

## Doc Chat Episode Seven Transcript

KATE CORDES: All right. I think we can get started now. It's a few minutes after the start time. I'd like to welcome you all to Doc Chat. I'm Kate Cordes, the Associate Director for Reference and Outreach at the Stephen H. Schwarzman Building. Doc Chat is a weekly program series from the New York Public Library Center for Research in the Humanities that digs deep into the stories behind the library's most interesting collections, and highlights the way that teachers can incorporate them into the classroom. In today's episode, Mila Sholokhova, Director of the Dorot Jewish Division, is joined by Meri-Jane Rochelson, Professor Emerita at Florida International University. Today's discussion will be centered on Professor Rochelson's father's memoir and her work on editing the transcript. The transcript is part of the American Jewish Committee's oral history collection here at the library. Our guest will speak for about 10 to 15 minutes before we open up the conversation. During the program, feel -- feel free to use the chat function to share general comments. Make sure you change the setting on your chat from 'panelists' to 'panelists and attendees' so everyone is included in your comments. Once we begin the question and answer segment, we'll use the Q&A function at the bottom of your screen rather than the chat function to share your questions and comments. If you wish to remain anonymous, please click that option before submitting your question. So we'd also like to know a little more about you. So I'm going to launch a poll that I hope you can fill out while Mila introduces the episode. On to you, Mila.

LYUDMILA SHOLOKHOVA: Thank you very much, Kate. Before we do anything, let's listen to Eli Rochelson's voice and please feel free to leave your impressions in the chat.

[ELI ROCHELSON]: On 28th of October, which I describe in the Tog in 1946 in New York in my article, I describe as coming from the airport from work we found the -- all ghetto were in a very depressed mood. There were people crying and so on. There was an order that no work tomorrow and that everybody should come to a certain --

[INTERVIEWER]: An umschlagplatz?

[ELI ROCHELSON]: What?

[INTERVIEWER]: An umschlagplatz or something like that?

[ELI ROCHELSON]: Yeah. That's right. A certain area and nobody should stay home, even sick children, otherwise they would be killed in the houses. And they should be six o'clock there. Then came the known selection where they -- where they took certain persons to the right and certain to the left, and then they took away 11,000 people and in a day or two shot them on the fortification near -- near the ghetto.

LYUDMILA SHOLOKHOVA: Thank you. And so -- Meri-Jane, welcome. Please tell us a little bit about your father.

MERI-JANE ROCHELSON: Thank you, Mila. My father, Elijah Rochelson, whose voice you just heard, was born in 1907 in the City of Kovno, which is now Kaunas, Lithuania. We need the next slide, please? Thank you. He is the second from the left in that picture holding onto his mother's hand. The family was religiously observant, but they were also what we would recognize as modern. In 1927, my father graduated from the Russian gymnasium or high school in Kovno, which is where he met his future wife, Serafima. He and Serafima were married in 1934 and they had a son who they named Boris, whose nickname was Borya. Serafima and Borya did not survive the Holocaust. But in the early years of his marriage and parenthood, my father served in the Lithuanian army, worked as a bookkeeper at night, and attended medical school. He received his M.D. degree in June 1940. In June 1941, a year later, the Nazis invaded and the Jews of Kovno were forced to leave their homes throughout the city and move into a ghetto which was small and crowded and had no running water and only meager food rations. From there, many Jews were taken and slaughtered and what my father described in the episode you just heard was the Great Action of the Kovno ghettos, the first time one of these [inaudible] took place. However, he and his family survived until the ghetto was liquidated in July 1944. At that time, everyone who was left in the Kovno ghetto was taken by train, cattle car, to concentration and labor camps. The men were taken to Dachau Kaufering and the women were taken to Stutthof. Borya went with our father but he was soon taken with a large group of other boys to Auschwitz. As the Germans realized they were losing the war in the spring of 1945, they started to move prisoners out of the camps. My father was on a train out of Kaufering when the Allies bombed it, killing many Jews along with Nazis. My father and others managed to escape the train and run into the forest where, after a day or more, they -- maybe two or three days -- they were liberated by American soldiers. My father helped set up the hospital in the Landsberg [inaudible] Displaced Person Camp, very close to where he was liberated and he directed the outpatient clinic. In June 1946, he was able to immigrate to the United States where he re-established his medical credentials and resumed work as a physician. He also met my mother, Pearl, and they had two children, myself and my brother, Dr. Burt Rochelson. In 1974, my father was interviewed for a project on Holocaust survivors, an oral history project organized by the American Jewish Committee. The audiotapes and the transcripts are now housed in the New York Public Library, and they form the basis of today's Doc Chat. Mila will now talk in more detail about the entire AJC oral history section.

LYUDMILA SHOLOKHOVA: Yes. Thank you so much, Meri-Jane. American Jewish Committee oral history collection is one of the most largest oral history collections in the United States. It contains over 6,000 hours of taped interviews, 150,000 pages of transcript, received from 2,250 informers, mostly in the 1970s and 1980s and documenting all aspects of the American Jewish experience in the 20th century. There are several subcategories in -- within the collection, such as the American Jewish women, Jews in sports, [inaudible] Jews, Soviet Jewish immigration, and Holocaust survivors. In 1990s, the entire collection was donated to the New York Public

Library where it is now available to the researchers, family members, journalists, scholars, and students. The sizable group of the Holocaust survivors -- interview the Holocaust survivors -- constitutes probably one of the most dramatic parts of the entire collection. Its importance will become even more apparent today as we examine transcript and the audio clips of one such interview [inaudible] with Meri-Jane who is the daughter of the Holocaust survivor and the subject of the interview. Now let's take a look at a picture with the page of the audio clip. So Meri-Jane, what is all this editing?

MERI-JANE ROCHELSON: Okay. So this is actually a transcript of what you just heard. And you see it is covered with at least two kinds of editing. After they did these interviews, the survivors were told that they'd receive a typed transcript. This was before the era of word processing and they were asked to edit the transcript as they saw fit and to return it to the American Jewish Committee. Well, my father never actually finished editing. I ended up submitting the complete transcript not too long ago. But I'll explain what he was doing in his blue ink editing and what I was doing in my pencil editing. My father saw this interview as possibly the basis for a book. And he wanted to get in the most important information, especially about his Holocaust experience. And what he did on this page, as you'll see, right in the middle where the editing is very heavy, is he has added detail. So what you heard was, yes, that's right -- a certain area. And nobody should stay home, even sick children, otherwise they'd be killed in the houses. They should be six o'clock there. Then came the known selection with persons to the right and certain to the left. And then they took 11,000 people and in a day or two shot them on the fortification near the ghetto. Now that's pretty unsettling as it is. But my father felt that he needed to describe it more fully. First of all, he corrected the word fortification to fort because the place was actually called the Ninth Fort. But then as you look at what else he wrote -- even sick children, otherwise those who -- will be -- they will be killed in the houses. They should be 6 a.m. there. Those who do not obey will be killed in their houses. And then in the cold, dark, snowy morning -- and we see that -- I don't -- I don't think you can see my cursor, but if you can just find it and follow along -- snowy is added to "in the cold, dark morning." Cold ghetto, was sick on stretchers, assembled in one place, at noon the German brass came and the selection started. So you see, cold, dark, and snowy. Now this was October 28th. Today is October 22nd. It's unlikely any of us will see snow anytime soon. But in Kaunas, Lithuania, northern Europe, it was snowy as other documentation of this event confirmed. It was snowing and they were standing there in the cold and the dark and the snow. And they were there, as my father indicates here, for six hours. So it's not just they were there at 6 a.m. and boom, boom, boom, they did the selection. No. They made them stand there with their children, with their sick relatives, in the cold and the snow. Now, that's my father's editing which you find throughout the document. You also find my editing. At a certain point, I went to the New York Public Library and listened to the entire audiotaped interview and with the transcript in front of me. And with a pencil, I corrected things that the -- the transcriber didn't hear correctly. I was more familiar with my father's voice and his story. So you see here, right, it says "which I describe in the talk in 1946." No. It's which I describe in the Tog in 1946, and my father said in New York, so I added that. And what is the Tog? I added in square brackets because it's additional information, Der

Tog. The name of a Yiddish newspaper where my father published an article about the Great Action on its fifth anniversary, October 28th, 1946. I will add that I found a copy of that article in the New York Public Library in the microfilm collection.

LYUDMILA SHOLOKHOVA: This is amazing. Now let's take a look at the very important photograph from the family archives that will prepare -- prepare us for the next episode and, Meri-Jane, maybe you can comment about this unique photograph.

MERI-JANE ROCHELSON: Sure. This is the only photograph we have of my father during the Holocaust. And the reason we have it is that there was a man named Zvi Kadushin, later known as George Kadish, who took many pictures in the Kovno ghetto, hiding -- he was -- he was also an inmate of the ghetto and he hid a camera behind a buttonhole of his shirt or his coat and took these pictures. And he gave this one to my father, I think after the liberation. You can see him, if you -- if you look at these people as forming a kind of triangle or pyramid, my father is at the apex of it with that very dark color and a hat with a brim. And he has the number 1 next to himself. There are notes on the back showing that number 1 is him, number 2 to your right, I believe, is his wife Serafima, and Borya is there, too. I'm not entirely sure which person Borya is. They were being taken to a labor camp in the suburbs of Kaunas.

LYUDMILA SHOLOKHOVA: Yeah.

MERI-JANE ROCHELSON: And I'd say it was November '43. And after a few months, unfortunately, they all got sick and they went back to the Kovno ghetto to the Kovno ghetto hospital. And the next audio clip is about an incident that took place there --

LYUDMILA SHOLOKHOVA: Yeah.

MERI-JANE ROCHELSON: -- in the Kovno ghetto hospital.

LYUDMILA SHOLOKHOVA: Next -- next audio clip is longer, so -- and so please let's listen together and I invite you to leave comments in the chat.

[ELI ROCHELSON]: And here stand the -- one of the tragic chapter of the children's selection.

[INTERVIEWER]: Is this in 1943?

[ELI ROCHELSON]: You can see right there [inaudible].

[INTERVIEWER]: Is this in 1943?

[ELI ROCHELSON]: This is in 1944, the 27th of March.

[INTERVIEWER]: Uh-huh.

[ELI ROCHELSON]: I want to stop and tell this story because it is a -- a -- a -- a situation which I really cannot comprehend how it happened that the Germans let it, too. And I would not want to make them sense or -- or anything because they got to know that on the 27th of March, nobody goes to work and all children should be delivered to certain place otherwise they will go and take them forcefully.

[INTERVIEWER]: All children under 13?

[ELI ROCHELSON]: All children -- yeah, under 13 I would say. Yeah. Thirteen, 14. Of course, majority didn't comply with the -- with the order -- with the request and they simply waited and tried to hide them. As a matter of fact, in the hospital, was where they were hiding children in refrigerators. Wherever they could -- the sick children. And the orders -- they were going from house to house and just taking them and surrounding and taking them. Some mothers didn't give them away and they were fighting with the guards and the guards shoot the mothers and took away the children. Most mothers didn't want to give away infants or small little children. Now when I heard this, I tell to the doctor -- look, he was in a special infectious division of the hospital. I said, look, my son had meningitis and he's probably better if you bring him to me because they were taking them definitely away. I was recuperating from pneumonia. And the Gestapo came and start to go from one bed to another and to another and I heard screaming. A woman said, "That's my husband, the doctor. Where you are taking him?" They say -- it was an elderly man. He say, "That's not your business. I won't let you. Okay? You don't like it, then join your husband." He took her and him. And then I [inaudible] took all the children. I was laying in the -- in the bed there and I took my child under my knees and covered him with a blanket. Now here came in the doctor, which I think they [inaudible] him. They came in, the Gestapo. One man came in and I probably -- you imagine I was probably pale like that. And he said, "Who is this?" to Dr. Zakharin [assumed spelling]. He says, "This is our doctor. He's a medical man and he's sick at the moment, but he is okay. He will be able to work very quick." He said, "Is that so?" And he looked and looked at him and looked at me. And he says, "Let me look under the bed." He looked under the bed and he left. And he heard -- I heard him saying to the others "[Inaudible], you shouldn't go in there." I'm sure he knew there was a child under my legs. I think I -- because you couldn't hide it. I was laying like this with the legs like that. And sure enough, then he stayed until the Auschwitz.

LYUDMILA SHOLOKHOVA: Well, this is entirely heartbreaking. That's [inaudible]. Here is a transcript of the -- of the audio clip you see on the screen and you can see that the extensive editing of these pages and the highly emotional tone of the interview that we have just heard, really prompt a lot of questions that perhaps we can address today. And we'll probably -- we'll do this in the discussion part, but now there is one question for Meri-Jane. So why do you say

the -- the memoirs are so important?

MERI-JANE ROCHELSON: Okay. Well, the memoirs are important evidence of all these things that occurred. The Holocaust survivors are mostly gone. The ones who are alive today are all elderly and they were teenagers at the time of the Holocaust, most of them. Some of them were fortunate enough to have been children who survived, but children and teenagers -- they are now elderly. the Holocaust ended 75 years ago. Soon we won't have any living witnesses. These memoirs give the survivors a voice. Now there are limitations to using memoirs as evidence because, as we should know, memory is fallible. We don't always remember every single detail of something that happened. We often remember things incorrectly. But with enough of these memoirs and I have submitted the names of several of them to the NYPL for the blog that will come next week, I think. When you have enough of these memoirs, you can put them together and you can see that these things took place and that they affected people's lives. And if the details differ in one way or another, you have a range of how these things were remembered. But the fact that they have happened and that -- and that people told their stories, people who didn't even know each other, told the same stories, this is very important evidence and it -- it's a human voice. It gives the human -- the human texture to an event that we often hear about in large numbers, like six million. Well, these are those who survived. So they are very important.

LYUDMILA SHOLOKHOVA: Yeah. Thank you, Meri-Jane. I think now it's time for discussion and we will turn over to Kate to open the discussion now.

KATE CORDES: One of our first questions is about, you know, you described why -- the importance of oral histories and people writing down their memories, but what would you say the limitations are in using these as evidence?

MERI-JANE ROCHELSON: Well, again, the limitations are that memory can be faulty. And I'll give you an example. I talked about how in his interview about the Great Action, he said that they began the selections at noon. Well, at around the same time, my father did another interview with my brother. It was a somewhat more detailed interview and it formed the starting point for the book, *Eli's Story*, which you'll hear about at the end. Anyway, there he says they started the selections at 9:00 or 10:00. So that's a difference of a couple of hours. But when you think about it, they were either standing in the snow and the cold for three or four hours, or they were standing in the snow or the cold for six hours. It doesn't make a huge difference, but it is a difference. What historians do is they take these memoirs and put them together and figure out a historical narrative that we can use. So this is a primary source. History books are a secondary source -- and articles -- that are created from the primary source and -- and -- and you have to really use both. You have to look at both of them to get a complete story. Because people will remember certain things and not everything, that makes memoirs limited. But because historians are putting things together, we sometimes miss the details. We need to use both. I use both in the book.

KATE CORDES: Another question from Nora. Mila, do you think you could talk a little bit about finding these oral histories in the digital collections? For example, what would someone -- I'm mispronouncing this -- if Nora wanted to search for Der Tog in the digital collections, would she find these?

LYUDMILA SHOLOKHOVA: Yeah. [Inaudible] The materials actually are accessible mostly by appointment. So if you'd like to access the collection, so the list of the oral histories interview is available on the New York Public Library website, Dorot Division. If you go to the Dorot Division and you will find American Jewish Committee's oral history collections. There is a list of all interviews. But it's only partially available online because of the copyright concerns. So you can't really listen to the audio files there, but you can read about 300 transcripts. Otherwise, it's actually -- access is not really restricted. You just need an appointment. But in order to get a copy of the transcript or to get a copy of the audio files then, well, we'll need to go through the copyright clearance process and get in touch with the -- with the descendants of the -- or the family of the informer.

MERI-JANE ROCHELSON: I have made this particular transcript and audio available to researchers who make use of them in the library.

LYUDMILA SHOLOKHOVA: Yes. There will be actually a blog post following the program that will actually include several attachments with the -- with the transcripts and with the audio files, even more complete than the ones that you heard and seen on the screen today. So -- and there will be also a list of selected bibliography to support the teaching of the Holocaust in the classroom. So that -- the blog post will follow in several days -- in a few days, actually. And it will be available online and, of course, I encourage everyone to get in touch with me and with Meri-Jane, of course, if you have any questions. So here is the book that Meri-Jane has recently published. I'll just go to the next screen. Sorry. And that's -- so Meri-Jane wrote a book about her father's life and it's available for free download from the New York Public Library website with a library card.

MERI-JANE ROCHELSON: It's called *Eli's Story: A Twentieth-Century Jewish Life*.

LYUDMILA SHOLOKHOVA: Yeah.

MERI-JANE ROCHELSON: Yeah.

KATE CORDES All right. Thank you very much, Mila, Meri-Jane. I think we can wrap up now. We're just about out of time. I would like to, as Mila said and stated, documents from this episode and additional resources along with the video and transcript of the episode will be published shortly in a post on our website which we'll send out to everyone who registered for this event. All previous episodes and their videos will be found there as well on our website. One difference in this episode is that the audio clips you played, as mentioned, are not available on our digital collections, but we'll give directions to you how to access them in our blog posts.

So this episode certainly showed us how the power of first-person audio and what it does -- it informs history. And I just want to let you all know that the library does continue to collect audio interviews to this day, including our new project, Pandemic Diaries, which I'll put a link to in the chat. And this project seeks personal stories about people's lives during the COVID-19 pandemic. And if you're interested in participating and sharing your story or know of someone who would like to share their story, I really encourage you to participate. Let me just pop that in here. To end, also just a plug for future episodes. Doc Chats are held every Thursday at 3:30. Our next one, on Thursday, October 29th, we'll tackle Malcolm X's handwritten notes from one of his most iconic speeches. You can register in the link that I'm about to put in the chat. And -- you can go -- you can see here on the slide that share -- oops -- there we go. You can follow us on Twitter for more news and you can sign up for our Research Matters newsletter which will give you all the updated news on our collections, services, programs, and reopening plans delivered to your inbox. So once again, thank you to our presenters and thank you to the attendees for the conversation and for joining us. Thank you very much.

MERI-JANE ROCHELSON: Thank you, Kate and Mila. Thank you so much. It was a pleasure really working with both of you. Thank you.

KATE CORDES: Thank you.

LYUDMILA SHOLOKHOVA: Yeah.

MERI-JANE ROCHELSON: Bye, bye.

LYUDMILA SHOLOKHOVA: Bye.