

Title - Dr. Thomas Detre  
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Notes - Summary from unauthenticated transcript. All information from interviewee, without corrections.

Contents - Survivor makes very provocative and illuminating comments about the nature of humanity and the Holocaust as an event.

Tape 1 of 1

10:03Dr. Detre was born on May 17, 1924 in Budapest Hungary. His father Gaza Feldmeir (ph) was a physician specializing in obstetrics and gynecology. The family lived in a small town outside of Budapest called Katchemit (ph).

10:05Detre's grandfather had been a renowned businessman and the family had been living in Katchemit as early as the beginning of the eighteenth century. Detre's mother, Gabriella Bauer, was born in Budapest.

10:06:30As a young child, Detre spoke German in the home as the family employed a German 'Fraulein'. Dr. Detre explains that every self-respecting middle class Jewish family had such a woman in their employment. It wasn't until he was about five years old that Detre became proficient in Hungarian. Detre was an only child.

10:07Dr. Detre was taught by a strict catholic teaching order, however religious instruction was mandatory and thus he attended instruction two times a week from a local rabbi. Later he was a Bar Mitzvah.

10:10Detre and his father went to religious services very infrequently and his mother went not at all. However his

father gave monetary support to the local synagogue. The family had largely intermarried yet still proclaimed themselves Jewish.

10:11For the first ten years of his life, Detre was in now way discriminated against for being Jewish. This changed in his teenage years as he began to notice how anti-semitic the priests were and the local society as a whole. However, such anti-semitism was tempered on account of the status and wealth that Detre's family enjoyed.

10:14Detre's father was a decorated officer in the Hungarian cavalry (Hussara) and served during WWI. For this reason, his family was protected for many early anti-semitic decrees.

10:15In 1939, Germany invaded Poland and thus many refugees came into Hungary recounting tales of Nazi horror. However most Jews chose to ignore these warnings, feeling safe and secure in Hungary. Detre was largely unaware in 1941 of the harsh anti-jewish laws that were being passed almost daily.

10:17Detre's dream was to be a doctor but because of anti semitic laws he could not register for certain classes. Thus, in 1942, he registered in absentia at the law school in Katchcemit (ph) and proceeded to move to Budapest where he audited classes at the medical school.

10:18Detre discusses different expressions of Judaism that were practiced in Hungary. His own family was very integrated into society and disdained the more cloistered orthodox Jews.

10:20Detre mentions that the group known as the Arrow Cross began increased beatings and destruction of Jewish persons and property in 1942. He also reveals that in 1941, with the Nazi invasion of the Soviet Union, Hungary drafted many Jewish men into forced labor battalions to be sent to the USSR. Among these were Detre's cousins who were never to return.

10:24In 1943, Detre worked at a Jewish hospital in Budapest. There he met many Central and Eastern European refugees. many of these recounted the horror of the camps and the brutal

mass killings. However, most of their listeners would not take heed, insisting that Hungary was different. Detre was not so certain and felt that it was only a matter of time before the Nazis came for the Hungarians also. His hope lay in quick Allied victory, without which he felt sure to perish

10:26 Detre says that everyone knew he was Jewish because he "looked like a synagogue.

10:27 Detre reveals that stories of the Nazi atrocities abounded but were never really confirmed, however his personal contact with refugees at the hospital made him increasingly anxious. yet somehow life around him was relatively peaceful. Detre explains that at the commencement of anti-semitic legislation, loopholes could commonly be found; especially for the privileged middle class.

10:28 Detre was only vaguely aware of the ghettoization of Hungarian Jews. He feels that this ignorance was partly self-induced as a coping mechanism.

10:29 In 1944, Nazi's took over Hungary and between March and May of that year, most of Hungary's Jews were departed to Aushwitz.

10:30 The puppet government which had been put into power by the German's was extremely brutal, and Detre believes that their actions even nauseated the S.S. At this time, Detre was arrested in Budapest and sent to a work compound. One day, he and 100 others escaped but were later captured and sent to a detainment hall.

10:31:30 One night, one of the soldiers guarding the group of detainee fell ill. Detre correctly diagnosed him and was soon elevated to the post of camp physician although in actuality he has no degree but had simply learned medical practices from assisting his father.

10:33 About a week later, Detre learned that all the Jews in the detainment had would be deported. He feigned an overdose of sleeping pills and because of Hungarian law regarding suicide attempts, we was sent to a rehabilitation

hospital. Detre escaped from the hospital but was soon recaptured.

10:34After being recaptured, Detre was sent to another detainment hall called Obuda (ph) where soldiers lined up prisoners into two groups. One was given papers to go to Swiss safe houses in Budapest, the other group was earmarked for the death camps. Detre was among the latter, but while the guards were not watching he switched over to the other side.

10:36Detre later obtained legal papers from a cousin and proceeded to live in a safe house in Budapest. He and hundred's of others lived together in very cramped conditions.

10:40On November 7, 1944 the Russian troops reached Budapest however they did not enter and cease the city until two and a half months later.

10:41Detre tells that in May 1944 his entire family had been deported to Aushwitz, he had not seen his parents since he had gone to study in Budapest. His parents and cousins were all slaughtered at Aushwitz. Only one uncle survived.

10:42Detre reflects on the reasons for decreased Nazi cruelty in the last months of the war. He believes that the context determines behavior more than a steadfast belief system and thus the Nazi's behaved as they did for fear of later being captured and punished.

10:44Detre speaks about contact with zionistic underground during his months in the safe house and mentions Raoul Wallenberg. He was never allowed to leave the house. However, another man hiding in the house, a Yugoslav partisan, would often go out at night armed with a knife in order to "kill a few fascists."

10:45Detre mentions that while in the safe house he was stricken with Typhoid fever.

10:46In February 1954, Budapest was liberated by the Russian army. Detre was now free however the war was still raging.

10:47 Detre states that he had escaped from labor battalions and the death they often brought because he was below the age of conscription.

10:50 Detre describes about how he learned of his parent's deaths through bulletins issued by the International Red Cross. After liberation, he retrieved some of the family's jewels which friends had been safeguarding. He proceeded to sell these to have money for food.

10:51 In March 1945, about three weeks after being liberated, Detre went to the town of Sighet (ph) to recommence his medical training. He studied there until July when the medical school in Budapest reopened. During this time he visited his former hometown of Katchkemet (ph) which had been completely ransacked during Nazi occupation. He sold the family home for a small sum.

10:53 In 1947, Detre left for Italy after having completed three years of medical training in Budapest. He remained in Rome for six years where he received his medical degree.

10:54 In 1953, Dr. Detre emigrated to the United States and spent two years of residency in New York hospitals whereupon he went to Yale University to complete his specialty training.

10:55 Dr. Detre says that emigrating to the United States had been a childhood dream of his. He had not considered emigrating to Israel after the war. He also adds that the years spent in Italy were wonderful; a real sweet life."

10:57 Detre compares the medical training in Italy with that of the United States. He also discusses his studies at Yale, where he remained on the faculty for over eighteen years.

10:58 Detre recounts that while working at Mt. Sinai, his lack of knowledge of Yiddish made others question whether he was really Jewish. They thought that perhaps he was simply saying he was a Jew to get ahead. Dr. Detre found these accusations ironic.

11:00 When asked what it meant to him to be a survivor, Dr. Detre

reveals that he never shared the guilt for surviving that plagues many other holocaust survivors. He feels that life and fate are a series of events and that chance rules the day. During the war years he had many close encounters with death, and it was luck, not survival instinct or intelligence that kept him alive.

11:02Dr. Detre appreciates the personal freedom that life in America offers. He feels that there is an abundance of opportunities for the hardworking. He sees Israel as an important guarantee for the Jewish people, as it serves to eradicate the stereotype that Jews are anyone's for the taking, a weak and frail people. He also feels that history has only ambiguous data about the behavior data about the behavior of the United States during WWII, and believes that many Americans participated in denial en masse.

11:04Detre's children know his "story". He feels no animosity against the German people of today. He believes that it is a Nazi idea to blame the children for their father's sins. He also stresses that it is an oversimplification to place the blame for the Holocaust on Germany alone.

11:05Detre questions the effectiveness of widespread education on the Holocaust. He feels that Amricans have sensory overload about tragedies and death from daily news and media.

11:06Dr. Detre has never spoken as a survivor in either an offical or public capacity. He feels that there are better story tellers than he.

11:08Dr. Detre's children have had no religious training what so ever yet he feels that they still identify themselves as Jews.

11:10Detre feels that the Holocaust must be looked at in perspective. He points out there have been many other historical genocides. He is distressed that the Holocaust is something less than a unique phenomenon. In his opinion, civilization is only skin deep. He feels that the Jews are safe in America because of the abundance of varied minorities, no group garners all the hate.

11:12Dr. Detre feels that in the future, more money and time should be devoted to the study of the psychology and behavior of groups. He feels that it is with society as a whole and not with the individual that many answers live.

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