

RG-50.146.0021

Oral history interview with Henri Fenster

Summary

Born March 4th 1921 in Vienna, Austria, Henri Fenster was in Belgium in 1939 after the atrocities of the Anschluss; because Henri lived abroad illegally, he was given the choice that he could either return to Germany or be interned in a camp at Merksplatz (Merksplas) around 80km from Brussels; Henri stayed in Merksplatz from 1939 until the 10th of May 1940 before he was transferred to St. Cyprien in the south of France; there were no barracks at St. Cyprien; he stayed there for the entire winter of 1940 before being transferred to Gurs; he made a demand to the minister to work, and on the March 4th, he went to Agen to work with foreigners; Henri was a carpenter in the barracks; in August 1942, he was sent to Drancy, and on August 31st 1942; he was transported from Drancy to Germany on convoy 26; Henri describes how internees were piled into wagons to go from Drancy to Germany; their convoy first arrived at Gogolin, in the Upper-Silesia region of Poland; they had to get off the train and those who could not get off the train continued on their way to extermination; Gogolin was a transit and work camp; Henri worked at Gogolin making pickaxe handles; for 6 months, he did not go outdoors; next he was transported to Othmüth where he remained for 6 months before being transferred to Blechhammer (a subcamp of Auschwitz); Henri finally arrived at Auschwitz in 1943; Henri was given the tattoo number A5629 and life became much harder; they received the "pajamas" and they were beaten; Henri was then marched to Buchenwald; they were working in a tunnel when Henri collapsed and was taken to the infirmary; when the S.S. left, they took all the men who could walk; Henri could not, and was left at the camp; this is what eventually saved him; Henri continues to describe daily life in Auschwitz (e.g. resistance efforts in the camp, work schedule); Henri describes his liberation by the Americans who took him to the hospital in Magdebourg; he describes how the Americans were terrified at the sight of the camp; the Americans asked him where he would like to be repatriated and he said France because he had left his sister in Agen; after liberation, he found his sister in a house for children of deportees and he found work in Agen; afterwards, Henri found other members of his family including a couple brothers and sisters, however his mother had perished in Treblinka; at liberation, he was 23 years old and weighed 39 kilos (85 pounds); Henri concludes by describing how these events continue to shape his life and his identity.

English summary provided by Ethan T. Ashley