

United States Holocaust Memorial Museum

Archives

Oral History Interviews of the Kean College of New Jersey Holocaust Resource Center

**Interview with David Dorfman
March 8, 1989
RG-50.002*0032**

PREFACE

On March 8, 1989, David Dorfman was interviewed on videotape by Bernard Weinstein on behalf of the Kean College of New Jersey Holocaust Resource Center. The interview took place in Union, New Jersey and is part of the Research Institute Archives of the United States Holocaust Memorial Museum's collection of oral testimonies.

Kean College of New Jersey Holocaust Resource Center created a summary and time-coded notes for the interview. The reader should bear in mind that these finding aids attempt to represent the spoken word in the recorded interview, yet have not necessarily been verified by the interviewee. The finding aids should not be used in place of the interview itself.

Rights to the interview are held by the Kean College of New Jersey Holocaust Resource Center. The United States Holocaust Memorial Museum houses a copy of the interview as a result of a contributing organization agreement with the Kean College of New Jersey Holocaust Resource Center. Details concerning the Museum's rights to use and reproduce the interview are contained in the contributing organization agreement.

**Summary of the
Interview with David Dorfman
March 8, 1989**

David Dorfman was born on January 22, 1933 in Brussels, Belgium. He was five years old when the war broke out. At the time, he was on a boat with his father crossing the English Channel from Antwerp to Liverpool. David and his father left for the United States in 1939. The rest of his family was in prison managed by the Vichy government in Gurs, France in 1942. His mother was brutalized in prison and became pregnant by one of the guards. She was given a pass to give birth away from camp. His half sister's name is Claudine. At that point, his mother escaped with the baby and joined the Maquis, the French Underground in 1943. She later remarried an Auschwitz survivor. David arrived in the United States in September 1939 and grew up on the lower east side of Manhattan. His full sisters, Mary and Irene, came to the United States in 1947 from Switzerland. David expresses his feelings towards the Holocaust through his art work, some of which he brought to the interview. His mother's recent death inspired him to revisit and explore the Holocaust through painting. These paintings include scenes of Bergen-Belsen, Chelmno, Nordhausen, Majdonek, and Ravensbruck. He tries to show through his paintings the human extremes of tenderness and cruelty. David lives in Mine Hill, New Jersey. He is married with three children.

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**Time-coded notes of the
Interview with David Dorfman
March 8, 1989**

01:00:00

Born in Brussels when the war broke out. He was crossing the channel from Antwerp to Liverpool. Remembers sirens going off at sea. He was only five years old. He hated to be separated from his family. Remembers "a sea-sickening trip". His father was with him. He had a grandmother in the United States (his father's mother) David's father was trying to find "a new life" in the United States. David did not know why his father left his family to go to the United States. The rest of the family was in Poland, except for another grandmother (his mother's mother) and a great aunt in France.

01:04:00

Doesn't know of anyone except for an uncle who survived. Mother and sisters got to France in 1942. Imprisoned in Gurs, France. Originally Jews were there from only France and Germany. Gurs was managed by the Vichy government. Later people were brought there from different countries. The Red Cross and others did nothing. Jewish organizations helped but were primarily concerned with bringing children across the border to Switzerland. His two sisters got out through Switzerland.

01:07:00

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His mother was brutalized by French secret police. She said the camp was "a horror". His mother was very small, soft, and compassionate. But she became cynical and desperate in camp. There were sixteen camps in France. Everyone thought they would be all right and the war would be over, once they were shipped out.

01:10:00

Many couples were separated. Pregnant women were not shipped out. Someone told his mother that if she got pregnant by one of the guards she would not have to go to an unknown destiny. She did get pregnant and David's half sister Claudine was born in 1943 or 1944. They gave his mother a pass to go and give birth away from the camp. She managed to escape with her baby and she joined the Maquis (French Underground). She carried messages. She spoke five languages and could get by.

01:13:00

Mother later told him Germans could suddenly appear and disappear. Mother spent the rest of war with Maquis. Most relatives were killed on both father's and mother's sides. His mother married another man. David's father could not forgive her for having a baby out of wedlock. Mother died a year and a half before this interview. His sister Claudine reminds him of his mother.

01:16:00

He found a cousin living in a Kibbutz in Israel. This cousin became a Hasid. David is writing a history of his family. After the war, his father ran away and remarried. David's parents marriage

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was one of convenience, not love. His mother was the strength of the family. Father was not a family man. He wasted time and money. Jack of all trades. In the United States, he went into the new and used clothing business.

01:19:00

David grew up in New York City's Lower East Side. He went to Yeshiva. He had no family. His grandmother was disturbed. His natural sisters, Mary and Irene came here in 1947. His father was angry his mother didn't come. At first, David and his sisters didn't know each other. The fibre of his family was destroyed. Everyone went his own way.

01:22:00

Irene was not really close to the family. Mary, his brother Marc, and Claudine and he constitute a family. His brother works for an automotive company in France. Claudine does not want to talk about the past. David is very close to his stepfather. He also went through the war. He was in Auschwitz.

01:25:00

(From this point on, he showed his art work: sketches, elaborate embossed images of the Holocaust. Each work has some text. Uses Gothic lettering, like medieval painting or tapestry. He never draws a whole body. Some of body part is always missing)

01:28:00

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Depiction of Bergen-Belsen. Burning smoke stalks. Tries to combine images. (which are often fragmentary, allegorical, abstracted) with historical data. Each panel is different.

01:31:00

Everything is black and white. Figures have no coloration. A text accompanies each sketch. Pictures of Chelmno (Kulmhof where 30,000 Jews were gassed. Shows musicians who play music to victims.

01:34:00

Draws nothing with military images or uniforms. Wants to depicts German and Germany, so he uses the Gothic medieval style of decorations and lettering. Always some body part is missing in his figures. Feels "no jew was whole" in the Holocaust.

01:37:00

Depicts rocket factory in Nordhausen in Hartz mountains. Shows jews hanging. Everyday a Jews was hanged. Picture seems to resonate of the scene on mountain sinai; except for the fact everything seems inverted.

01:40:00

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Depicts Flossenbergl, one of the later camps that popped up all over Germany. Knows the Germans knew what was happening. There were just too many of these places for them not to have known. Only Bulgaria protected its Jews. He won't go to Germany, Austria, Hungary, or Romania.

01:43:00

Depicts Majdanek where 400,000 Jews died. Depicts Ravensbrück where notorious experiments were conducted on the prisoners. There were actually medical and scientific experiments done on victims at the "experimental" sites.

01:46:00

This series of sketches and drawings took over a year to produce. They were inspired by his mother's death. He felt this was all he could do for his mother. His work reinforced his faith. He wonders to this day why Jews are considered such anathema that people would want to do this to them.

01:49:00

Meanwhile Nazis are still around, living unpunished and admired. The statements on his work are taken from actual biblical and historical sources. One of his works depicts the Warsaw Ghetto and General Stroop.

01:52:00

Remarks that much of what the Israelis did to the Arabs during the Intifada to stem Arab terrorism. They learned from British tactics of suppressing Zionists. He depicts in some of the pictures the ways in which the British interdicted Jewish attempts to reach Palestine, even as they, the British were fighting Nazism.

01:55:00

The theme he is trying to depict is the extremes between the tender and the cruel sides of humanity. Her is reminded of the einsatzgruppen (the killing squads) whose commanders were highly educated, cultured, and distinguished. Their only job was to administer murder. Thinks also of the Croatian Eustache who were barbaric in a different way. Killing Jews in particularly savage ways. (Personal Aside: This comment is rather poignant since it evokes current events in Bosnia, Croatia, et al, where the killings of Croats is being compared to the killing of the Jews, and we talk about another "Holocaust". This is not to take either side; it is merely to point out the ongoing depredations and brutalities that are the results of irrational hatred. Then, the Serbs were being murdered by Nazi-Allied Croats who were also murdering Jews. Now the Serbs is likened to the Nazi victimizers. The cast of characters may change, the script is sadly and inevitably the same.)

01:58:00

The victims in Dorfman's works, though depicted as incomplete, nevertheless represent the compassionate side of humanity. His mother wasn't cruel or hard. But she was strong and in Gurs

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she took a stand. Most of the Jewish inmates in Gurs were shipped out to be killed. The Germans wanted to draw in as many Jews as possible.

02:01:00

The smokestacks kept burning even as Germany was being defeated. David didn't try to carry over the painful experience of his life to his children. Now, however, as three of his siblings and he have come closer together. It is also easier for him to bring to his children some of his own thoughts and feelings about the war and the loss it engendered. This, the bond of memory is stronger because to some degree it involves them all.