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Oral history interview with Raymond Kamonier

Summary

In 1928, age 19, Raymond Kamonier passed his Polish Bacculaureate; because of the situation in Poland against the Jews at this time period and thanks to the aid of the Union of Jewish Students in Poland, Raymond left Poland to continue his studies in Caen, Normandy where he enrolled in the Chemistry School; in 1929, lacking resources, Raymond began to work at his uncle's barbershop in Paris; he then married and in 1932 and decided to become a barber in Paris; at the beginning of the war in 1939, Raymond was 31 years old; he was on vacation with his wife and son in Berck Plage; he registered as a volunteer on September 2nd, 1939; in January 1940 he was summoned to the Polish army's camp in France in Coëtquidan, Bretagne and after 4 weeks of preparation, he became a corporal; Raymond was sent to Rennes at the moment of the capitulation of France in June 1940; he decided to go back to Paris to evade becoming a prisoner of war; upon his return to Paris, he could not find his wife and son who had left in the exodus of Paris; soon after his wife returned; in October 1940, Vichy passed the first anti-Jewish laws; Raymond did not want to register as a Jew but his mother pushed him to respect the law; Raymond went to the commissariat and registered as a Jew and was forced to put a sign on the front of his business to declare it as a Jewish enterprise; in May of 1941, Raymond received a notice that he and the other Jews would be arrested; Raymond was arrested, taken to Gare d'Austerlitz, and sent to the internment camp at Beaune-la-Rolande; his daughter was born in December of 1941; he became the barber at Beaune-la-Rolande and eventually the "manager" of barbers in the camp; in 1942, he returned to Paris under the pretext of gathering his materials and was able to see his mother and wife; Raymond was then sent to Compiègne; in June 1942 he was sent to Auschwitz; Raymond and the others from Compiègne were taken to block 18 (the block for the Jewish prisoners); Raymond participated in some of the construction of the camp at Buna; many of the prisoners from Compiègne did not understand German or Polish (Raymond did); he enrolled as a doctor (he knew the hospital from Rodom where his father was a barber); he presented himself as a barber to the guards; the infirmary at Auschwitz was run by Polish antisemites; Raymond was refused at first but managed to interview with another Polish doctor whom he convinced to accept him after explaining his training in Poland; afterwards, he was placed in block 21 (the surgical block) which neighbored block 11 (disciplinary block and execution block); it was also close to block 10 where they conducted experiments on women; the 20th of June 1942, he began work with Doctor Dehring who was an antisemite but made an exception for Raymond; he began helping clean, remove corpses, help with feeding, caring for the sick, they were 3 per bed; Raymond also spent time working in the crematorium of Auschwitz; some time after, Raymond was summoned by the head of his block to go to block 11 with him; Raymond was scared, he remembers being forced to clean two children in a heated cell; as the months passed Raymond began to gain authority; Raymond's work went on like this until April 1943; Raymond tried to save prisoners from Beaune-la-Rolande; in October 1943, there was another selection; the doctors and nurses did not participate in this selection; he was, however, selected to go to Warsaw with 2,000 other Jews to clean-up the ghetto; they only took Jews who were not

polish, which is why Raymond was selected (because he was registered as French even though he was born in Poland); they were 2,000 in total; they arrived and began destroying the remains of the ghetto in preparation of installing a monument for Germany; they were held in a camp that was close to Pawiak; they had to conduct a search for the areas where the bodies were buried to dig them up to be burned; there was no oven or crematorium, so there was a special commando (Sonderkommando) that was in charge of burning the corpses in pyres of wood; Raymond describes how an infirmary was established in old military barracks in the ghetto and the outbreak of two epidemics; he continues to describe the horrors of his experience returning to the ghetto, including the rape of a young woman by all of the Kapos in charge of the clean-up at Warsaw; with the passage of the winter, there were many other sickly prisoners; new barracks were installed with showers and other convoys arrived; in July of 1944, the Soviets approached; they left the ghetto; around 100 men in total clothed and guarded by the S.S. during the month of July, 1944 they marched more or less 30km a day; Raymond describes the horrors that took place along this march and the constant struggle for survival; they boarded a train at Kutno headed towards Dachau; many people died of thirst along the way; Raymond arrived at Dachau in August 1944; he worked primarily in the Waldlager which was located in the forest; from September to December 1944, their life was strictly concentrated; Raymond was privileged by his function; their commando was in the forest and completely unknown to the others; they were liberated the 2nd of May 1945; he was taken back to Paris by train, where he was housed at Hôtel Lutetia and then he was reunited with his wife and children.

English summary provided by Ethan T. Ashley