

United States Holocaust Memorial Museum

Interview with Jenine Butnaru

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PREFACE

The following oral history testimony is the result of a videotaped interview with Jenine Butnaru, conducted by Linda Kuzmack on May 5, 1990 on behalf of the United States Holocaust Memorial Museum. The interview took place in Washington, DC and is part of the United States Holocaust Memorial Museum's collection of oral testimonies.

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JENINE BUTNARU
May 5, 1990

Q: Would you tell me your name, please?

A: Yah, sure. Uh, my name is Jenine Butnaru.

Q: Where were you born, and when?

A: I was born in Romania, near the city of Bac_u, uh June 25th, 1925.

Q: Tell me about your family--about your parents, first.

A: Yah. My parents uh...uh lived in Bac_u. My mother was not originally from Bac_u, [but] from another smaller city. But when she got married, she moved to Bac_u with my father. They had a grocery. And my mother used to help my father. They were working together. Uh, my father was a--how to say? A very special person. Uh, not because I am his daughter; but uh everybody used to say the same thing. He was a very good and uh kind, and very... Uh, a man who helped everybody, whenever everyone needed something, you know. He could...you could wake him up at midnight or 2 o'clock in the morning. And uh if he was called to help somebody, or to...to bring something to somebody, or you know to call a doctor or something; he would do anything for everybody and anybody. He was really a very good-at-heart uh man. And he suffered a lot during his lifetime, because he fought in the...the First War...World War...World War (laughter) First... Okay. And he was just on the first uh line of the battlefield. He was decorated uh on the battlefield, you know; and he was wounded at a certain moment. And um...he was taken uh prisoner, as a prisoner. Yah. And when uh...well, when the [First] World War was over, he came back to Bac_u, his native city. Uh... uh, they were uh a big family. They were 10 children--uh, two girls and eight brothers. Uh, well, my father had a stepmother; because uh the first wife of my grandfather uh passed away. So my grandfather remarried, so they had more children. So...but she was a very good mother for my husb...for my father, too. Excuse me. Uh, and they lived all in the same city, you know. Now, most of them are now in Israel. They emigrated during the years. And um...he was very close to...to his family, to his brothers and sisters. And um...when the Second World War broke out, you know, uh we were already in...we moved to Bucharest in '38. [In] 1938, we moved to Bucharest. Uh, my father has been very sick, very ill; and uh he lost everything--his shop, everything. So we moved to...to Bucharest. And um...he got a job, a very small job, over there; because he was very sick before. And um...we went to school. My sister--I have an older sister, two years older than myself. Excuse me--than myself. And um...then when, you know, the Fascists came to power and the...all the Jewish students and youngster were uh thrown out from all the schools, all grades of the schools, uh we went to this Jewish schools. And um...that were organized uh...then, at that time. Because uh the young people, they had...there were these dreadful measures against Jewish people and Jewish students. They had to go uh...in uh to...to the labor...labor camps, most of the youngster. And

um...they weren't allowed to...to be in the state school anymore. So a whole system of school had to be organized and put up, in order to fit in all these Jewish students and pupils--from kindergarten to elementary schools to high school and colleges. And um...the Jewish community, uh they...uh had the very bright uh leaders. And um...they organized all this, all this...the system of schools for everybody. Every student and child. And they printed books, schoolbooks. They printed university courses. And um...they uh...organized this...this classes. So we went to this uh Jewish... I went to Jewish high school; and my sister, and everybody. It was very hard at the beginning. Because they were not... You know, it was the beginning of this uh schools. And they had teachers, Jewish teachers; because the Jewish teachers were not allowed to...to teach in the state schools. Uh, very high level teachers. And um...but they had to rent, you know, apartments or rooms for the schools, you know. Uh, they organized the schools in some old synagogues or old Jewish schools, or just rented some other uh...uh apartments for the schools. So it was quite uh hard to adjust. But the teachers were so good. And everybody was so willing to...to learn, you know, and to...to be at the same level with the other students. And besides, uh the synagogues uh played a big role in uh keeping the uh Jewish tradition and culture and spirit, you know. So they organized all kinds of uh meetings and festivals. And um... Not just religious, uh from the point of view of religion; but culture in the same times. You know, tradition. And uh they had uh...you know, uh chorus--a music uh chorus, with students. And um...it was a place where we met, you know, and were able to discuss all our...all our, you know, disappointments and sufferings. And um...uh then they organized uh this uh...some professional schools and courses. Because uh they said, "Well, if not all the students will be able to attend the schools, at least they should have a profession later on." So they organized all kind of professional uh courses. And um...you know, technical, electrical--like to be a tailor, or to be a carpenter, or to be a shoemaker. And I went to a course of uh bookbinding. I took a course of [this], because I like to read, (laughing) you know, and being related more to this. So I...I went to take this course. And besides they organized the clinic. How to say, polyclinic--health center-- for the Jewish people. Because uh they couldn't go to be treated anymore to the state uh health centers. So they organized. And uh, you know, the best doctors and surgeons were treat...treating these people, sick people--Jewish sick people. And in the same time, they organized the...around this health center, uh medical courses for medical students. So they were able to attend these courses. (Sigh)

Q: Tell me what...what your parents were doing during this time. And what was your daily life like as a family?

A: Yah. Well, as I said, we...we went to all the holidays, to the synagogue, to all the festivals. Um, they tried, you know, to...to make the best of the life that was, you know, going on that time. And um...they had a lot of frustration, of course. You know, because uh...uh they felt like pariah, you know, among other people. You know, everybody feeled... felt the same. And um...we tried to be as much as possible together with our friends and family, of course. And um...you know, not to...to suffer of spiritually too much, you know. And um...they tried to...to help us, you know, with, you know, what we needed to have; everything we needed, you know, our parents. So they didn't have too many meals at that time, you know, in this

period of time. Because they lost almost everything. And besides, because my father had a...a store, you know, uh they were obliged to give to the state and to the army uh clothes and food. You know, I remember. I was, you know, still quite young. Uh, my parents had to buy; you know, they...they loaded two big couches...coaches...carriages, coaches, with, you know, clothes--all kinds of clothes and boots and winter coats--and food and everything. Uh, you know, they [NB: the Romanian government] said that uh due to the fact that they [NB: her parents] had a...a grocery--they had a shop, you know--they must have been very uh...at least rich or something like this. So they had to...to give a lot of things. Really, they had to buy new things, just new things. Not, you know, old things--clothes, or... So then, you know, linen for beds and pillows and um...comforters and um...all kinds of things, you know. Because they were sent uh on the battlefields, for the army on the front. Anyway. So it was uh really hard for them. Really hard for them. But they had to do it. They were obliged, you know, to do this. And um besides, uh all the Jews were obliged, you know, to clean the streets from the snow. To, you know, to uh do all kinds of uh "city work," how to say, you know. But especially the Jews were put to clean the streets and the snow; and to...to keep clean everything, you know, in the city. Which was, you know, hard for older people like my...my parents. Nothing for younger people; but it was harder for older people to do things like this. And besides, you were always afraid that somebody will knock at your door. And, you know, there were so many people arrested, you know, for no reason. And uh you always lived in a kind of terror, you know; scared that somebody will... When you heard the uh bell ringing, you were scared who...who could be. You know, you were afraid somebody would come and take your father, take your mother, arrest you. And um...this was the way of life, then. And um...as I said, uh they put up this uh very good schools and colleges and universities. Were uh brilliant teachers, you know. They organized even a uh...uh, how to say, uh medical uh...uh college of medicine...college of medicine. Was a brilliant teachers. Very well known teachers. And the leaders of the Jewish communities, you know, who were in the uh...the underground resistance movement in...in Romania. You know, they did...they organized all this.

Q: Did you have any contact with this underground resistance?

A: Yah. Of course! Of course!

Q: Tell me about that.

A: Because the Chief Rabbi, it was Alexander Safran the Chief Rabbi of Romania, at that time. It was a very well known Zionist and activist and leader--uh, Dr. [Wilhelm] Filderman. It was another one, Benvenisti.¹ Then it was one who was called uh...[Unescu (ph), Marcu Unescu (ph)]. He organized the best college for students on every field. It was called uh...uh [Unescu (ph)] College, in Bucharest...in Bucharest. And um...

¹ Misu Benvenisti was president of the local Zionist Organization and a member of the underground Jewish Council organized by Dr. Wilhelm Filderman.

Q: Maybe I'm not clear. My...my question is, did you have any contact with this underground? Were you involved in helping with any of it?

A: Uh, yah. You know how we were involved? We uh...we worked as volunteers. Uh, in the hospitals--Jewish hospitals--doing all kinds of...you know, of work it was uh needed. Uh, I worked serving in the canteens, you know, where poor people, you know, they didn't have what...where to eat, what to eat. And they organized these canteens. And we worked as volunteers through this underground organization. Yah. You know, in the hospitals, in this canteens. Uh... In libraries, Jewish libraries, we used to work. But I worked in a canteen, and I worked in a hospital. Yah, just as volunteers. Besides going to this uh binding book courses and going to high school. You know, besides this, uh I worked as a volunteers for a few years. Yah.

Q: When did things begin to change for you?

A: Well, after '44. Uh, when, you know, the war was over and uh we were liberated. Because we were in Bucharest, in uh...

Q: Wait a minute. Excuse me. I'm unclear. You had said some... Let's go back...before '44. You told me earlier that in 1941 you were in Bucharest. Uh, were you there during the uh massacre of Bucharest?

A: Oh, yah. Yah. Yah. During the rebellion in '41. Yah.

Q: Let's talk... Talk about 1941.

A: Yah.

Q: What happened?

A: Yah. The...you know, the...the fascist Legionnaires--or they were called the Organization Green Shirts--uh, they were very antisemitic, of course. They organized this rebellion in Bucharest, in Ia_i and other cities. And they killed a lot of Jewish people, and they put fire to their houses and to their stores. And um...it was really a terror for the Jewish...uh...the Jewish people. Really. We were scared. We had to stay all the time, almost, home. You know, we were scared to walk on the streets. Yah. And um...we were not allowed to do anything, really; to participate in anything, or to do anything. Because uh they could kill us. Yah.

Q: Can you describe what happened as they came through? As the Legionnaires came through, what did you do?

A: Uh... We...we just uh...you know, we couldn't do nothing, really. You know, we tried through this Jewish organization to...to do something with this underground resistance organizations. Uh, to help, as I said--going to hospitals, [as] volunteers, or going to uh...to the canteens to serve. And um...going to this uh Jewish school that they organized. Because we were young. I was young, anyway. You know, I couldn't do uh something uh different. Because it was very dangerous, first of all. And we were not allowed.

Q: During the massacre of Bucharest...

A: Yah.

Q: ...was there a... Did you see a lot of burning? Did you see any of the killing?

A: Yah. Yah. I...I...we saw at the morgue... You know, we went to the morgue, where around there we saw people standing in line to recognize people who were killed. And we saw a lot of uh corpses. You know, bringing in corpses all the time. And I saw all this fires going all over, you know, this burning. The whole street was burning. And it was not far from our house, because I could see the flames on the...on the sky from our house. How they put fire to all the houses and the stores of the Jewish people in this Jewish area. Yah.

Q: How long did the massacre last?

A: Uh, it uh lasted uh a few days. A few days in January. January '41. Yah.

Q: What did you do after it was over?

A: Uh, after it was over... Well, everybody started, you know, to...to look around. To see what...what happened. And life started to, you know, to resume its...how to say, its way. Or its normal...in a way, normal way, you know. But it was a very hard period of time. It was after such a terror, you know. And um...such a scare period of time, scareful period of time, for everybody. And then, you know, they...the other, the Antonescu government, you know, he took the power. So things changed, in a way, a little bit. You know, not they ...it was better for the Jews. But uh anyway uh they were no more killing after the...the Legionnaires, you know, uh uh were no more in power. But it was another hard period for...for the Jewish people with even under Antonescu, until '44; because they were again...against the Jewish people, you know. There were all these deportations, and um...all the...the uh measures against the Jewish people, you know. The Jewish population in general.

Q: Can you tell me about the deportations? What did you see?

A: Yah. Uh, we lived in...in Bucharest, you know. And from Bucharest, uh uh not many people were deported from Bucharest. From other cities, you know. A lot of cities. And from Bessarabia, and from the part of uh...the border with Hungaria [**NB:** Hungary], uh many,

many Jewish people were deported. From Bucharest itself, not too many were deported. I don't know how we escaped in this way, you know. We didn't escape the bombardments, for instance. In '44, when the American came...before the Russian came to liberate Romania, uh...the Americans started to bombard the railroads. And there's a city where--uh uh Ploie_t_i, where is uh the oil, you know-- because they wanted to...uh they didn't want to allow the Germans, you know, to advance to...to do... They had to cut the Germans [off]. So the Russians came, and the Germans left. So they uh tried to cut. They bombarded the city, not to give the Germans the necessary oil to fight uh farther, you know. So we had big bombardments even in Bucharest.

Q: What did you do?

A: Yah. Yah. We...we stayed there in the cellars all the time, you know, with pots and pans over our heads. And scared to death, really. Because they were heavy bombardments. Because as I said, beside the oil areas--uh, Ploie_t_i is a city very close to Bucharest. Very close. And so they crossed...you know, they flew over Bucharest to go to Ploie_t_i, you know; and from Ploie_t_i to Bucharest. And to cut the...the Germans--who were, you know, advancing. And um...so they bombard Bucharest and Ploie_t_i and other cities. So it was very, very scary, and very... You...you could be killed. We spent almost all the time in the cellars. Yah. The bombs were fall...falling, you know, very close to our house.

Q: Tell us about what happened after that.

A: Yah. After uh then, the Russian, uh they liberated. So we said, "Now, we'll have freedom. And our life will be much better and easier." You know, the Communists, they came to power. Of course, it was better in a way. But uh still, you know, um...you couldn't uh be very happy. Because uh it was for a certain period of time was better for Jew...the Jewish people, because they could get jobs and they could uh, you know, have some uh, how to say, "opportunities," you know, to work and to...to have a little bit a better life. But then, it was again uh hard...hard. Because they started to...to close, you know; to uh give less uh opportunities and um "advantages," how to say, you know, for the Jewish people. So we started to think, you know, for the future of our daughter, especially, you know.

Q: Wait. Let's back up, because I didn't know you'd gotten married.

A: Yah. Yah. Yah.

Q: Tell us about meeting your husband.

A: Yah. Yah. I was uh... I was um working at the Writer's Association in Bucharest for many years. And my husband, he was a writer. He worked in this field--you know, culture field. So he came over there. And so we met at the Writer's Union. And then, after two years we got married. Yah. And um we...we had our daughter. And then, we said... We couldn't leave

earlier, because my parents have been very sick. My father died, then my mother was very sick. So we couldn't leave earlier. We wanted to leave earlier, but we had to stay with my mother. You know, we couldn't leave her. Because my sister, she left before, the country. And um...when we heard... You know, after my mother died...after almost two years, we...we left the country. We...we uh started, we...we decided to emigrate, you know.

Q: And this was in what year?

A: In '76. Yah. In '76, we came here. So, as I said, for uh...we are not anymore young people. And it's hard to start from the beginning. So...but we saw just that our daughter wouldn't have any...any future, you know. Because they always asked about your background, if you want to go...she wanted to go uh to uh the university, you know. Uh, they...the Communists always said, you know, "Your background is not good. You are not from uh workers, you know...'background,' how to say, you know." If you are intellectual or something, or if your parents had a shop, you know, it means you are not good uh citizens, how to say. Not the right uh level. So it would have been very, very hard for her to get into the university, you know, to...to learn, to study. And um...we said that uh we have to think at her future, you know. And that's why we decided to...to leave. It was hard to start from the beginning, and at our age. But for...just for her, we decided that we have to leave. And we are really very glad that here she had the opportunity. And she could go to school and um...uh study and um... It's really a great country, where if somebody works hard and wants to achieve something, you know. And you have all the opportunities and all the uh doors open, how to say. And um...uh regardless of your beliefs or, you know, race or whatever, you can really achieve whatever you want if you really want and work hard, you know. And the freedom, that's something that it's the first, you know, the most uh...uh wonderful thing, you know, that you can have, really.

Q: Is there anything you want to add?

A: Uh, well, that's uh...I'm...we are really very happy here, and um we are very uh grateful that uh this country, you know, allowed us to...to come here and um to...to work and to be free. And um...for our daughter to...to achieve something, you know, to do whatever she wanted to do and to...to be able to raise a family. And uh to speak whatever you...you...to speak your mind, how you say. You know, to say whatever. In Romania, you were afraid to talk, you know. You are...are always uh under the uh threat that somebody is going to hear you and will tell the security; and you will be arrested, you know, and put uh into prison, into jail. And here, you have freedom of speech, and of everything, you know. Uh, whatever you think, you can uh fight for your uh beliefs, you know. For whatever you...you...you feel you like to...to do or to say. Yah.

Q: Okay. Thank you very much.

A: Thank you. Thank you.

PHOTOGRAPHS

- (1) Six men in uniform, circa 1919. At the far left, is Jenine's father. She explains that he was taken prisoner, along with his comrades, during World War I.
- (2) Six young people in street clothes--four women and two men. Jenine is on the far right of the picture; the others are her colleagues. The picture was taken in 1945 in a park in Bucharest.
- (3) A young woman and a young girl--Jenine and her older sister, Sophia. This is a pre-war photograph, but no specific date is given.