

RG-50.862: EHRlich COLLECTION - SUMMARY TRANSCRIPTION OF AUDIO FILES

Introduction by Anatol Steck, Project Director in the International Archival Programs Division of the United States Holocaust Memorial Museum:

These are English summary transcription notes of the digitized interviews recorded by Leonard and Edith Ehrlich in the 1970s as part of their research for their manuscript about the Jewish community leadership in Vienna and Theresienstadt during the Holocaust titled "Choices under Duress." These notes are intended as a finding aid for the researcher; researchers are strongly encouraged to consult the digitized recordings for accuracy and authenticity and not to rely solely on the notes. As much as possible, persons mentioned by name in the interviews are identified and described in the text; however, as persons are often referred to in the interviews only by last name, their identification is sometimes based on the context in which their names appear within the interview (especially in cases where different persons share the same last name). In case of the interview with Benjamin Murelstein, unless specifically stated at the beginning of the tape by Leonard Ehrlich, it is not always clear whether a particular interview segment continues in the correct order or, as the interview was recorded over several days, a particular interview segment continues where the interview was concluded on the previous day. It is possible that the individual interview segments are not in their correct order. Leonard Ehrlich and Edith Ehrlich are identified in the summary notes as LE and EE.

RG-50.862*0001 Part 1

Interview segment starts with LE: "Joint Distribution Committee research tape #1." LE records himself reading aloud English translations of historical documents which he has obtained from the Joint in New York City that relate to Austrian Jews. These include telegrams, newspaper articles, letters, reports, etc. At time stamp 1:23:23 EE continues reading the translations. At 1:30:26 LE continues reading.

[NOTE: recording was most likely taped on or about December 27, 1974 in Dr. Margaret Feiler's office at the Joint headquarters in New York - see also RG-50.862.0001 Parts 2 to 4].

Tape ends with LE stating "letter continued on next tape."

[Tape ends at 1:32:20]

Quality: Good

RG-50.862*0001 Part 2

Interview with **Dr. Margaret Feiler**, a Joint official in New York who was a survivor and former Jewish community staffer from Vienna. Recording was made in Dr. Feiler's office at the Joint headquarters in New York on December 27, 1974. Tape starts with LE: "This is another interview conducted with Dr. Feiler on the 27th of December 1974." Typing can be heard in the background. Interview is conducted in fluent, Austrian-accented English. Interview begins with discussion of the respective relationships and contacts between Kultusgemeinde and Zentralstelle and Gestapo Leitstelle. Dr. Feiler is a survivor from Vienna who worked for the Jewish community and now works for the Joint in New York. In Vienna she appears to have on occasion had contact to the Leitstelle *[NOTE: which she initially refers to Zentralstelle but she corrects herself when LE follows up]*. She insists that she had no contact to the emigration department headed by Dr. Murelstein. Dr. Feiler discusses the head of the Kultusgemeinde

Josef Löwenherz. Dr. Feiler mentions that she worked in the community's translation department but that she did not translate any letters for Löwenherz. Mentions Löwenherz's secretaries by last name. States that hardly anyone working for the community had a good command of English. Ehrlich mentions that he found a "shattering report" from October 1940 that corroborates what Dr. Feiler had said earlier about the US Consulate. He shows her the report but she does not have a chance to read it as Ehrlich continues by asking her a question about which functions Benjamin Murmelstein had within the community. Dr. Feiler states that among other functions she thinks Murmelstein was Löwenherz's liaison to the Gestapo. She continues by emphasizing that unlike "the other girls" she never intended her work for the community to be "a career" so she did not really pay that much attention. She had trained initially to be an attorney.

[Tape interrupts at 00:09:08]

[Tape continues at 00:09:09] LE reading aloud historical documents where he left off in the previous tape. "This now is a continuation of the transcription of material which was interrupted at the end of side B of Tape #3."

[Tape ends at 01:09:24]

Quality: Good

RG-50.862*0001 Part 3

[NOTE: this interview segment appears to be the continuation after RG-50.862.0001 Part 4]

Interview with **Dr. Margaret Feiler** conducted on 27 December 1974 continued. Recording was made in Dr. Feiler's office at the Joint headquarters in New York on December 27, 1974. Tape begins with Feiler asking "Where did we stop?" and LE tells her "You did not get any details from Rabbi Young." Dr. Feiler picks up the story from there. Refers to relationship between Rabbi Young and Benjamin Murmelstein. EE also asks questions. Dr. Feiler recounts how an associate from Vienna during a visit of hers to Vienna in the early 1970s asked her whether she is in touch with "Ben" (i.e. Benjamin Murmelstein) and that she should write to him. She did so, although she did not know how he would react. To her surprise Murmelstein wrote her a long letter back immediately. She then proceeds to read from the letter - in German - a passage which she says is very telling. In it, Murmelstein tells her that she was one of the few who were able to see behind the scenes and were able to recognize from as far away as New York and Lisbon the "gathering clouds." Dr. Feiler states that she does not remember writing Murmelstein from Lisbon but that he might have a better memory than her. Talks about how she went to the Joint in Lisbon with "the children." "A very nice arrangement." She recalls very well her arrival in New York. It was the first time, according to Dr. Feiler, that Murmelstein learned that he had such a bad reputation. Otherwise, she states, he would never have sent her to Rabbi Young. LE clarifies that, in other words, the gathering of the clouds refers to him and his reputation and not to the extermination of the Jews. Dr. Feiler emphatically agrees. She states that Murmelstein is now retired in Rome and is gathering his papers to write his memoirs. Dr. Feiler talks about her letter correspondence with Murmelstein. Reads at length aloud from one of Murmelstein letters to her (in German). "Auf mich hat die böse Rolle des Ungeheuers gewartet und ob ich wollte oder nicht, ich musste sie verkörpern." Talk then continues about Murmelstein's son. Dr. Feiler continues reading from the letter. "Es bleibt mein Schicksal grundlos verdächtigt zu werden." "Ich bin nicht mehr der Jüngste und habe manches

am Buckel zu tragen." After reading the letter, Dr. Feiler states: "You can't really blame him, it is his life, and he can't really get over it." Interview continues by EE asking Dr. Feiler about a "Dr. Josef Schwarz, Director-General for Overseas Operations." Dr. Feiler calls him an "elder statesman in our office here" and that she mentioned Murmelstein to him and how Murmelstein "is not rational." Continues by reading from her last letter to Murmelstein. She notes that Murmelstein addressed his reply letter to her to the Joint Office in New York but placed someone else's name on the back as the sender with his correct address. He writes that he "does not want to harm her." She then reads her reply to him in which she tries to comfort Murmelstein that as far as she and the Joint are concerned he is not "blacklisted." Mentions her last visit to Vienna in 1973 where she met Jonny Moser [*NOTE: Jonny Moser, b. Parndorf, Austria December 10, 1925 - d. July 23, 2011, Holocaust survivor and historian*]. Reads aloud Murmelstein's reply in which he expresses skepticism about her assertions. Murmelstein writes how a Jerusalem professor who emigrated from Vienna was against Eichmann's execution but wanted Murmelstein hanged instead. "Ich stehe nicht auf einer schwarzen Liste aber auf einer Liste der Angeschwärmten." LE chuckles at this remark. EE asks who this professor is. Dr. Feiler says she can ask him (i.e. Murmelstein), that she has not replied yet to this, his most recent letter from October 30 but that she sent him a New Year's card. Dr. Feiler says that she did not tell Murmelstein that she is in contact with the Ehrlichs, asks whether she should tell him. All agree that it is a good idea. LE says that he plans to get in touch with Murmelstein. Mrs. Ehrlich calls it a "matter of fairness." Dr. Feiler says that Murmelstein to some extent has a "persecution complex" and she is someone Murmelstein trusts. Ehrlich continues the interview how Murmelstein got "into the organization." Dr. Feiler says she only knew very little while working for the community. Murmelstein "came in only after Hitler." Interview continues with Dr. Feiler explaining, by name, who did what in the community's office and/or Murmelstein's office. The Ehrlichs and Dr. Feiler are looking at some sort of report or book with photographs while she is explaining. Points out Mrs. Mezei who was "so motherly". "Emil Engel came to the United States and died here. His secretary is the present Mrs. Tuchmann." Dr. Ehrlich asks Dr. Feiler whether she knows what happened to Mrs. Mezei's family. Dr. Feiler does not and asks whether they survived. Dr. Ehrlich responds that theirs is a "shattering story." He says he will tell her off the record and that he will now turn off the recording device. [*NOTE: Margarete Mezei (1899-1993), maiden name Neufeld, worked for the Jewish administration and was the mother of Kurt and Ilse Mezei. Her husband was the writer and translator Moritz (Maurus) Mezei, 1886-1944. Mrs. Mezei had two children: Kurt and Ilse Mezei who were twins born in 1924. Kurt Mezei was a courier and clerk in "room 8". Ilse Mezei worked as a telephone operator for the Jewish community. Ilse was killed on March 12, 1945 during an Allied bombing raid when she was denied access to the bomb shelter on account of being a Jew. Her brother Kurt was murdered by retreating SS on April 11, 1945 in the Förstergasse 7, 1020 Vienna. Both Ilse and Kurt were only 20 years old. Their photograph and story is part of the permanent exhibit of the Jewish Museum Vienna. See: "Mignon: Tagebücher und Briefe einer jüdischen Krankenschwester in Wien, 1938-1949" StudienVerlag*]

[Interview with Dr. Feiler ends at 00:27:21]

[00:27:22] Tape continues with LE reading aloud historical documents. "At this point we continue the transcription of JDC folder Austria [...]"

[Tape ends at 1:34:19]

Quality: Good

RG-50.862*0001 Part 4

[00:00:04 until 00:46:20] Tape starts with LE: "Joint Distribution Committee research tape #2." LE and EE continue reading English transcriptions of historical documents, presumably acquired from the Joint.

[00:46:28 until 1:32:26] Interview with **Dr. Margaret Feiler** conducted on 27 December 1974 continued. Dr. Feiler discusses how she worked on emigration issues while in Vienna and continued to so in New York after she arrived there in December 1940. Irwin Rosen asked her for report, later head of Transmigration Bureau [*NOTE: according to the website of the Joint, Irwin Rosen was the director of the J.D.C.'s Transmigration Bureau from 1939 to 1941.*]. LE mentions that he has three days "here" to conduct the research and he understands that this month is not very convenient, Dr. Feiler mentions that on Tuesday she is holding a party for the staff "here" but gives LE and EE the option of working in another office. LE politely declines as he only has three days and needs to be back at Amherst on Tuesday late afternoon. He says that the documents won't get done by then anyhow, that he will have to come back. At home he will study the documents and then he will come back to Dr. Feiler with follow-up questions.

[Tape is interrupted at 00:49:37 as someone enters the room]

[00:49:38] Interview with Dr. Feiler resumes. June 1941, consulates are closing. Dr. Feiler describes the emigration department, how the emigration process worked. Communication with HICEM, JDC in New York, the Committee in Australia. Payments of monies by the Joint's Transmigration Bureau. Her work for Irwin Rosen. After a lengthy pause, Dr. Feiler states that "she is one of those people" who when she came to the US from Vienna never talked about her "tribulations" and how she got out. "I always hated to talk about it." Says how her parents also never talked about it, and how they figured that everyone around them had had a similar experience, so there was no sense in "rehashing it." "I don't think people are interested in this." LE mentions how he finds it extremely important to talk about, and to talk about it in great detail, especially to the young generation because they have nothing in their experience that would indicate to them what humans are capable of inflicting upon other human beings. Not only the cruelty but also the "Schickanerie", the "chicanery." Dr. Feiler states that she has no one, that she is all alone, so she never felt the need to tell anyone, that she did not want to talk to Americans about it because they would not understand, including the American Jews. Dr. Feiler recounts leaving Vienna on November 30, 1940, the reluctance of her parents to leave who preferred to wait it out. "Wishful thinking." How she left her parents behind and that there "already was a certain rumor" about deportations and transports to Poland. How she and her parents agreed if it came to it they will send her a telegram with coded language so that she could take the necessary steps. Recounts how she received a cable from her parents in February 1941 that the Poland transports were starting and to deposit 400 dollars. How she got the money from the second cousin of her father. How she took the money to the Joint to send to Vienna and how she ran into the Joint's Executive Vice Chairman and how she informed him that the deportations to Poland had begun and how he replied "Well, if they deport them, they deport them." Dr. Feiler says that she, too, did not know that "they would exterminate them," that at the time there was no Auschwitz yet, no indication "that they intended to liquidate everybody." She only knew that it would be terrible to be in a camp somewhere in Poland,

somewhere in the woods in Poland "like the people [who had been] in Nisko had explained to us." How she tried to explain to the Joint's Executive Vice Chairman that survival would be difficult, "not because they would exterminate them but because they would go with a minimum of clothing" and that from there emigration would not be possible anymore. Recounts how the Executive Vice Chairman replied that there was nothing that can be done about it and "it is not as you say" and "we know better." "And with that I was dismissed." States how her parents were lucky, they fell under the German quota, could simply go to the Gestapo Leitstelle, get their passports stamped and pay the money, recounts how her parents came to the US in June 1941 on a ship that had been chartered by the Joint. "They were the lucky ones. It was really easy for us, everything was easy." LE asks follow-up questions of what was known about the deportations at the time. Lengthy pause. LE asks Dr. Feiler about the "Nisko people" coming back to Vienna after having been deported to Poland, whether their stories had any impact. Dr. Feiler says it did not have enough of an impact. "There was no panic." LE states the need to differentiate between the reaction of the Kultusgemeinde and the general population. Recounts his own emigration in November 1939, "two to three weeks after the Nisko action." Recounts how those with Polish citizenship were optimistic. Dr. Feiler asks LE whether he was in the temple at Seitenstettengasse when Dr. Fenzberg gave a speech about going to Nisko. LE was not. Dr. Feiler: "It was mostly his doing, the way he talked." Recounts how the Gestapo "had asked us to get people to volunteer to go and that they needed someone to speak to the Jewish community." Describes the interviewing of volunteers for the transports and how Dr. Fenzberg was chosen because Murrelstein was too disliked within the community. How Fenzberg was little known, "mostly interested in the cemetery" and in Chewra Kadisha. How Fenzberg was a great public speaker. EE asked about the Gestapo's orders. Dr. Feiler describes the procedure of how orders were transmitted to the community by the Nazi administration, how Löwenherz would be summoned on most mornings to Kuchmann on Morzinplatz in the Gestapo headquarters "to get his instructions for what had to be done." Upon Löwenherz's return to the community offices, "if it was something of greater importance or more work, he would call us together. But usually he would only call Murrelstein." Dr. Feiler recounts how she was first hired "as a voluntary worker" in 1939 exclusively for "the Australian correspondence." How, after a few months, she took over "all of the emigration correspondence." How she then became a salaried worker in the "Direktion." She kept the correspondence department but "my office was in both places. And I worked with Murrelstein." How the Gestapo asked him to write a history of the Jews. How she helped Murrelstein write the manuscript and other projects he did for the Gestapo. Mentions Murrelstein's two secretaries, a Mrs. Brandt and a Mrs. Breuer. How every afternoon she had to send in to the Gestapo a list of the community staff who will be working late that evening because of the curfew. Dr. Feiler goes back to the point in her narrative where Löwenherz would regularly summon Murrelstein to relate to him what the Gestapo wanted done and that the Gestapo always wanted to have it done by the next day as a form of harassment. How it was Murrelstein's job to convey the order to the community in order to get it done. "He was the front. He was the man the people knew, who asked them to do things. Who told them what to do." How Murrelstein was arrogant. How Löwenherz "did not even try to say no" to the Gestapo. Dr. Feiler recounts how the information the Gestapo was after was nothing "necessarily bad" but was mostly statistical such as how many persons lived on a given block and that she did not know then what this information

would be used for in the end. Talks about an incident in July/August 1941 when Kuchmann told Löwenherz that the community was employing far too many persons and that a number of staff will have to be let go (because community staff had "certain protections"). Those without skills were the "Ordner." Secretaries were needed. "The point is" that Murmelstein made the selection of who would be fired. "A catastrophe for each one of them." How she was called on a Saturday or Sunday when neither Löwenherz nor Murmelstein were in the office to appear before Kuchmann. Talks about the "Passierschein" entry procedure at the Hotel Metropol, the Gestapo headquarters on Morzinplatz. How Kuchmann presented her with a list of those to be fired and accused the community leadership of selecting so-called "Galizianer" (i.e. Polish Jews) for the list. How she insisted to Kuchmann that she did not know anything about it. How she lost her nerve at another unrelated accusation that Kuchmann made and how she jumped up and banged her hand on the table. How Kuchmann left the room without saying a word with the Passierschein and how she was afraid that she might never get back out without it. How Kuchmann eventually returned and handed her the Passierschein. How she left Gestapo headquarters and immediately went to Löwenherz's home in the Porzellangasse. How Löwenherz told her "nonsense" to comfort her. How the Gestapo's written order to fire the people on the list was received the next day by Murmelstein. How her decision to emigrate was influenced largely by this one incident with Kuchmann. Discussion turns to the American consulate and the US visa. How the consul who issued the visa for Dr. Feiler is the same one who issued the visa to Dr. Ehrlich.

[1:24:00] Dr. Feiler mentions an "American Committee for Children" which arranged for 30 children whose fathers had died in the concentration or labor camps and whose mothers fell under the quota "that did not come up" (Hungarian, Romanian, or Polish) to be taken in by foster parents in the United States. How the community was preparing to send two social workers who had the necessary papers with the children to the United States. "They all applied for visa around August/September and of the children only nine got visas for reason we never knew and none of the social workers got visas." "When I got the visa they asked me whether I would take those nine children. And that's what I did. And that is how JDC paid for my fare because I was the escort." How she went via Berlin where she picked up a tenth child and how she brought the group of children to the United States via Lisbon. How she was the only one during this period who got a visa because she gave the right answer to the question everyone was being asked, i.e. what party the applicants had voted for during the last free Austrian elections. Everyone who answered Social-Democratic or Christian-Conservative was denied a visa; when Dr. Feiler found this out and when she was asked the same question when she applied for a visa, she responded that she had voted for the "Demokratische Mittelpartei" (a fringe party that got "no more than 12 votes" in all of Austria). This is why, Dr. Feiler is certain, she was issued the visa while all the others were not. Recounts the medical examination at the US consulate. How she was asked two questions: what is your hair color and what month are you pregnant. How she left November 30 with the children. How she wrote an article in the *Gemeindeblatt* about the rescue of the children. Talks about Murmelstein's anxiety about his own emigration. How she promised Murmelstein to see Rabbi Jung [NOTE: *Rabbi Leo Jung of the American Jewish Joint Distribution Committee - see also RG-50.862*0018, interview with Rabbi Jung*] about a job offer. Recounts how she saw Rabbi Jung and how he cut her off by saying "Not a word about Murmelstein. I know all about him!" How Rabbi Jung "practically

threw me out." Dr. Feiler recounts that Murrelstein never did anything that bad in Vienna that would justify the "rumors" that were already being spread about him as far away as New York. [Tape ends abruptly at 1:32:26].