

Bay Area Holocaust Oral History Project

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

Name of interviewee: Bennahmias, Daniel

Date of interview: 11/12/1991

Summary: (Deceased) Daniel Bennahmias was born in 1923 in Salonika, Greece, where he lived with his parents, Mark and Harriet. They were not very religious. He describes a strong Jewish community in Salonika, and only subtle anti-Semitism. His father's family was from Italy, so Daniel had Italian citizenship. His father worked at the Bureau of Information in Salonika. Daniel was planning to study medicine in Italy before the Germans arrived. When Italy was at war with Greece, all Italian citizens, including Daniel and his family, were put into Greek concentration camps, and when they were released they moved to Athens to live under Italian rule, where they would be protected. In 1941 the Germans liberated them, and at first were quite good to the Jews. In 1943, however, Italy surrendered to the Germans and they started gathering the Jews and created the ghetto, and started transferring people. Daniel and his family went into hiding in Athens, where they lived for six months.

They were discovered in March of 1944, arrested, and put into the Haitari concentration camp for one month. After that, they were put into a boxcar and traveled for 9 days to Auschwitz-Birkenau, where Daniel's parents were immediately killed. He was put under quarantine for one month, and then selected to work; he was part of the sondercommando. His job was in the crematoria, where he had to untangle the dead bodies before they were put into the ovens. Daniel recalls that the first time he had to do this job, he passed out four times, until an officer sent him back to the camp. The next time, he was able to handle it. The sondercommando lived in Block 13, separate from the other inmates of the camp.

He worked in the crematoria until January 1945, when he was put into another boxcar and traveled to Mauthausen in Austria. He was there for about five days, until he was moved to Ebensee, a sub camp of Mauthausen. Two weeks after that, around May 8, 1945, the Americans came and he was liberated. He says that the members of the sondercommando were scheduled to be killed several different times, but their files were lost and so the Germans didn't know who was part of the sondercommando.

Daniel says that by the time the Americans arrived, he was a "musselmann." After the war, he returned to Athens, where he continued to hoard food for months. Eventually, he married and moved with his wife to the United States, where he got a chemistry degree at UC Berkeley.