

United States Holocaust Memorial Museum

Archives

Oral History Interviews of the University of California, Los Angeles Holocaust Documentation Archives

**Interview with Fred Diament
March 5, 1983
RG-50.005*0008**

PREFACE

On March 5, 1983, Fred Diament was interviewed on videotape by Arnold Band on behalf of the University of California, Los Angeles, Holocaust Documentation Archives. The interview took place in Los Angeles, California and is part of the United States Holocaust Memorial Museum's collection of oral testimonies.

The United States Holocaust Memorial Museum's Department of Oral History created time-coded notes for the interview. The reader should bear in mind that the time-coded notes attempt to represent the spoken word in the recorded interview, yet has not necessarily been verified by the interviewee. The time-coded notes should not be used in place of the interview itself.

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**Time-coded notes of the
Interview with Fred Diament
March 5, 1983**

- 1:30 Diament was born in Gelsenkirchen in the Ruhr valley in Germany. He grew up in Germany in this heavy industrial area. He attended high school for six years.
- 1:50 His parents were Polish Jews who came to Germany in 1919.
- 2:00 His family was Orthodox; Fred discusses the strong Eastern Jewish community as distinct from the German Jewish community.
- 3:00 Diament suggests that there was some interaction between the German Jewish and the Eastern Jewish community.
- 3:30 According to Diament, the Jewish tradition of education was prevalent in his family and education itself was generally available though sometimes one would have to pay money for it.
- 4:00 Diament describes how after Kristallnacht, all Jewish students were expelled from German schools but how before Kristallnacht, German Jews were expelled but Jews of foreign origin remained in school.
- 4:45 Diament maintains that the Jewish community was scared to death as early as 1933 during Hitler's putsch. Diament's parents sent each of their six kids to live with gentiles for two weeks.

USHMM Archives RG-50.005*0008

- 5:20 Diament recalls the general, opposition to Hitler even among gentiles.
- 6:00 Diament thinks that the police were infiltrated by Nazis because they simply stood still while atrocities happened.
- 6:20 Diament mentions that there was fear of a pogrom after the assassination of von Rath. He recalls hiding in his house seeing the SS and the SA - 'brown shirts and black shirts' - destroying things, breaking everything during Kristallnacht.
- 7:30 The son of one of the tenants of the building was SS and the Diaments were close to this family. The family convinced their son to say that there were no Jews in the building.
- 8:30 On September 9, 1938 according to Diament, the gestapo arrested all 'foreign' Jews.
- 9:15 Diament describes how he was arrested with one of his brothers and his father; sent to Sachsenhausen/Ravensbruck concentrationcamp.
- 10:00 Diament remembers Rudolf Hess giving him, along with the 56 other Jews arriving to Sachsenhausen, a speech - 'you will be treated well here, etc., just work hard.'
- 11:15 Diament describes the amazement of the new inmates when, after Hess finished his speech and left, the SS came in to beat them up.
- 12:00 Diament compares his time spent in the city jail (for a spell after being arrested and being sent to Sachsenhausen) with the concentration camp.

USHMM Archives RG-50.005*0008

- 12:10 Diament discusses the notion that rumors floated through the grapevine about what was happening in these camps for German Jews had been arrested in 1938 and stories began to filter through the grapevine.
- 13:10 Diament thinks that a lot of German Jews ran.
- 13:25 Diament recalls that a lot of the other Jews could not accept what was happening, it was inconceivable in this nation 'of poets and thinkers' especially considering the Jewish contribution to German culture.
- 14:10 There were six children in his family which Diament describes as upper-class and his parents were somewhat old.
- 14:55 Diament refers to his mother as 'a typical Jewish optimistic woman.'
- 15:20 His mother placed a great deal of faith in the Versailles Treaty and in other international accords.
- 15:45 Diament describes the fear about going to a new country to start from scratch for they lived in relative prosperity in Germany.
- 16:15 The young Diament was attracted by the Zionist movement which he says was favored by 90% of the Eastern Jews in Germany.

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- 16:45 According to Diamant, emissaries from Israel were active in Germany and the concept of the kibbutz provided a 'romantic' dream for the Jews in Germany.
- 17:05 The kids thought they would end up in Israel, but mother was uncertain for she had reservations about living among Jews only.
- 17:25 The family owned a store selling linens and such, and served many members of the lower middle class and where people frequently paid in installments. The mother had developed great relationships with the Christians, she had their 'trust.'
- 18:30 His father was a complete scholar.
- 18:55 On shabbat the family closed the store recalls Diamant, even though 40% of the income could be obtained on Saturday.
- 19:20 The family was a proud, religious family.
- 20:00 They knew, however, that they had to get out. The father was more aggressive than the mother and, like his sons, had aspirations of moving to Israel.
- 21:10 The mother had a sister in the United States. In trying to immigrate into the U.S. the quota system provided a barrier; Diamant mentions how the quota applied to country of birth and not one's adopted country - he would be listed under 'Poland' and not 'Germany.'
- 22:00 The mother tried to register the children as students for purposes of immigration and at age

USHMM Archives RG-50.005*0008

- 15 Diament somehow was accepted at Columbia.
- 23:00 But still there was 'nowhere to go.' The student visa was struck down because his parents were immigrants. It was after Kristallnacht that the dispersion of the family occurred when they were sent to Sachsenhausen.
- 24:35 There was some, though limited, letter writing and letter delivery in Sachsenhausen and the hope that the mother was working on a visa while they were in Sachsenhausen helped to keep them going.
- 25:45 Diament describes the situation in Sachsenhausen; how the community was segregated; the SS men would come in for 'sports' and in the winter of 1939-40 which Diament remembers as 'incredibly cold', 25 degrees below zero, these SS men with their sticks and whips (known as tail of the oxen) would order Jews to lie down in the snow and roll while being trampled upon; how prisoners would be dying, new prisoners arriving; how the 'sport' would lead to 10-15 deaths and 30 serious injuries; how they all worked in Sachsenhausen, often carrying huge bricks and doing other jobs.
- 29:00 Diament suggests the work was a meaningless exercise, an effort to beat down the Jews, to torture them. They had to stand all day long. In regards to keeping morale up, Diament says that conversation was crucial and that there were a lot of prominent Jews in Sachsenhausen. A prominent producer and director of films, Max Steiner (?) would tell stories about how he made movies.
- 30:30 Everyone perished except for maybe 500-600 Jews transferred to Auschwitz 1942 according

USHMM Archives RG-50.005*0008

to Diament who mentions that they had a 'fake' hospital in the camp which Jews could not go in; the Nazis in Diament's view "invented means of degradation"; Jews had to run all the time in the camp.

32:00 Diament himself was assigned to keep the barracks clean and to carry food from the general kitchen. Diament was a small boy carrying huge barrels. The cook called him over to ask him something and Diament recognized the cook's Westphalia accent and responded in a Westphalia accent. The cook found Diament appealing and told him to fill his belly.. Diament mentions how the kitchen was run by political prisoners and that Sachsenhausen held many prominent political prisoners such as Leon Blum.

34:55 Diament made a connection in the kitchen which allowed him to obtain an extra barrel for him and a group of youngsters for a period of time; he did what he could, he was small in size and therefore was able to hide under the barracks when the Nazis entered looking for 'sport;' Diament mentions that you learned the law of the jungle.

37:00 Diament insists that there was an uprising in Sachsenhausen, the only one, organized by the underground.

37:30 In 1942 before the transfer to Auschwitz, they were placed in a disinfection barracks. There had been rumors about gas experiments and, Diament mentions, the first experiments were conducted on Russian POW's; the group was kept in the disinfection camp without food and feared the worst. They had been in prison 3 years and feared the worst at this point. They possessed a desire to die valiantly and they all ran to the door to break out, astonishingly they were not shot at.

USHMM Archives RG-50.005*0008

- 40:10 Diament suggested that people with a trade were better off and he pretended to be a painter.
- 41:00 Punishments were ruthless and one time Diament caught '25 bucks' which left him unable to sit or sleep for four weeks.
- 41:30 Two of his brothers and his father were sent to Auschwitz. Diament talks about his oldest brother and his second brother who were expelled earlier from Germany and joined a Zionist group in Poland and received fake certificates to enter Palestine. They were allowed to cut back through Germany in transition and, while in Germany, the second brother's certificate did not come through. The older brother decided to leave him and go himself. This was 1939 and there was a strong fear of doom and a sense of the brother betraying the family.
- 45:30 Diament discusses the fate of the mystics and the realists. The intellectuals would go under. Diament thinks that the Nazis must have used the latest findings of group psychology in order to give the prisoners a glimmer of hope - a means of preventing revolt - but also utilize them - to produce things, to exploit them for labor. In Diament's view, the intellectuals were not accustomed to physical labor and were destroyed spiritually by the Nazi oppression. Diament mentions the term 'Einger' which refers to a flower which withered away. The Nazis wanted them not to die but to "wither away" and according to Diament that's what happened to the intellectuals.
- 49:00 Diament never considered himself a German. Even in Auschwitz, he thought the German population was against Hitler but was too terrorized to do anything about it. In Diament's view, the Nazis destroyed your dignity, your self respect by the shrewdest means.

USHMM Archives RG-50.005*0008

- 51:00 Arriving in Auschwitz, Diament remembers the stamping of tatoos as a type of ceremony like branding cattle. You were no longer a human being, now you were a number. Diament recalls that the number had such an intimidating effect on the inmates and that there was a hierarchy within the camp based on the number of years of survival in the camps, at the top of the social hierarchy were the veterans, the old- timers. To survive 2 1/2 years gave a person the knowledge, the belief that they could outwit the SS, that they knew all their tricks. Diament points out, however, that nothing was secure. For example, his job cleaning the barracks in Sachsenhausen did not last the whole time he was there, he was shifted. Diament suggests luck played roles in his survival.
- 54:50 He describes his arrival in Auschwitz. He knew vaguely about the gassing. They arrived on a Sunday and were told that the gas man was on vacation. 600 of them, old- timers from Sachsenhausen arrived, undressed, and stood for 24 straight hours with no food, no drinks. Schwarz (?) came in and starting looking at the bodies and selecting people, that's when the two brothers were separated from their father, the two brothers were sent to Buna - Auschwitz III, what Diament terms the largest industrial complex in all of Europe and 80,000 people worked there producing synthetic fuel and rubber - Buna is a generic name for synthetic rubber.
- 58:45 A few people from his hometown, including his brother survived but his father was literally beaten to death in Auschwitz. Diament eventually heard this from a guy he knew who witnessed the beating.
- 00:00 Though newcomers to Buna, Diament and his fellowarrivals knew the game from their time

USHMM Archives RG-50.005*0008

in Sachsenhausen.

- 1:00 Diament suggests that the Germans used prison inmates to become the infrastructure of the camps; at times they had more power than the SS. SS men from Sachsenhausen helped build the camp and Diament talked to them. Diament insists that the German prisoners were people without a conscience; that there was even a bordello in the camp for them.
- 3:17 The 'Lageraeltester' - the #1 inmate, was a man obsessed with his boots who spoke with a Rhenish accent. It was an advantage for Diament that he came from Germany and knew the language. Diament got up his courage to speak to him in a Rhenish accent and said that he was the greatest boot polisher in the world and Diament became his boot polisher which gave him and his brother access to a little more food, better work assignment inside the camp and not in the factories. Diament recalls how every lie was used to pretend you were a professional; had a trade. His brother became a camp builder.
- 6:15 Diament recalls that there was a strong underground in Auschwitz led by old-timers - even those incarcerated in 1933; Jewish political figures, artists, communists - some of them survived six years of concentration camps. The underground would try to save as many as possible and the two brothers became part of the underground. As the 'lageraeltester's' boot boy, Diament could hear information from SS men talking to the elder.
- 8:15 Diament mentions how in the sick barracks, some doctors were 'more humane' than Mengele.
- 8:50 Diament mentions how the criminals in charge of the barracks would steal food etc.

USHMM Archives RG-50.005*0008

- 9:20 Diament mentions that there was a degree of idealism in the camp; how some people remained human on the inside. Diament tells a story about how when the final solution was decided, all the Jews in Germany were rounded up; workers, labor camps, etc. and there was a Zionist group working in preparation for a life in Israel, a kibbutz. Diament recalls how they tried to live communally; displaying compassion and understanding which offered Diament an enormous morale booster. They would try to cooperate in order to save human lives - you could only save so many, they tried to save those with the best chance to survive - the young, they would try to obtain food and manipulate the SS.
- 14:30 Diament talks about how a new camp leader came in, a criminal - 'an embezzler, maybe a rapist'- who had his own code of ethics: he could steal but no one else could. Diament was good at manipulating him by saying that other SS men were stealing etc. and the leader had some respect for the old- timers.
- 16:45 Diament mentions that there was some sabotage but nothing serious, there were a lot of civilians supervising at the plants, and even so the inmates rarely did anything significant, they mainly did the dirty work.
- 17:45 It was hard to keep the morale up and it did not help to hear the German propaganda over the radio. To gain information, truth, was one means of maintaining morale. According to Diament, there were some radios in the homes of the SS men and people cleaning these homes might be able to hear something but it was a huge risk.
- 19:40 Diament describes the death of his brother, Leo. At the end of 1944 it was known that the Nazis were losing, a 'race with time,'the underground knew of SS plans to destroy the camp,

USHMM Archives RG-50.005*0008

to leave in the case of a retreat. Why were there no mass outbreaks by the underground? Fear of the repercussions, that the majority would die in the attempt. Leo and two others were assigned to break out of the camp and hook up with partisans. The plan was to short-circuit with the help of a Polish political prisoner who was an electrician and a member of the underground. The electrician got cold feet and confided in a Polish doctor in the sick barracks who was known to be anti-Semitic, a man who hated both Germans and Jews. This man told the SS and Leo and the two others were arrested immediately. The SS tortured them but no one else was arrested. Eventually, the three returned but were to be executed publicly. The SS built gallows on the parade grounds where the inmates were counted every morning. As the three were about to day they shouted 'don't lose your morale, you will survive.' Diamant describes this as one of the few incidents of heroism and the Germans were stunned, Schwarz soon regained his composure and forced the whole camp to walk by and see the executed. Diamant had guilt feelings about not saving him. Diamant himself was saved by his contact for if the SS had known that Leo had a brother, Fred Diamant would have had some problems. He was transferred to another Auschwitz camp Glauwitz.

28:45 Diamant escaped from Auschwitz. He was in the January 18 death march out of the camp. Approx. 70,00 prisoners in Diamant's estimation were still alive, many were loaded on to trains, but Diamant's group came late and a Russian patrol starting shooting and those who were already loaded went and the rest walked two months through Germany. At one point there was an air attack in a small town and there was a blackout for 60 seconds and Diamant ran.

30:30 Diamant discovered that his family was dead, found a group going to Israel and helped to found a kibbutz in Israel.