

HOLOCAUST TESTIMONY

OF

UTE SARAH SEILER

Transcript of Audiotaped Interview

Interviewer: Murray Cohen
Dates: April 22, 1985

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Gratz College
Melrose Park, PA 19027

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US - Ute Sarah Seiler¹ [interviewee]

MC - Murray Cohen [interviewer]

Date: April 22, 1985²

Tape one, side one:

MC: You were born [unclear] prior to being at Auschwitz?

US: Yes.

MC: Can you tell me where, when, and do you have any recollections at all where you're from, or where are you from?

US: Okay, I was born in Berlin, in Germany, and have no recollections, of course, of Berlin. I have recollections, my first recollections are being in hiding. I can't explain why I recollect so early in life.

MC: How old do you think you were at this point?

US: I'm just using logic. I must have been getting awfully close to two. I don't dare say that I could possibly remember before two, but I was in hiding shortly after I was born. What I mean by that is my birthday is in October and I would say that I was in hiding from the beginning of '43, 1943 on, until I was found. I was found, I was in hiding with my grandmother and my sister, my twin sister. And, my mother and my older sister-- I had two sisters-- one was Anna, and one was Heidi-- Heidi is my older sister-- were taken shortly after I was born. My mother took my older sister with her, to try to get some food through the underground and never came back. Now what I recollect is clinging to my grandmother. I recollect being in a dark, dingy cellar. And as I've told other people, I learned death before life, because I was told, I recollect being told if I make noise, that bad people in uniforms would kill me. I recollect a lot of fear, and I recollect clinging to my, literally being clinging to my grandmother. I recollect sitting on her lap. And I recollect a lot of fear. Now that, maybe it doesn't sound like much. It's hard to put fear into words.

MC: I'm sure.

US: But I recollect a lot of fear. I repeat it because there was so much fear. I don't recollect ever seeing daylight. There was my grandmother and I and my sister in hiding. I don't

¹Also known as Sora Seiler Vigorito in the United States Holocaust Memorial Museum collection. The forms signed for Gratz College have the name Ute Sarah Seiler, born in October 1942 in Berlin, Germany.

²Recorded at the 1985 American Gathering of Holocaust Survivors in Philadelphia, PA.

recollect my older sister or my mother. I know they were in hiding with us, because my grandmother said so. But I don't recollect them.

MC: Is your grandmother still alive today, or...

US: She was a survivor, but she died, a natural death.

MC: After you recollect this fear of being with your grandmother, where did you go next?

US: Okay, we were found, and again, the dates were filled in by my grandmother. I had no knowledge of dates at that time. We were found in early 1944, or mid-1944, okay. My grandmother, I, and my sister. My mother and my older sister were gone. When I say my sister, I mean Anna. We were found, and we were taken on a train. I remember waiting in a station, and there was lots of people. And we were put on a train and the train car was terrible. It was a terrible ride. And it was-- again, I'm not gonna say any numbers because I didn't say any nu-, I didn't know how to count. I remember lots and lots and lots and lots of people, like packages. Packages. And I remember holding onto my grandmother's legs. I remember my grandmother picking me up. It stunk. And it was...

MC: This is in a car?

US: Yes. Not an automobile, a railroad car.

MC: No, yes, a railroad car.

US: Okay. And it was dark, and it stunk. And it was hot. And it was terribly scary, because I didn't know what I was, where I was going. My grandmother kept trying to, everything will be okay. I love her very dearly.

MC: I'm sure you do. And still you remember your darkness now also.

US: Yes. Again, I'm not going to say time, because I didn't know time, but we were there going there for a long, long time. The car just stunk horribly, absolutely horrible. Just, it was so many people. Nobody was, seemed to be very nice, except my grandmother. What I mean by that is, people were pushing, and nobody cared if you're, I mean, but this is the way it seemed, you know. It was lots and lots of people. Then I remember, I, that's what I remember of the whole trip. There was nothing else that I can remember. It was all like that. It was long, very long, almost unbearable. And, then we came, the train stopped. I remember one stop and then nobody got off, because I wanted to get out of there. So I remember the stop. I can't explain my memories. I do, I have them. That's all I can say. Then it stopped again, and everybody got out. And it seemed like, it seemed like we stood for a long time, with lots and lots of people.

MC: Do you know where you were at that point? Or, your grandmother told you where you were.

US: My grandmother told me.

MC: Where were you then?

US: Later she told me, later. At that time it wouldn't have probably meant anything to me, you know. We were at Auschwitz. I could remember the, what would you call it, the gateway, a gate sounds, this, it's not a gate. The front of it. The trees and then the barrack-like things where you go in. And my grandmother, I remember my grandmother telling me that I must, must, must, I have to stay by her. And, she was trying to hide me under her legs. I wasn't even aware of my sister. I'm very ashamed of that. But, she was there, but I didn't even care.

MC: Well, it's nothing to be ashamed about. It's just...

US: My grandmother told me to hang onto her legs, and not to leave. And she covered me kind of with her, she had a coat on and had a few things. Anyway, the next thing I remember is being taken from my grandmother, and then I remember my sister clearly, because then I cling to my sister and I cling to each other. My grandmother was taken away and I screamed. I remember screaming so loud, I thought I was going to have, well, I didn't know anything about heart attacks, but it seemed like my insides was going to pop out, because I, my grandmother meant life to me, meant safety. And I was separated from her. And then I remember, there is a lapse of memory there. Not, this didn't happen right afterwards. There's a lapse of memory there. Then I remember being in, among, where there were many children. And I say, today, they call it the Children's *Block*. And, I was in, there were other children there. And a person came around, and some people ask me do I remember Dr. Mengele? Well I don't know if it was Dr. Mengele around, but a doctor did come around. And we had these type of what today I would call it a makeshift type bunk, a cubby type bed. I don't remember, I remember being fed, probably better than the adults. But the biggest thing I remember is I was given a lot, this doctor came around and I was given injections. I hated these injections because they hurt really bad.

MC: Were they given in your arm or...

US: They were given in my spinal column. The ones I remember the best is in, and I remember a couple of these injections in my arm. But, the ones that I can remember the best...

Other interviewer³: [asks Murray] Can I turn over here? That wall paper is making

³Since this was recorded at the American Gathering of Holocaust Survivors in Philadelphia, there were multiple

me look cross-eyed, the geometrics of it.

MC: Go ahead.

Other interviewer: Sorry.

MC: You remember the injections...

US: Yes. I remember the injections very well. They were very painful. And I remember after I was there a while-- again I have no concept of time-- I'm telling the story as I remember it back then, with, trying not to fill in, you know. It wasn't very long. I feared this man tremendously. He was like, what would you-- I feared him, this man that came around. And it wasn't just me. And then...

MC: Did you talk to the children that you were in the barracks with about what was going on? At this time you were about three years old or four years old?

US: No, I didn't talk. I didn't talk to them. I didn't talk. I was, if I did talk, I mean, I didn't talk much. I was very, very young. I wasn't quite three. I don't remember talking. I might have. I was with my sister, and I don't know how long [noise] convulsions [noise] at that time I didn't know what a convulsion was, but today, it would be called a convulsion. She was very sick. Then, I remember when my sister-- we were together-- my sister and I were kept together, in a, as I said, I said it was a makeshift like a, I say makeshift because it wasn't anything like you buy on the market today. It was a makeshift type bunk, but we couldn't get out of it. This is probably to keep us together. I'm guessing that. I remember when my sister died. It was morning, very early, and my sister was still sleeping. She had had a convulsion. Well, she had been like that all night, so I suppose she had been convulsing all night.

MC: This then was soon after you got...

US: Hmm?

MC: This was then soon after you got to Auschwitz?

US: Well...

MC: Again, you can't tell the time frame.

US: No, I can't tell the time frame. I'm sorry.

MC: It's okay.

US: But anyway, she probably had many convulsions in one night. Now this I'm filling in from my knowledge of convulsions today. But, at that time she had, you know, been sick like that all night. The reason I know she died was, she never woke up. But she was in the

interviewers and interviewees side by side in a large room together.

crib for quite some time. The man came around, and he looked at her. Maybe she wasn't dead yet. I don't know. But, it was around, what would have been around noon time, but maybe not. Because we were up very early, very, very early. So, she was with me. She, they just left her laying there. They just left her there. And then, what would have been around noon time they took her away from me. And I remember that was terrifying, because I clung, after my grandmother was gone, we clung to each other. And somehow I thought if I was with my sister, that somehow something would work out. I don't know. I had crazy ways of thinking.

MC: But you were still in the crib with her after she had passed away.

US: Yeah. Well, she was just laying there. And I presume she was dead. And then what would have been to me, what I would think now, around midday...

MC: Yeah.

US: Okay? They came and took her out. I never saw her again. No one ever saw her again. That was the end of-- and somebody asked me yesterday, "Are you sure she is dead?" And I said, "Yes." And I suppose I could say, I shouldn't say that. I am assuming, because they took her away, and I never saw her again. Then, it was the same thing as what I've already said. They continued to do things on me, and I developed tuberculosis, and I developed convulsions also. And I've had convulsions all my life. But I'm keeping back. Going back there, is, the next thing I remember well is-- I didn't know it was liberation; I didn't know the Russians had come-- I could tell you pretty much what the season was, because it was cold, mighty cold.

MC: But they were still feeding you? You still had enough food, to your recollection, to eat, besides...

US: I don't recollect hunger as much as I recollect the other.

MC: The pain.

US: Yeah. I, maybe we were hungry, but I don't recollect hunger as much as I recollect the injections, the pain, and then the convulsions I had were accompanied with pain [unclear] or something like that. I didn't know, of course, I was having convulsions. I didn't know that that was the label of it. Anyway, the day that we were liberated, it was confusing. Again, I didn't know it was liberation day. It was a day where there was like a mass confusion everywhere. And I didn't know. I was scared, okay? Mass confusion. It was just like people...

MC: Were you as frightened as you were on the train with your grandmother?

US: Yes, because I thought, well, I didn't know. Any change, so far in my whole life, anything that was a change was to the worst. So I was afraid. Anyway, somebody came in

and it was an adult and it was-- that's why I am wearing this sign-- is, it was not just one adult. There were some others. But I am referring to just myself. Somebody took my, opened my where I was-- I call it a cage, but as it is it was supposed to be a bed-- and took me. I don't know who that person was. It was a man. And took me for, out of the place, you know? And my recollections after that, my grandmother fills something in here for me. Because I kept in touch with my grandmother right until she died, by letter.

MC: So she stayed in Auschwitz the whole time also?

US: Yes.

MC: She [unclear].

US: Yes. She wasn't in the same place where I was in.

MC: Right. That was just for children.

US: Yeah, yeah. But, fortunately she was, wait a minute. This man took me, and I was with, he took me, and then I was with someone else, some other people. And they cared for me for a period of time. My grandmother later on filled in that I was separated from her after the liberation for six months. And she was found through the underground, I don't know. They, I can't, it's bad to interview somebody who was so young, because I can't fill in vital statistics. But they must have had a system working where they tried to get people back together, okay? So anyway, I was reunited with my grandmother late '45, late in the year. Because I remember it was getting cold, you know? And my grand- mother and I went to live in Dessau. I wrote that down. Whether, what do I remember after that? Ironically, my memories get dimmer. I remember...

MC: Do you remember Dessau?

US: Yes. I could draw a picture of it.

MC: Do you remember...

US: Well, I can't draw a picture of Dessau.

MC: Right. You mean...

US: I can draw a picture of the street. And then maybe it's even less than a block. But to me it was a big street. And then maybe that's because I was so little.

MC: Who took care of you at that time? I mean, who, you and your grandmother, how did you, do you recollect how you survived? Or, again, you were only three years old.

US: How we survived? We were living in a room, some, it seemed like it was a big building at one time. And again, I didn't think about it, you know? She, and I didn't think how she managed things. No, I didn't think. I know she took care of me, and I know I got better. I

was ill.

MC: They were happier times then?

US: What? Even though I was sick they were happier times.

MC: Right.

US: And I did get better. I mean the TB. I always had the convulsions. They were just, and they got worse as I got older. I can't say how many times I had a day or a week I had the convulsions then. But they seem to get better. When I go, when I was over the TB, well let me skip, when I finally met my father, which was at age six, five or six, 1948, I don't know whether I was five or six years old, I was subject to these convulsions about twice a week, which was much better, okay? That's all I can say after the post-war period behind the Iron Curtain. I remember being with my grandmother. I remember her cooking soups, and I just remember her being around. She was always around.

MC: Did you go to the, did your grandmother go to East Germany instead of the West because the Russians liberated the camp, or that's where she chose to go, or was there another reason she went there instead of going West? Even though you don't recollect it, just from what she told you?

US: It might have something to do with, my grandmother originated in Latvia. But I don't think she had favorable experiences with the Russians. She was sent to Siberia in her young days. I don't quite know why she went to the East, maybe because the Russians liberated it. She had opportunities much later on, when they opened the gates for the older people to come over. And my father wanted her to but she didn't.

MC: Your father came and you came?

US: No, this is where my father took, I'm skipping many, many years, okay?

MC: Okay. Let's go back to 1946, when you were in East Germany with your grandmother. Then what happened to you after that?

US: Okay, my grandmother, okay, I was ill. And the immediate illness that I had, aside from the convulsions that I had-- because I guess people thought I had the convulsions through emotional reasons or something-- I also had tuberculosis. My grandmother was able to get some kind of care for me, medical care or whatever. And I was put under medicine, some kind of medicine. And it was a long time before I recuperated from it, but I did. I used to cough a lot, an awful lot. And I was very short-winded. And sometimes I would get very sick to my stomach, and I didn't eat very well, and so on and so on and so on. But after that was over with, after I got better, I remember playing. I don't know why I have this particular

memory but I do. I remember my grandmother, there was a ruin across the street, just a ruin. And my grandmother warned me and warned me and warned me not to go into the cellars of the ruins. Today I understand. But then, see I, daylight wasn't anything so familiar and I love daylight. And I love going outside because I was always sick and I was either in hiding and I was either in horror, but by this time I had perceived and I understood that things weren't the same, that the bad men, the Nazis, okay, weren't around anymore. But I was still afraid of uniformed men. I was terrified of uniformed men. And even today, when I see men in uniform I back off. I don't like men in uniform. I don't like the police, because they have uniforms on. And it's, I can reason. I know why it is, so it doesn't, I can counter that. But I don't like uniformed men. Anyway, I remember playing in the ruins, by myself. I never remember playing with anybody. I was by myself. And I don't know whether I really played all that much. I don't remember much more, after that. It seems like I should remember more after than before because I was older, but I don't. The next immediate thing that I remember is the trip across the border.

MC: What year would this be?

US: 1948. And that was, my grandmother told me, that I was going to meet my dad. And she made it real excited like. It was a real big thing. And real happy. But I didn't want to meet my dad. I didn't want to leave my grandmother. I didn't care if I never met my dad. This had nothing to do with my dad personally; I didn't want to leave my grandmother. But she said that it wouldn't be for long. She lied to me. And she put me on the train with another woman, whom I don't know, okay? And she said that I would, you know, she would see me again, and it wouldn't be long. And I remember sitting on the train. This other woman said I could sit by the window as long as I could still see my grandmother. And I lied to the other woman and told her that I could still see my grandmother when I couldn't see her, because I was crying my heart out. I remember this was one of the, another one of those big heartache moments in my life. I remember my grandmother at a train station. I remember a white handkerchief. You could see it for the longest way. But I, somehow I knew I would never see her again. Then it was train, and this woman was with me on the train. Then from the, it was a long train ride. This was a different type of train, by the way. It had seats in it. It was like a, it had seats in it and it wasn't like the trains, like the transport trains. It didn't stink, and it wasn't crowded, you know, and so on. I was on a train for a while, and then from the train it was horse and wagon. And we were on the horse and wagon for a while. And then when the horse and wagon trip was done, three men joined us. And we received instructions which I had

already received from my aunt that we had to be very, very quiet. And once, that was the same thing that I had heard when I was very, very young. If you speak, you'll get killed. And I was terrified, because I associated it again with the same thing as before. And we, it seemed like walking and there was like a ditch next to a dirt road. And it was walking along the road and into the ditch and walking along the road and into the ditch. I don't remember the actual crossing. Some people ask me about the Berlin wall. I'm sure it wasn't built, but I don't even remember barbed wire or anything. I'm sure it was there but I just don't remember it.

MC: I don't think there was a demarcation. It was a free flow until 1960.

US: Was there?

MC: Yes.

US: Well we had to, we were very careful in getting across, so, but I don't remember any, like I just said, barbed wire or anything like that. I just remember having to be careful and I guess it was guarded or something like that. I don't know. Then, the next thing I remember is meeting my father. First the men left, and the woman went all the way. And I met my father, then the woman went elsewhere. Okay? And I met my father and I was like a stranger to him and I was, you know. I had to get to know him. He was a survivor from Dachau. He took me to where he was, which was Wanne-Eickel. That's near Bochum. And the rest of my memories really don't have much to do with the Holocaust. It was just...

MC: [unclear].

US: Okay. The only thing unique, my, somebody told me I should tell was the convulsions that I have, the convulsive disorder. And we had a-- when my father came over here-- I don't think he did, I don't remember him doing anything about it over there, that I can recall.

MC: What year did you come here again?

US: In 1952, Canada, no, I mean in Canada, okay.

MC: Yeah, right, so between '48 and '52 you really didn't have any medical care.

US: Not that I know of. Not that I know of. I don't recollect it. He put me in Toronto Children's Hospital. So I don't know, I presume it's probably still there. And I was there for a period of time. I don't mean five days, quite a period of time, for observation and study and to see what they could do for me, you know? And again, I was in a crib. It was a very horrifying experience, because I assoc-...

MC: The second time now, in Canada.

US: Yes.

MC: Because it brought back memories from the past.

US: Right. Right. I don't like any kind of a thing that has bars on it, or associations with a crib or something like that. But I had to stay in this crib because my dad, now I can reason now. I'm, I was 10 years old so I can explain it a little more thoroughly, is my dad explained to me that I had to be, and the nurses also, I had to be in this crib because if I had a convulsion I could fall out of the bed and I could get hurt and all this other stuff. But that doesn't take away your fear of cribs or something like that, you know? I was there for a long time, longer than I liked being there. But it was, and they were nice to me. And it's just that, you know. They put me on some kind of medication. I think it was phenobarbital. They thought I was an epileptic. But, anyway, the medication didn't help. I grew up, and I've been switched around from Dilantin to phenobarbital and a combination of both. I even took, there was another pill I took at one time. I can't remember the drug. And finally, after I was married, my husband said to me, he says, "Well, you know," he says, "I don't," he said he did not believe that there wasn't any help. So I went to a neurologist in Erie and he, not having seen me before, he did the whole EEG test and all that on me. And there's nothing on the EEG test. He was a little bit more honest and, or not, he was a little more informative. Sometimes doctors won't tell you anything. They just...

MC: I know.

US: You know? And that was the interesting part, that we don't have anything on the EEG test, and now they have brain scans and everything else. There's absolutely nothing. But my husband knew as well as I did that I had these convulsions. And before the convulsions I had pains out of my head. It's very strange pains, because they will go through my arms up my back, and it's almost like it had a pattern. It goes this way, and then through my arms and then up this, my temples, and then I would have a convulsion. So, my husband says, "Why don't we go to Cleveland Clinic?" And I was all for it. Anything. Anything, you know, to-- I said, "They don't know anything," but my husband, God bless him, he said, "You never know." So I went to Cleveland Clinic, and I can still see this Dr. Dinner, Dinner like what you eat? And he did the whole series of tests on me again. And somehow or other he was familiar with this problem. This was a Godsent. He had treated some people, I don't know how many or how few, with the same identical problem. And he prescribed a medication, Tegretol, a very expensive medication. Ironically, I met a doctor today who was a survivor and he, without my saying much of anything told me the name of this drug that I was taking. And I said, "How did you know?" And he said the reason he knew is this drug is being given for, and he labeled it,

and again I already forgot. It's a particular type of neurological damage from this kind of experimentation that has something to do with the emotions, something to do with the nervous system, and it works. And I...

MC: That's wonderful.

US: Yeah. As of two years I've lived an absolute normal life. I have no more convulsions. I take, of course I have to take them every day, but that's nothing, you know? But I, that's a very nice thing. It was awful when you have these...

MC: I'm sure it is.

US: Yeah.

MC: I'm sure it is. As you talk about it, it will make things easier as time goes on.

US: Mmm hmm.

MC: So that you can endure the rest of your life. Thank you for the interview. [tape off then on] Do you have any recollection of the face of the man that you saw when you were...

US: Yes, but I didn't know his name.

MC: In the pictures that have come up of Mengele lately, or in old movies that they show, like yesterday...

US: Mmm hmm?

MC: Does that face...

US: Yes, yes.

MC: Come back to you so...

US: Definitely. In fact, that face comes back so clearly that, you know, I said to my roommate who came with me, I said, "You know," I said, "this stirs some awful feelings up for me." I said, "I hate to have feelings of hate in me or anything like that because it'll destroy me more than anybody else." But I said, "My God, when I see that man's face," I said, "I want to be at his trial." And my satisfaction is, because I look at that face and it, you know what I think of? This is, now they, I've seen faces of him that don't seem to look like him. But maybe the face is more current. I remember him years ago, so he wouldn't quite look the same as, you know, as today. What it stirs up in me is I see this man, this man made me suffer terribly. This man came around and he, well, he wasn't nice to me. He wasn't kind to me. The story that I heard yesterday about him and that little boy in the white suit. Somebody asked me if I ever seen him. I said, "No." I said, "I never seen him come around with the little boy."

MC: But you were probably just in the crib all the time.

US: Yeah.

MC: Because you were only two-and-a-half...

US: Yeah.

MC: Three years old.

US: Yeah. I only, the only thing he ever did was he came, the only thing I can associate him with for that matter is, he came around and he gave me injections. He observed me, you know? And it-

[Tape one, side one ended.]

Tape one, side two:

MC: ...and you were aware of yourself...

US: No, there were other children there. I said yesterday to my roommate, I said, "You know, when the camp was liberated there were other children." I'm positive. I remember other children. And I said, "I would love to," and you know, I did find, I found them right here. I didn't, I had said this before I had any knowledge that some of these other kids were here, you know. I had just said to my roommate, I said, "There were other children in that *Block*." And I said, "Where are they?" You know? And I says, "I would just like to..." And then lo and behold in the afternoon I had run into two sets of twins, boy girl and I can't remember now if the other ones were the boy girl, but two sets of twins. And we were liber-, we were in the same exact place. We had to be, because they were there in the Children's *Block*. They were in Mengele's experiments, experiment children. So, I mean it was a real, it meant something to me. It really meant a big thing.

MC: That's wonderful.

US: Yeah. Because we can really relate.

MC: Thank you again.

[Tape one, side two ended; interview ended.]