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INTERVIEW WITH DAVID GALANT

HOLOCAUST ORAL HISTORY PROJECT

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INTERVIEWER:

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Q DAVID, CAN YOU TELL ME WHERE YOU'RE FROM AND HOW LONG YOU'VE LIVED THERE?

A I was born in Paris, France, and I lived there until 1946, when I came to the United States, except for a period during the war where I was sometimes in southern France, sometimes in Italy, and sometimes in Auschwitz.

Q WHAT CAUSED YOU TO MOVE FROM PARIS TO SOUTHERN FRANCE AND THEN TO ITALY?

A Well, the German occupied northern France, Paris, etc., and we went to what was quote Free France, and settled in Nimes, which is a little--well, it's not so little. It's a town in southern central France. As a matter of fact, Nimes is the origin of what you could call denim, which means it came from there originally. In French De Nimes. It's a very old town, part of the triangle that goes from Montpellier to Avignon to Nimes--all of these are in that corner of central south France, and we settled there for a couple of years; and then when the Germans occupied all of France in 1943 we went to Nice.

The reason we went to Nice was that that part of France was occupied by the Italians, and our understanding was that the Italians were much easier to live with than the Germans.

So we went down there and were promptly arrested by the Italians and put in what they call "forced residence" in a little village up in the mountains in the Alps, Saint Martin

de Vizubie. It's a very small village a few miles from the Italian border, and it wasn't very bad. At that point, all we had to do was report to the Carabinieri twice a day, in the morning and in the evening, and that was that. But outside of that, we were free to do whatever we wanted.

Q WHEN WAS IT THAT YOU FIRST REALIZED THAT YOU WERE IN DANGER?

A Oh, my. That goes back to 1941.

Q '41. WHERE WERE YOU IN '41?

A In 1941 I was still in Paris.

Q AND WHAT WAS LIFE LIKE, AND WHAT SIGNS DID YOU SEE THAT...

A Well, the fact that they were beginning to do mass arrests of Jews at various times. This is when we decided that the situation was getting worse day by day, and it was only a question of time before something else would happen. So that's when we left for Nimes.

Q DID YOU ACTUALLY WITNESS THIS MASS OF ARRESTS?

A Oh, yes.

Q CAN YOU DESCRIBE WHAT IT WAS LIKE?

A Not really. What you have is a multitude of people, and you have policemen all over and a lot of confusion, and people being very scared and being shoved onto buses really, and carried out, and very frightening, very frightening, especially for a teenager.

Q AND YOU WERE A TEENAGER?

A And I was a teenager then.

Q SO THESE WERE MEN, WOMEN, CHILDREN?

A Men, women, children taken, and this when Drancy was first organized by, actually the French government, who was very definitely collaborating with the German when it came to this particular phase of the war, because it was a war, a specific war of the German against the Jews. And to take any other attitude is completely wrong.

Q WHAT WERE YOUR FRENCH NEIGHBORS LIKE? ANYONE WHO...

A No. No. Our neighbors were not..we had very little contact with them, and I can't say that there was anything in particular that either for or against our neighbors.

Q ARE THERE ANY NEIGHBORS THAT YOU REMEMBER SPECIFICALLY BEING ESPECIALLY FRIENDLY OR HELPFUL OR...

A No. No.

Q BEFORE 1941 ARE THERE SOME THINGS THAT YOU REMEMBER THAT CAUSED YOU TO BELIEVE THAT YOU WERE IN DANGER BEFORE THE MASS ARRESTS OR THE MASS ARRESTS WERE THE FIRST TIME?

A The first time that I realized it. My brother was much more aware of things, but he was older than I was, and much more active in political circles, and so was my father. So from that point of view, they knew more, but it hit me when I saw what was happening.

Q AND YOUR FATHER AND BROTHER--WHAT KINDS OF POLITICAL CIRCLES DID THEY, ANY GROUPS YOU WERE AWARE OF?

A Well, my brother was one of the leader of the student council in Paris and later on in Nimes. And, I don't know if you're aware of this, but mostly in Europe, the students

are the leaders of whatever political movement is going to be, and that was his thing.

My father was much more involved with Jewish welfare and was the president of some organizations that dealt primarily in trying to keep Jews that didn't have anything from--they had a soup kitchen, they had-- I mean it was somewhat like Jewish welfare over here, but...

Q DID YOU LIVE IN A JEWISH COMMUNITY IN PARIS?

A No, not particularly. We weren't far away from the Jewish community, the area, but where we lived was pretty much of a mixed neighborhood.

Q AND WHEN YOU WENT TO NIMES, WHAT WAS YOUR LIFE LIKE THERE, AND WHEN DID YOU LEAVE AND WHY DID YOU LEAVE?

A Well, we lived in Nimes from 1941 to 1943. My brother went on and continued his studies. He got his bachelor's degree from the University of Montpellier while we were in Nimes, and I went to the national college there. And we tried to maintain a fairly normal life, and as long as the Germans weren't there we were able to do so.

My brother being involved with the student council also knew quite a few people in the police department, and that gave us a certain amount of freedom that maybe other people did not have, so from that point of view it was all right.

Q WERE THERE OTHER JEWS THERE?

A Oh, yeah. There was a very large Sephardic Jewish community and quite a few Ashkenazi Jews that had come down from the

north and that had taken the same thing that we did. Well, you can imagine that it was a fairly normal life. My older sister got married while we were in Nimes, so life was pretty good.

And then the Germans came; they came in the beginning of 1943, and toward the end of March one of the police inspectors told my brother "get out of here, the Germans are getting ready to do the same thing that they did in Paris." So we left.

Q YOU WERE FOREWARNED?

A Yes.

Q AND YOU WENT TO?

A Nice.

Q NICE.

A Now in Nice, as I said, we arrived there in the beginning--either the last day of March or the first day of April. And by the 4th of April we were taken into custody by the Italian and brought to St. Martin de Vizubie, and we were there until September, when the Italian surrendered.

I remained as a--being a born Frenchman, I could travel more freely than any other member of my family. And I would go from St. Martin into Nice because my brother kept contact with the underground in Nice, and this is, I was a courier going back and forth between the two places.

And when Italy surrendered, we received what amounted to an order to get out of St. Martin, go over the mountain

pass (the col de la Fenestra) and get to Cuneo. Cuneo was a little town on the other side of the mountain on the Italian side. We were advised that there would be a train waiting for us there and that it would take us to Rome, where we supposedly would disperse among the population and wait for the arrival of the allies, which were coming up the Italian boot. The only unfortunate part of this was that the message was apparently intercepted by the Germans, and that is why, when we got to Boago San Dalmazo, which was a little town before Cuneo, a little village really. The twelfth company of Panzer Division Adolph Hitler was waiting for us and we were taken into custody, put into the military kaserne, that was in Boago San Dalmazo, and kept there until January of 1944--no, wait a second. December of 1943 still, at which time we were transported back to Paris, were processed at Drancy, which was the camp I told you about before, and shipped to Auschwitz.

Q JUST GOING BACK A LITTLE BIT. HOW MANY WERE YOU? WAS THIS JUST YOUR FAMILY OR...

A Oh, no, no, no.

Q OR MANY, MANY, MANY FAMILIES?

A Going over the mountain were approximately a thousand people. Caught by the Germans at Boago San Dalmazo were approximately three hundred. The rest of them, we were in groups, and unfortunately my group was the first and we were the ones that were caught.

One of the people in our group managed to run away and warn the other groups that the Germans were there waiting, don't come down. So they stayed up in the mountains with the Partisans, the Italian Partisans, that were already forming up in the mountains.

And so about three hundred of us were caught and then brought back to Paris. And then as I said from Paris, processed in (Drancy), taken to Auschwitz, and we arrived in Auschwitz on December the 10th, 1943.

Q AND WERE YOU WITH YOUR WHOLE FAMILY?

A At that point, yes.

Q AND THERE WERE THREE CHILDREN, YOUR SISTER AND BROTHER?

A No. There were four children. Both my sisters were married. One of my sisters had a baby, and uncle and aunt and cousins and a lot of other people. In the transport that went to Auschwitz, there were eleven hundred people.

Q WHEN YOU WERE GOING TO AUSCHWITZ, WERE YOU AWARE OF WHERE YOU WERE GOING?

A No. No.

Q WHAT WERE YOU TOLD?

A Well, at that point we were going to a work camp is what we were told. Then we arrived in Auschwitz; that's when I met (Mengele). And from there I was transferred to the Buna. The Buna was one of the--you know that Auschwitz was a number of camps; it was not just Auschwitz. There was Auschwitz, Birkenau. Auschwitz was number one, Birkenau was

number two, Monowitz or the buna was number three; and there were two others, altogether five. And that's where I was from then until the evacuation of Auschwitz in January of 1945.

Q WHAT DO YOU REMEMBER ABOUT THE TRAIN RIDE TO AUSCHWITZ, WHAT IT WAS LIKE, HOW LONG YOU WERE ON THE TRAIN?

A We were on the train for three days, and we were about a hundred and some people in those box cars; and it was kind of crowded, it was kind of dirty.

Q WAS THERE FOOD? WATER? COULD YOU BRING ANYTHING WITH YOU?

A Well, we brought some food with us, and they gave us water twice on the trip, during the trip.

Q TWICE?

A Yeah.

Q AND THE ONLY FOOD YOU HAD WAS WHAT YOU BROUGHT WITH YOU?

A Correct.

Q ANYTHING ELSE YOU CAN REMEMBER ABOUT THE TRAIN TRIP? IT WAS CROWDED AND...

A No. I have pretty well erased it, a lot of those things in order to survive you just put away.

Q DO YOU REMEMBER SPEAKING TO ANYONE IN YOUR FAMILY?

A No. Just a few images here and there, but that's it.

Q WHAT ARE THOSE IMAGES?

A Oh, the one image of my mother talking to my father and saying let us hope that at least the children will survive.

Q AS IF SHE KNEW?

A Yeah. She obviously knew that that was it, and there was no coming back as far as either herself or my father. No, that's too hard. I can't...

Q WHEN YOU GOT TO AUSCHWITZ, CAN YOU DESCRIBE WHAT IT WAS LIKE WHEN YOU FIRST GOT OUT OF THE TRAIN?

A Well, there was one picture that I'll never forget, and that's (Mengele) looking at my father. He was in his full SS uniform and telling him "Malade Monsieur" and sending him to the line that later on I knew meant going to the gas chamber. He was quite proud of himself, quite.

Q DID YOU KNOW WHO HE WAS AT THE TIME?

A No.

Q YOU REMEMBER HIM?

A I remember him because of the way he talked to my father in perfect French. Then I met him once more later on in the Buna. He came down for selection, and that's when he picked my brother. No, I won't forget him.

Q WHAT WAS THE PROCESS OF SELECTION LIKE?

A Well, we were naked, and he stood by the door and everybody went by and he would say either this way or that way; and if you went this way you were all right, and if you went that way that was it. And he just stood there, perfectly comfortable, knowing full well what he was doing. It takes all kinds of people, I guess.

Q THE DECISION WAS?

A Oh, yes. There's no question, no question about that.

Q SO YOU WERE THERE WHEN YOUR FATHER AND YOUR BROTHER IN THE SELECTION PROCESS?

A My father had been selected when we first arrived right by the train; my brother was selected in May of 1944, during one of those periodic selections that they made in the camp. You see, the Buna was--the reason it was called the Buna was that it was an industrial complex built by I. G. Farben Industries for the production of synthetic rubber, buna, and that's why it was called the Buna and in there most of the workers, outside the few German civilians that were working there, were prisoners of one kind or another.

We had the prisoners that were from the Buna, which included Jews mostly, some gypsies, and some political prisoners. Also working there were English prisoners of war, and other various prisoners of one kind or another; and they were all working there slave labor for the production of synthetic rubber.

We were still in the process of building the factories, and some of them were destroyed during various bombing, but this is--and this is what the Buna was. And periodically Mengele would come in to thin out the ranks of those no longer, as far as he was concerned, no longer able to produce and replaced by others.

One of the camps was a coal mine, and the prisoners were working in the mines. But those were the better camps in that at least you were working, you were getting some

food, not enough to survive on, but you got some food, and that was that.

Q WHAT DO YOU REMEMBER OF THE RELATIONSHIPS AMONG THE GYPSIES AND THE POLITICAL PRISONERS AND THE JEWS AND OTHER GROUPS?

A The were pretty well separated.

Q BY THEIR OWN CHOICE?

A Of their own choice. I mean, we may have been in the same barracks, but the Jews kept to themselves. The political prisoners stayed pretty well away. I mean, as far as they were concerned, they were Germans--and good, bad, or indifferent, they still were Germans.

We also had some criminals that were, well, green (vinkle), which were the green triangles, meant that the person was a criminal of one kind or another.

Red vinkle, which was a red triangle only, were political prisoners.

The Jews had a red and a yellow, making a Mogen David, and those were the Jews.

The Gypsies had a purple, so you knew by just looking at the person, you knew what he was there for, okay.

Now, the commandant of the Buna was a former prosecutor of the Germans--or of Germany, who in order to enter into some money had killed a couple of members of his family, so that he would be the one who got the money. He got caught and was sent to the Buna, where he became the Lager Eltester, the chief of the camp, is deputy. But he was also

a criminal that had been made, and they ran the camp for the Germans very well indeed. The political prisoners were a different story. They usually tried to escape more than anybody else.

And the thing is that when a Jew tried to escape he was hung. When a red vinkle tried to escape he was not hung. They would put a big target on his back, and would be forced to stay within the camp, could not go outside of the camp to work, etc. That was a punishment. But for a Jew it was a hanging.

Q DO YOU REMEMBER ANY HOMOSEXUALS IN THE CAMP?

A Well, they were--you had both, the red and the green vinkles. You had homosexuals there.

Q YOU DON'T REMEMBER ANY BEING THERE JUST FOR HOMOSEXUALITY?

A No.

Q WHAT KIND OF WORK DID YOU DO IN THE CAMP?

A I was a bricklayer. I became a bricklayer. I learned how to lay bricks and I laid bricks.

Q WHAT WAS A TYPICAL DAY LIKE? WHEN DID YOU GET UP AND--

A Well, you got up--I don't know, it must have been before six o'clock, and you got your soup and your piece of bread, and that was going to have to last you for most of the day. And then you went and you had an appel, where everybody was laid out, and they counted the prisoners, and then each command would go out and to the sound of orchestra music. This is when I learned to hate the Beer Barrel Polka, because this

was one of the songs that the orchestra would play over and over and over again, as we went out of the camp to the factory, and when we came back from the factory into the camp.

And that was--then we worked on the various and sundry works that we had assigned to us.

Q YOU WERE A BRICKLAYER AND WHEN YOU GOT UP AND HAD YOUR BREAD AND SOUP YOU WENT OUT TO THE FACTORY AND...

A No. First we went to the Appel and from there we all walked out of the camp to the factory and to the various places where we worked.

Q AND WHAT KINDS OF THINGS WERE YOU BUILDING?

A Oh, we were building the factories, the various buildings of the factories, the various factories. There was one factory that we built three times. It was supposed to have been an electrical supply warehouse.

So we built it. We poured the concrete and we built the walls and everything, and when it was finished the English bombers came and blasted it. So we rebuilt it. And this time, in order to be able to make sure that even if it was bombed not everything would be destroyed, so we built interior brick walls, and there were six of them making seven separation within the building. And no sooner was it finished than the British came back and bombed it and put seven bombs, one in each one of those sections and the building was destroyed again, and we started building it

again. Those were those little good things that would happen when it was done.

Q YOU SPENT YOUR TIME BEING A BRICKLAYER THE WHOLE TIME YOU WERE AT AUSCHWITZ?

A Most of it, yeah.

Q AND WHAT MEMORIES DO YOU HAVE OF THE DAY? HOW CAN YOU DESCRIBE THE DAY? I MEAN, BASICALLY EVERYDAY YOU WORKED? WERE THERE DAYS OF REST?

A There were no days of rest. I mean, I think we got one Sunday a month where we didn't have to go out, but outside of that it was work straight across.

Q AND YOU WORKED UNTIL EVENING?

A Well, yeah. We came back to camp around seven o'clock, and then we had a bowl of soup again and went to bed; and then in the morning we would get up, get washed and dressed, and start all over again.

Q WHAT CAN YOU DESCRIBE ABOUT YOUR SLEEPING ARRANGEMENTS AND YOUR WASHING ARRANGEMENTS?

A Well, the washing arrangements, there was a big room kind of thing, and you had in the center of it, it was like a big round basin. There was water coming from a number of things, and you sit at one of them and wash. There were also some showers. The water wasn't hot. Every once in a while it was warm. And the bathrooms were in another building, and there were rows, wooden things and that was that. During the summer it wasn't bad. During the winter

it was a different story.

Q WHAT WAS IT LIKE IN THE WINTER?

A Very, very cold. The winter of '44, '45, just before the evacuation, the temperature dropped down to minus 40, and considering the amount of clothing that we had, it wasn't warm enough. As a matter of fact, this is when I got my feet frostbitten, and that was that.

Q WHAT CLOTHING DID YOU HAVE? DID THEY PROVIDE CLOTHING?

A Well, you had the uniform. As a matter of fact, I gave a uniform to the museum in Berkeley (Magnus). I gave them one so that they would have both. The top, I think, was the winter one, and the bottom was a summer one.

The cloth was made out of wood really, pulp. And one was thinner than the other, and one was thicker than the other.

One was gray, the winter uniform was a little heavier and was gray. I mean, gray and blue, and the other one was white and blue--one of the reasons I can't stand blue and white stripes on anything.

The shoes were wooded soled, and you could always use paper to wrap yourself under. That was about it.

Q WHAT WERE YOUR SLEEPING ARRANGEMENTS?

A Well, they were those wooden, two tiers, rows upon row, like bunks really, and there were two tiers. Oh, they were about 24 inches wide by about six feet, and you had straw and you had a blanket and you made whatever arrangements you could

with it.

When the place got very crowded, then they put two in a bed; and that was that. One on top, I mean two in each bed and you had two on top, two on the bottom, and that was that.

Q WHAT KINDS OF THINGS WENT THROUGH YOUR MIND, IF YOU CAN RECALL? WHAT KINDS OF CONVERSATIONS DID YOU HAVE WITH PEOPLE?

A Most of the conversations really were about when we get out, the kinds of foods that we were going to be eating. I mean, hunger was such that we mostly spoke of food, various and sundry foods, holiday food, steaks, fries. I mean, all of the--this is what most of the conversations were. Every once in a while there would be something happening, and we were pretty well informed of what was happening on the outside world.

Q HOW?

A Well, somebody had a homemade receiver, and when the allies landed in Normandy, within two hours we knew about it. Whether it came from the West or it came from the East I really don't know, but we knew that they had landed. We knew as progress was coming on, and we thought that the Germans would ease off because they were obviously retreating from the eastern front. They obviously were in trouble on the western front, and we thought that they would begin to realize that this was something they would be

brought to account for. But it didn't work out that way.

On the contrary, they seemed to be wanting to finish the job faster, and we started getting people, transports coming in faster and faster, instead of less. Thats when most of the Hungarian Jews came in at that point.

Q THINGS WOULD GET CROWDED?

A Oh, yeah. What we did then is we had tents built in the middle of the camp, and people were just dumped in there as it were. But this was the only thing outside of food that we would be talking about--when something big happened.

When the first V-1 and V-2's were fired, we were devastated, but then it didn't turn out to be the weapon that we were afraid it was. And it was quite an experience.

Q SO YOU HAD THOUGHTS THAT YOU WOULD SURVIVE AND GET OUT OR...?

A Well, when my brother was selected and before he was taken away, he told me you're the last one, so you have no choice, you must survive. So I tried.

Q WHEN DID YOU BECOME AWARE OF, DURING THE SELECTION PROCESS, OF WHAT WAS HAPPENING WITH YOUR FATHER?

A As soon as I got into the Buna, and I very quickly learned what had happened was that my father had been sent to the gas chamber.

Q HOW DID YOU LEARN THAT?

A From some of the people that were already there.

Q FOR HOW LONG WERE YOU IN AUSCHWITZ BEFORE YOU--

A I was in the Buna for fourteen months and then we did the evacuation and we walked for a number of days; then we were loaded onto open boxcars, and we were loaded on about 150 to 175 people in a car. And, of those that were there, less than half survived the trip, and we arrived at Dora.

Dora was an administrative camp. We were processed there and then sent to various camps around there. I was sent to Nordhausen.

Nordhausen is a camp where the V-2's were built, and I was there until April of 1945. On the third of April the camp was bombed and out of the 5,000 people that were there, 2,800 were killed. But also, all of the barbed wire and fences and so-on were destroyed and--

Q AND YOU SAW THE BOMBING?

A Oh, I was there.

Q WHAT KINDS OF FEELINGS DID YOU HAVE ABOUT IT?

A Well, I could understand why we were being bombed. We were in the middle. On one side of us was the SS Kaserne. On the other side of us was the railroad depot; the third side was the airport. So obviously we were part of the target, and they didn't know that we were there, and besides which, American bombing at that time was (carpet) bombing. And they bombed everything in sight. They knew that there was these things that had to be destroyed, and everything in between was being bombed too.

And anyway, after the bombing two of my friends and

myself decided that that was enough, so we left. We went across the road to the SS Kaserne and went and hid in their cellar, and the reason we did that was that we figured that out of all the places, this is the last place they would be looking for us--and they didn't. Besides which, their cellar was full of food. So we ate more than we should have, and we all got very sick.

But nine days later Belgian troops arrived and the next day the Americans came.

Q SO THE DAY OF LIBERATION THE BELGIAN TROOPS CAME IN?

A Yeah.

Q AND YOU WERE THERE WHEN THE AMERICANS CAME?

A Uh-huh.

Q WHAT DO YOU REMEMBER THE DAY OF LIBERATION?

A All I remember is when the Belgians came. They were the fighters, and they said you don't have to worry about anything, because we're here now. And it was fine because they spoke French and I spoke French, and we were fine.

And the very next day the Americans came and they started cleaning up the place. And they came into the room and asked, "How many of you are sick?" And I told them, I couldn't even speak, I just raised my hand and showed three of us, and they had some German civilians that they had taken, and made them take us out on stretchers and bring us up into the field, and then from there we were taken back to Dora.

And a few days later I was put on a plane and came back to Paris.

Q DO YOU REMEMBER THE REACTION OF THE BELGIANS WHEN THEY FOUND YOU IN THE CAMP? DID YOU HAVE THE FEELING THAT THEY KNEW?

A Oh, they knew already. We weren't the first ones that they had seen, but they just wanted to let us know that we were not to worry anymore. The situation was now under control and that was it. They were too busy fighting. We didn't have really the time.

Q HOW LONG WERE YOU AT NORDHAUSEN?

A From January to April--four months.

Q WHAT WERE YOU DOING WHEN YOU WERE THERE?

A Building railroads, which we built and we were bombed, and we built and we were bombed.

Q YOU SAID YOU WENT BACK TO PARIS?

A Right.

Q AND HOW LONG DID YOU STAY IN PARIS?

A Well, I stayed in Paris until I got back on my feet. And then I went down to Nice to see if there was anything left of our belongings that were there.

Q DID YOU FIND ANYTHING?

A No.

Q DID YOU SEE ANYONE YOU HAD KNOWN?

A Well, while I was there my aunt came back from Italy and she and her son, so I got them back and from there I went back--well, when I was in Nice I got sick again and almost died,

and again was in the hospital.

And after that, went back to Paris and was put in touch with family that I had here in Oakland.

Q FAMILY THAT YOU HAVE HERE?

A Uh-huh. And that's when I decided time had come to leave, and in '46 I came here.

Q DO YOU EVER HAVE THOUGHTS ABOUT GOING TO ISRAEL?

A No. No, I have fought my war. I was tired.

Q ANY OTHER THINGS THAT YOU CAN THINK OF THAT IS SPECIFIC IN YOUR MEMORIES?

A Not really. That's pretty well in a nutshell. It's amazing how you can, what less than an hour, concentrate all of this. A whole lifetime. Okay? That's it. Thank you.

CAMERA MAN: YOU'RE VERY WELCOME. THANK YOU FOR PARTICIPATING.