on the road, because peasants would come from the nearby villages and a sort-of pogrom started... what was left in the house, in the neighborhood, was mostly destroyed since the houses were empty. But it was incredible to watch, to go into town, to... Our father did not allow us to go anywhere, God forbid, we were afraid to go on the roads. I was pretty young...

*Interviewer:* And the peasants that came, what were they doing?

*GHILAS:* Well, they were peasants from the villages... mostly they were taking pillows, well... what they could find in the houses.

*Interviewer:* The houses were not locked?

*GHILAS:* No! All the doors were open; the windows were also open; the dogs would go everywhere, no. It was complete and total abandonment; all the houses were opened, doors slammed... how can I explain... everything was deserted! There was no one! They were looking for Jews, they... those that were looking and took them all. They took them and headed them this way and locked them in that enclosure...

*Interviewer:* But did you actually see when they were taken from their homes?

*GHILAS:* When they took them from their homes no... I saw them all gathered here though.

*Interviewer:* But you did not see when...?

*GHILAS:* I did not see how they took...we were young... just children...

Interviewer: You just saw the empty houses...?

GHILAS: The empty houses yes, when we would go out for something into town with our mom or dad, yes... they were empty, and the road looked laughable [*she means the road looked deplorable*], a lot of objects were thrown on the ground, it was like a pogrom... with all of them here, almost no one managed to escape. There was a sort of neutral town, Cernăuți, and they bought their freedom there—those that managed to get away, they were protected in Cernăuți, they managed to flee from there onward. But here, those that did not manage to escape... were taken and locked here.

Interviewer: I wanted to ask you some more about the town, when you said that you saw scattered objects all throughout the town...?

GHILAS: Different objects on the road, you know when a house left empty, when a person leaves the house in a hurry; everything is left scattered all over the place...

Interviewer: And you saw people actually carrying objects out from the houses?

GHILAS: The peasants would come out on the road, and I would look around as they came with satchels, bags, pillows...as they went on, the feathers would be left behind... they took little things.

Interviewer: Did you recognize any of them?

GHILAS: No, no I did not know any peasants...

Interviewer: But you did not see any person that you seemed to know? From those that were carrying...?

GHILAS: No, no I did not see anyone. Since they were peasants from the villages, how could I have known them?

Interviewer: And the people from the town... did they...?

GHILAS: The people from the town... let me tell you that the last house on the outskirts of town was OK but what they were doing in the center of the town only they could know. Some dragged stuff... maybe also the neighbors took stuff—who knows, since the houses were left deserted? Completely deserted, the windows broken, the doors open, everything was left open... everything was left broken.

Interviewer: And then you saw the concentration camp, right?

GHILAS: The camp, I saw it; it was surrounded with barbedwire and they were locked inside, people with infants, old people, all were taken there in a hurry, all carrying what they could hold in their hands at the moment. Most carried some baggage and they cried out for water and bread! They would take what they had on them, a ring or something, and would ask [to trade] for bread

or water but there was no way we could get closer. For example... there was that fence, there was the house on the corner, the one you passed by on your way, and there was the camp across the road from it.

*Interviewer:* What would you estimate was the distance between the house and the camp?

*GHILAS:* The length of the road. Only the length of the road. That was it, the length of the road. And they would cry out from there, since they knew my father, they would cry out to him, asking for water. We would wait for night to come... sometimes it happened that while the Romanians were on guard, one of those inside would run with the jug for water but the soldiers would shoot [*warning shots*] and they would retreat; it was impossible, almost, to get out. Well, very late at night though, crawling so that no one would see them; my mother would bake bread, one loaf after another... and they (people we knew) would come, and since we had been living here for over five years, everyone knew us... my father was a teacher and taught many of their kids; we had a good life, we had friends here, good neighbors... there were rich Jews here, doctors, rich merchants, there was one who had a soap factory, a store for different materials, and a shoe store; I know that was where our father bought our shoes. They would also let you buy on credit; they were really nice people.

*Interviewer:* Please tell us some more about the camp; if you can, more details.

*GHILAS:* Well, the camp, at night they would collect and store water; the wells were made with wood boards as rooftops and were not too deep... they [*the inmates*] would take all the water in the morning, and during the day the water would fill up again from the spring and in the evening they would go at it again... they would carry bread during the night also, as much as my mother could bake, but other than that they were devoid of any help, medical or otherwise.

*Interviewer:* But how many people would you say there were in the camp?

*GHILAS:* Oh, there were a lot, a lot of people. Those that died were buried... well, the camp went around a corner; this side was near the road having the quarters of the gendarmes to the back in the corner, and over the corner there was a road leading to the forest, as our field of crops was close, so when we would go towards the forest, on the corner, it was there they [*the inmates*] had their cemetery, where they would always bury the dead covered in cloth...

*Interviewer:* Did you see...?

*GHILAS:* I saw them covered in the cloth, in white linen, or whatever it was...

*Interviewer:* How many times did you see them?

*GHILAS:* Well, who knows...? I saw people...

*Interviewer:* Well, make an approximation...

*GHILAS:* Approximately... I saw that they buried people, they would always bury someone.

*Interviewer:* How many times did you pass by and see them burying people?

*GHILAS:* We would be walking, walking towards the cornfields or in the forest looking for firewood, and we would see as they buried the inmates there; the gendarmes would keep guard and they would dig...

*Interviewer:* But did you see them once, twice or...?

*GHILAS:* I saw it many times and when the Jews came back [after the war] I saw them dig out the bodies. They would dig out the bodies as they came back, those that survived; it was where a house has now been built.

*Interviewer:* When they would bury them, who would do it?

*GHILAS:* The Jews, all by themselves, alone.

*Interviewer:* And were they guarded or...?

*GHILAS:* Yes, of course there was a sentinel to prevent them from... it was always guarded.

*Interviewer:* How many bodies did you see them bury?

*GHILAS:* That I cannot tell you, I cannot say how many... I do not know; I saw as they covered them with white linen and as they would dig the hole, but... we could not go closer to get a better look, as we were afraid...

*Interviewer:* How big was the camp; give us an approximate surface area...

*GHILAS:* Well, as big as... from here to... maybe half of a kilometer from this corner to the other one, I would say that about that big... it was large, large enough, a big camp.

*Interviewer:* And were there hundreds of people there or thousands, would you say?

*GHILAS:* No, not thousands but rather hundreds, I do not think there were thousands of Jews in Edineți. There were hundreds, I can not really say how many, maybe a thousand but I wouldn't be able to say for sure.

*Interviewer:* And how did the people in the camp look like?

*GHILAS:* Oh, poor them! Starving, dirty, broken... in a deplorable state. They would cry constantly for bread and water! Children would die; sick children would beg... it was very sad. I do not know how they could stand as it was the middle of the summer and an excruciating heat; they had no place to stand under when it rained and they would just stand there...

*Interviewer:* Did not they have a place to stand inside, within the camp?

*GHILAS:* There was no house, nothing! They did hang up, as cover, cloths and other stuff, I do not know where they got them... there was nothing there, they were just taken and placed there just like you would with a cattle herd, treated like one would animals...

*Interviewer:* But the spot where they built the camp was empty?

*GHILAS:* The place was empty, just some remains... some ammunition was kept there, just ammunition...

*Interviewer:* A storage place maybe, of some sort?

*GHILAS:* An ammunition storage place I think; we were afraid to go play there as they told us there might be bombs; there were some sort of buildings... most of them stood there cramped in, some outside the buildings... and they would help each other, with what they could... for example, Doctor **Lerner**, together with his children, we had a big orchard stretching from one corner to the other, that's how big it was, half a hectare of orchard, and there we had planted rye, I mean my dad planted it. The rye was very tall and it almost reached over our heads [*she points to the level of her neck*] and they would crawl in the middle of the garden and lay there until it was night, because we would give them food, we would sneak food to them, but all was done during the night... him with the children, the doctor...

*Interviewer:* How many children did he have?

*GHILAS:* He had... there were two children.

*Interviewer:* Do you remember their names?

*GHILAS:* No, I do not remember... I cannot tell you their names.

*Interviewer:* Not even his wife?

*GHILAS:* I only remember that for us, he was Doctor **Lerner**, since he was our family's doctor and that one night, while still hiding, they left for Cernăuți, but it was a secret who took them there. And this is how we got rid of the anguish that haunted us, because we were constantly fearing discovery, God forbid someone would see! They would shoot us all! We were so scared, God forbid, such anguish! But we did not know how not to... back here in the yard there was a big walnut tree, with big nuts and we would give them the nuts and their children would walk around but my father asked them not to wander, because if the soldiers caught them, they would shoot everyone, including my family. We helped them the best we could, and then they were put in trucks, those that were left in the camp, and taken away! There were few that managed to leave for Cernăuți. The rest were taken in trucks at night, and they would scream, cry and hit what they could... the trucks were covered, and all were put into them, but where they were taken none of us had any idea. Few returned afterwards. Very few, and those that came back [*after the war*] dug up their dead. Very few returned, especially those we knew and lived around here. Of those living with us in Edineți, I saw no one. As my parents said later, no one came back. It was

a terrible situation. God forbid... they could not make a step, no food, no water... they gave them nothing! What could they have taken in their hands while they were dragged out of their homes and brought here? What products could anyone take from inside the house?

*Interviewer:* How long were they kept in the camp?

*GHILAS:* Well long enough, it was a while and some died and were buried... and... a while, they were there a long time.

*Interviewer:* But could you give me an approximation of the duration, do you remember, what season was outside...?

*GHILAS:* I do not remember... it was hot...

*Interviewer:* When it was over or when the Jews were taken there?

*GHILAS:* I can tell you that the barley was really tall, so tall that they could stay hidden, you could walk through it and no one could see you it was so tall that no one could see you...

*Interviewer:* And when they were taken from the camp, when they took them in those...?

*GHILAS:* When they took them... I think they kept them like a month or so in the camp, and I did not see when they brought them to the camp because it was done during the night, we were little and our parents did not allow us to go...

*Interviewer:* But when they took them away did you manage to see that?

*GHILAS:* When they took them away, they were swept away... suddenly a big transport arrived and loaded them all...

*Interviewer:* Did you get to see the big transport?

*GHILAS:* No, I only heard the loud noises it made, all throughout the night there was an uproar, a big, loud uproar, and screams, and my parents did not sleep the entire night. And they were afraid to turn on the light, or to even ask what was going on over there. Someone would come and knock on the door! It was very strict back then, people were afraid... you were really afraid even to give a piece of bread because heaven forbid...

*Interviewer:* How were the gendarmes treating those in the camp?

*GHILAS:* Well honestly I did not see them shoot anyone; they were Romanians after all, they were not German, you do understand, they were Romanians, but they shouted a lot and sometimes shooting towards the sky as a warning, demanding someone to come back or else they would be shot. And those going after water or something else would come back.... Yes, it was very strict but I honestly did not see them shooting anyone at all!

Interviewer: You did hear gunshots?

GHILAS: They were shooting towards the sky, to scare them and stop them from going where they were not allowed, or to leave. But they were shooting only towards the sky! To see an inmate shot by them, I did not see. They were shooting to scare them... to keep them from going out, from running away... maybe someone, somehow, since the camp was large, maybe someone managed to flee, maybe crawling underneath the wire... the barbed wire and the wood poles placed to surround them were done so in a hurry. The barbed wire was placed in thick layers but who knows maybe one or two managed to escape without being seen...

Interviewer: How many soldiers were on guard; how many soldiers were there in the camp?

GHILAS: There were many, many of them... the gate was here towards the end like this, and they were standing one beside the other. But aside from that, there were not too many along the fences; on the other side there were some making sure the Jews did not get out. They kept a thorough guard but I did not see Romanians shooting to have the Jews killed. But the houses were empty, it was horrible. It was a terrible pogrom! Everything was barren! People kept dragging pillows after them and there were feathers all over on the roads...

Interviewer: But were there other people that...?

GHILAS: They were scared... the people from town... God forbid to come and... the Jews were nice people and helped all the time, my father for example, loaned them money, well... different stuff, there were never rumors that someone would not help the others or something of the sort. There were many in town but they came from the villages; peasants that did not know much, thinking they could bring something back for their families. Cats and dogs were everywhere, abandoned by their masters, and there were objects thrown on the road, some cups, some broken plates... how can I explain... like in a pogrom. The houses were empty, completely, everything was broken! Everything was shattered! They looked for Jews all over the town; they found every single one of them and took them away! And they were all taken at night, they searched for the Jews all at night and those they did not find, they came after them later...

Interviewer: Did you see as they looked for the Jews?

GHILAS: Yes, they were looking for them armed, lots and lots of gendarmes; we would ask one another, "Did you not see them, did you not see?" But who dared say anything? No one said anything, God forbid! We did not see anything, we did not! But it was hard...

Interviewer: Was the fear so great, that others would tell on you?

GHILAS: The fear that others would tell on us was great, yes! People were afraid! But how could anyone say, "Yes, I saw... he went that way!" No, no! No one said anything! Especially given these situations, because afterwards... God forbid! When the war started we, the entire high school, were evacuated to the Banat and the people there shouted at us, "What did you bring with you?" Because the first wave of people they brought to that town was from Siberia. And they shouted, "What did you bring with you? You brought Siberia with you? Go back home!" (At the



time Romania was not the ally of the Russians and therefore they regarded them as intruders bringing war with them in their country) They were telling us to go back home. I remember that we lived in Oravița, in a village called Broșteni, where my father was a schoolteacher. They took us and we went to Chișinău; it took us three months because tanks were going the same way and we were taken in a refugee train car... and then we were tried by the court martial, in Chișinău. „**Pace mu ia hale, pace moto**” and so on [*no translation of the Russian words and unsure of the wording*] and then they took our house; they took everything from us! We came and stayed by the fence. The Russians cleaned us dry of everything we owned! What could we do...

*Interviewer:* I want to ask you two more things about the camp... did you see if they fed them, if they brought food to those in the camps?

*GHILAȘ:* No, no... I never saw them being given any food, no!

*Interviewer:* How did they survive there, how did they live?

*GHILAȘ:* I have not the slightest idea! I do not know; they kept shouting, “God help us, help us!”

*Interviewer:* Were other people from the town allowed to come and bring them food?

*GHILAȘ:* No one could get close! No, no! We were not allowed!

*Interviewer:* And no one would...?

*GHILAȘ:* No, no! Only at night they would... since ours was closest to the camp, they came to us. They would crawl and my mother would bake bread and they would carry it from one man to the other, a piece of bread or whatever my mother could give them, a cup of water...

*Interviewer:* But did others from Edineți make it here to... or...?

*GHILAȘ:* I did not see, we were worried that God forbid someone could see us! I do not know. Over there was the house of mayor **Iejucher**, shot by the Russians; they took him and shot him in Siberia. So we were all afraid and we were not allowed to go further than our own fence! The camp was just across the road from us, so nothing!

*Interviewer:* Did you see them working? Were they taken somewhere to work?

*GHILAȘ:* No, no! They kept them locked up to be transported later on! They were ready to be taken away; no one took them to work. They were not taken out anywhere.

*Interviewer:* And did you at least hear where they took them?

*GHILAȘ:* No, this only they knew... I think the Germans took them, not the Romanians, because they did not have that many trucks; they did not have the means to. The Germans took them, organized them, and loaded them all. I did not see anyone returning after the war.

*Interviewer:* Did your parents help anyone else except Doctor **Lerner's** family?

*GHILAS:* Help them run? Well, **Rosenberg**, the **Rosenbergs** and their children, but they got out before they could be forced into the camp; they stayed a short while, just a couple of nights; they were very rich...

*Interviewer:* And before that, before them...?

*GHILAS:* And after that there were the **Lerners**. First the **Rosenbergs**, and after they left the **Lerners** with their children. The **Lerners** remained longer because they could not leave.

*Interviewer:* How long would you say the **Lerners** stayed?

*GHILAS:* They stayed a long time because we were really worried that, God forbid... we really were scared while they stayed... maybe two weeks, they stayed for about two weeks.

*Interviewer:* Was that while the camp was set in the village?

*GHILAS:* The camp, the camp... he was inside with his children and escaped and came to us, because he could not go farther. Who took them from us during the night I could not tell, I think my father knew, because my parents always locked the front door, since we were so afraid.

*Interviewer:* How about the other family?

*GHILAS:* The other family left, I think they left for Cernăuți; like the **Lerners** I think they left for Cernăuți.

*Interviewer:* Could you tell us a little bit about the **Rosenbergs**?

*GHILAS:* The **Rosenbergs** were two brothers, one had a factory for making soap but the other was really very rich! Now, in his house is the headquarters of the military commissariat. He had a big house, a beautiful villa downtown, with high evergreens in front...

*Interviewer:* And how was it that they came to your family for help?

*GHILAS:* They had a little girl and we studied together, and I know that she... I can't remember her name, I have forgotten it... she would offer me... they had a cook ever since I knew them, they lived well. When I went to her place she would always offer sandwiches with butter and tomatoes on top, and the tomatoes were thin sliced and it was really delicious, and I honestly tell you I keep this tradition even now, and I taught my husband to do the same. She would always invite me over and her mother would offer us the sandwiches.

*Interviewer:* And was the little girl also hiding with the...?

*GHILAS:* Yes, the girl was hiding, I do not remember if her brother was too, since we did not see much of each other... I saw the girl everyday at school, when we played, when I would eat at their house. Their house was just two houses over but the house of the brother [*she refers to the other Rosenberg brother, the girl's uncle*] was also close by, but it was not as fancy and I did not know the brother that well... the one with the soap...

*Interviewer:* But those that hid at your place, how many were they... from their family?

*GHILAS:* Well, about... from their family... there was the girl, the father and the mother, the girl and I think there was a boy but I am not completely sure, because I did not see him, but he was older than the girl.

*Interviewer:* And for how long did they remain at your place?

*GHILAS:* Not much, very little time and then they fled. They were very rich, very, very rich. Somehow they managed to escape. But the others, the doctor was not that rich, and he stayed longer...

*Interviewer:* We do have a few more questions... please tell us, first of all, we want to clarify, you said that you saw people dying in the camp and that they were buried...

*GHILAS:* Yes...

*Interviewer:* We would like to know how they died in the camp.

*GHILAS:* This is somewhat hard for me to tell you... it's hard for me to answer, maybe one tried to escape somewhere inside the camp... or even on the road and we did not see. I did see that they buried the dead, they buried a lot, they would bury not one or two but many... maybe they died of hunger, or heart attack, of fear, of diseases, of hunger or if they were shot... I can't tell you because I do not know; if I had seen them being shot I would say so but I did not! I just saw as they buried people, as they were here they buried a lot of people and then they came back and dug them up, all of them...

*Interviewer:* When did they dig them up?

*GHILAS:* When they came back, when the Jews came back, [*after the war*] now free, and when the Russians came, yes, the Russians came...

*Interviewer:* Right after the Russians came?

*GHILAS:* Well, the Russians came after some time... they came, the Jews and dug them up and moved them to a cemetery... there is a certain cemetery...

*Interviewer:* The Jews, which Jews in particular?

*GHILAS:* Maybe them... you see, the Jews are very organized and it is possible that those that were in the camp [and got out] and knew that some were left inside, came back and organized the funeral... there were funerals organized...

*Interviewer:* Did you see as they dug them up?

*GHILAS:* They got them out, they had machines and people paid and thus they got the dead out and moved them to a cemetery.

*Interviewer:* Do you happen to know if were there a lot of bodies dug up then?

*GHILAS:* I do not... why... well my opinion is that they would not leave the dead uncovered. I do not think they would. As far as I have known them and their habits, the manner in which they help each other... there was one back then, I know that they do not kill the chicken and there was this man, **Hähäm**, who did that for them... well, even for that man, **Hähäm**, they found a wife and had him married... do you understand?! The rich look after the poor, they look after one another, in their community they live... it's a strong community; for example I do not want to make a comparison but, try to touch a gypsy in the square and from the ground others would spring around and ask you to account for your actions. Do you understand? Well, the Jews are cultivated people, they care very deeply about their kind and help each other in times of need... here for example, there was this little girl, a woman, just across the street. She was a Jew from Byelorussia but he was a Moldavian from around here. They got married. Another woman, also a Russian, from the other side, she lived with a Jew, but he died and she receives the newspaper from Israel (Israel), both of them do. There is a community that helps them all, from Israel (Israel) they receive help. Different types of help, for heating, in general, so as not to be completely cut out from their country they receive the papers and so on. You do not really see this with other nationalities. I made this parallel so that you understand, therefore I really do not think it was possible for them to leave their dead buried where others would build a house! It is not possible! I do not really know how to make it clear for you or... another connection, we had a math teacher, one named **Cucer Ana Filipova**, also married to a Jew, even now she has connections with Israel (Israel).

*Interviewer:* I wanted to ask you one more thing... we wanted to know, did you notice any antisemitic propaganda before the war or at the beginning?

*GHILAS:* No, no... I see it now on TV, on Russian stations, they speak ill of the rabbi, of the synagogue, and in trials...

*Interviewer:* But back then... before the war or at the beginning?

*GHILAS:* When the war started no... God forbid, did I not tell you that we lived vey well with the Jews, if we kept them, they could have shot us and we helped them... as best as we could...

*Interviewer:* But the authourities that came, did they attempt to push antisemitic propaganda?

*GHILAŞ*: No, I did not see... they only asked about where the Jews were; but who do you think would tell them? No one said a word! No one betrayed them! But for the authorities to do something against the Jews no! Not even today, go search, ask all over Moldova, no one would... God forbid! Jews still live here just go look! Now you know there is a war going on in Israel (Israel), well it was... now it stopped... Jews come and buy apartments in Chişinău. They buy them in Chişinău and then they come in the village and buy houses, leave the houses with a tenant telling them, "Just live a good life and we will come back and store some stuff at the house." So you see?!

*Interviewer*: Thank you very much!