

Bay Area Holocaust Oral History Project

P.O. Box 25506, San Mateo, CA 94402

Name of interviewee: Bourgois, Philippe

Date of interview: 12/17/1991

Summary: In this interview, Philippe Bourgois tells his father's Holocaust survival story.

Pierre Bourgois was born in Paris on November 13, 1922. He was born into an upper-middle class family. When the Germans invaded France, the Bourgois family moved to Nice, in southern France, where they believed their living situation would be much better. Shortly after their move, Pierre learned that all young men born in the year 1922 were being drafted into "STO's," or an obligatory labor service. Pierre attempted to change the birth year on his birth certificate, but was eventually found anyway.

Pierre was sent to Auschwitz. He was placed in a peripheral labor camp, and did not have much contact with those in the death camps. In fact, Pierre did not know that Jews were being systematically exterminated only miles away from him. In Auschwitz, Pierre worked in a factory, managing equipment. He was often allowed to leave the camp to pick up equipment. Because his job allowed him access to the outer world, Pierre was also a part of a resistance force in the camp. He would listen to Russian radio stations, and then report the news back to fellow prisoners.

Pierre was in Auschwitz for approximately one year until he escaped. Shortly before his escape, the S.S. officers in the camp began to suspect a resistance group, and began investigating. A fellow prisoner helped Pierre fake medical papers, put a cast on him, and helped him escape to a train during one of Pierre's equipment pick-ups. The escape occurred the day after D-Day, so the German officers Pierre encountered were not concerned with who he was. Pierre took the train back to Paris, where he hid in the basement of his own building until the war was over.

Interestingly, Philippe said Pierre did not think that his story was worth telling because his experience was not as extreme as someone who was in a death camp. His son feels that Pierre understates the horrors that he witnessed. Despite this feeling, Pierre recognizes ways that his experience has shaped his life. Since his escape, he has attended business school and worked for the United Nations in an attempt to prevent inhumanity of individuals against other individuals.

As a result of his father's experiences, Philippe has become a professor of anthropology. He focuses his studies on "mini-holocausts" that are occurring today. He does a great deal of field work (often placing himself in great danger) in hopes of better understanding his father's experiences, as well as passing

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along his father's message: be tolerant, question authority, and not be a cog in a wheel that destroys.