

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*0016 Interview with Dr. Wilhelm ("Willy") Stern

Interview with **Dr. Wilhelm ("Willy") Stern** (1920-1999) recorded on June 27, 1977 in his home in Vienna. A woman, possibly Dr. Stern's wife, can be heard in the background. At one point during the interview, Stern's dog enters the room. The quality of the audio is poor and towards the end of the recording becomes barely audible.

At the beginning of the tape and while LE is still setting up the equipment for the interview, Stern can be heard mentioning to EE that after the war he was ordered to appear before the Austrian state police [presumably in connection with his work for the Jewish administration in the years from 1938 to 1945].

[00:00:25] Interview begins by LE mentioning the date of the interview and that the interview is being conducted with "Primarius Willy Stern" in his home in Vienna. LE asks Stern when he started working for the Jewish administration. Stern discusses his work for the Jewish administration in Vienna, in particular for Benjamin Murelstein; that he began working for the Jewish community (Israelitische Kultusgemeinde) in 1939 when he was 18 ½ years old; Murelstein personally hired him at the end of 1939 for his department which was situated in "room 8"; this was around the time of the Nisko transports; Stern recalls how he had intended to volunteer for the third Nisko transport which never came about; that he continued working in "room 8" until shortly before the end of the war; that he was responsible for compiling statistical reports for the Jewish community as well as for the Central Office for Jewish Emigration and the Gestapo; attributes his survival to his job of working for the community; briefly discusses the purpose of the statistics; recounts how he went into hiding during the last four weeks of the war; that his mother also survived by working for the community in a home for children of mixed race ("Kinderheim für jüdische Mischlinge").

[00:07:13] LE asks what Stern's duties were while working in "room 8" and until Murrelstein's departure in January 1943; Stern replies that his duties were to compile statistics and to manage the central card file; discusses how he transcribed by hand the data from the questionnaires into the card file and how he also compiled alphabetically organized name lists with data from the asset declarations ("Vermögenserklärungen"); EE asks whether the deportation lists were compiled with the data from the card file and the lists; Stern denies this and refers to this as an "erroneous assumption;" states that he thankfully was not in a decision-making position; however, because of his excellent German language skills, he was also designated to run errands to and from the Nazi authorities; in this capacity he was almost daily in the Gestapo headquarters; how he once refused an order by Gestapo official Otto Kuchmann to report on a Jewish individual slated for deportation.

LE asks whether the Nazi authorities received copies of the card files; Stern states that the Jewish community shared copies of the card file with the Central Office for Jewish Emigration and the Gestapo; that the deportation lists were compiled by the Central Office by using the name card file.

LE asks whether Stern knows who made the decision in the Central Office for Jewish Emigration about which names to add to the deportation lists; Stern replies that this was not known but directly involved were [Nazi officials in the Central Office] Brunner 1 (Alois Brunner, 1912 – either 2001 or 2009/2010), Brunner 2 (Anton Brunner, 1898 – 1946), and Girzick (Ernst Girzick, 1911 – unknown); Stern speculates that for logistical reasons the deportation lists were compiled according to streets; states that the more he thinks about it now he is convinced that the deportation lists were compiled by using the alphabetical name lists and not the card file as he had earlier stated; the card file served strictly statistical purposes;

[00:20:57] Stern discusses the role and character traits of Murrelstein;

[00:23:30] Stern discusses Leo Balaban who worked as Murrelstein's deputy for the "Ordnungsdienst" headquartered in "room 8"; states that both Murrelstein's and Balaban's brutishness was later unconsciously embellished by survivors who remembered physical abuse;

[00:24:50] Stern goes back to talk about the types of lists that needed to be delivered by the community to the Nazi authorities; again explains the procedure of compiling name lists from the questionnaires;

[00:30:05] Stern discusses the daily activities of the Jewish functionaries who worked for the Central Office for Jewish Emigration, among them Julius Boschan (1896-1944); Stern strongly doubts that they or any other community officials were involved with compiling the deportation lists;

[00:32:00] Stern discusses the relationship between Murrelstein and his assistant Robert Prochnik (1915-1977); describes Prochnik as the "crown prince;" mentions that Prochnik had been a member of a German fraternity and had dueling scars ("Schmisse") in his face; talks about Prochnik's duties in Vienna and in Berlin;

[00:34:10] LE and EE ask Stern whether he had contact to Richard Friedmann (1906-1944), a community official who worked in the Central Office for Jewish Emigration in Vienna and later Prague before he was transferred to the Netherlands; Stern replies he never knew Friedmann;

[00:34:38] Stern discusses Kurt Mezei whom he calls 'Kurtl;' mentions that he and his wife were classmates of Kurt Mezei; that he and Mezei were together in the cellar in the Förstergasse but that he, Stern, left before retreating members of the SS massacred Mezei and all of the others

who were hiding in the cellar; calls this an “act of fate;” that he avoided Mrs. Mezei henceforth [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 Foerstergasse 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: Tagebuecher und Briefe einer juedischen Krankenschwester in Wien, 1938-1949" StudienVerlag] ; LE asks whether Stern also worked as an orderly (“Ordner”); Stern replies that he did not, that there was a separate group of orderlies which consisted of five to six persons and was called “Transportgruppe;”*

[00:37:35] LE goes back to the group of officials who worked in “room 8”; besides Stern and Kurt Mezei there was a Mrs. Berta [?] Brandt who worked as a secretary, a Mrs. Breuer [?], and Mr. Balaban; Stern mentions that Mrs. Balaban is still living, that she is currently 76 years old; Mr. Balaban is in America; Mrs. Breuer [?] is deceased; recounts that Mrs. Brandt was “terribly frightened” of Murmelstein and his threats of deportation which she took seriously; how Mrs. Breuer [?] had no fear of Murmelstein; the discussion continues about Murmelstein and his relationship to the community and the Nazi authorities; Stern asserts that, as far as he knows, Murmelstein never went against the community’s interests; that he does not believe that Murmelstein had anyone deliberately deported; that everyone was “just waiting until it was his turn;” they discuss the investigation of Murmelstein after the war by the Czech authorities;

[Tape interrupts at 00:46:36]

[Tape resumes at 00:46:55]

LE asks Stern about Mrs. Murmelstein and her relationship with her husband [barely audible]

[00:49:10] LE asks whether Murmelstein’s corpulent physical stature had any effect on his reputation; Stern replies “no, only the screaming, he was known as a choleric.” LE asks whether Murmelstein benefitted from the black market in food goods; Stern is skeptical; LE asks about Murmelstein’s relationship to women other than his wife [barely audible]

[00:53:20] LE asks what was known in Vienna about Nisko; Stern talks about his youthful naivete, that he thought of Nisko as a “reservation in the East;” states that only later did people learn about the beatings and deprivations suffered by those who had gone to Nisko; talks about what was known or not known about the extermination camps; LE asks whether anything was known about the mobile killing units (“Einsatzgruppen”) and the mass shootings; Stern replies that nobody knew about this, the only camps that people were familiar with were Buchenwald and Dachau; people had a sense that Auschwitz was a “bad place;” Stern talks about the speech given by Ernst Feldsberg before the first Nisko transport [barely audible];

[00:58:55] LE asks whom Stern worked for in “room 8” after Murmelstein’s deportation to Theresienstadt; Stern can’t quite remember [barely audible];

[01:02:30] Stern discusses Josef Löwenherz [barely audible];

LE thanks Stern for his cooperation;

[Tape ends at 01:06:20]

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