

-TITLE-RENE MOLHO
-I DATE-FEBRUARY 20 1989
-SOURCE-SAN FRANCISCO HOLOCAUST ORAL HISTORY PROJECT
-RESTRICTIONS-
-SOUND_QUALITY-EXCELLENT
-IMAGE_QUALITY-FAIR (FUZZY AT TOP)
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-KEY_WORDS-
-NOTES-
-CONTENTS-

1:00:30 Dr. Rene Molho was born in Salonika, Greece on April 9, 1919. His concentration camp number was 122213. He lived with his father, mother and younger brother (by two years) in France, where he went to school. When the Germans came to France, Rene and his family left and went to Greece. In 1941, the Germans came to Salonika. In the beginning, the Jews did not notice anything different than usual, except the hunger, because the Germans took their food (and from non-Jews as well).

1:02:00 The winter of 1941 was harsh, and Rene remembers seeing a lot of dead people in the streets. He saw something that he thinks very few people saw: there were bodies lined up in the streets, and the relatives of the deceased would not tell the Germans that they were dead so that they could get their food ration.

1:02:50 In 1942, the Germans told the Jewish community that they had to register with them. The Nuremberg Laws began to be applied. Food rations were taken away and the Jews had to receive food from the Red Cross, who gave them only one meal a day.

1:03:45 Rene remembers food being very scarce, and that working people were taxed in order to get money to acquire food for the rest of the community.

1:04:00 Rene recalls when the Germans started taking young Jews-between 18-40 years old- and forcing them to do hard labor. These men had the terrible task of drying swamps in Greece. Greece was infested with malaria and the men sent to work in the swamps died in masses.

1:04:40 Although Rene had not yet completed his medical training, he volunteered to help care for the men when they returned to Salonika from the swamps. He remembers them being sore-covered, fevered and ill. There was no quinine to treat the malaria and many of the men did not survive.

1:05:20 Some time after the swamp labor program started, Rene

remembers that the Jewish community paid the Germans a great deal of money to allow them to stop the work. Again, the working members of the Jewish community were taxed to pay for this 200,000 gold pound fee. Rene's father was a member of the council that governed the community.

1:06:15 Rene remembers the Nuremburg Laws being enforced ever more stringently, with the Jews not being allowed to use public transportation or see movies, etc. Soon the Jews were not allowed to run or work in any businesses; they were ousted and non-Jews took over.

1:07:00 Rene remembers life getting even harder and the Jews being made to wear the Yellow Star and obey a curfew. They were made to live in specific districts, with a number of families crowded into the same small house. Rene's parents, who had money, were able to buy food and other goods off the black market.

1:09:30 Rene remembers there being various bouts of anti-Semitism during the time he lived in Salonika, before the Germans came. Although there were no pogroms, the Jews were not allowed to join some organizations and could only vote for their own Jewish representatives. They were not equal citizens, but they lived relatively freely, and Rene remembers being happy.

1:11:20 Rene remembers when the Germans decided to send the Jews to Poland, tricking them into believing it was in order to work. They were instructed to get warm clothes, blankets, etc. and to change their Greek money for Polish money.

1:12:15 Friends of Rene's family begged them to escape through the underground, but his father did not want to risk it and said they should just go to Poland and work and get it over with. Rene says, looking back, that was a big mistake.

1:12:30 Within a few days, the Jews were taken to a railroad station and made to wait for 2-3 more days in common housing before they were crowded into boxcars. Rene's family had brought some food with them, but water was scarce. The train stopped twice each day, once in the morning and once in the evening, to allow the Jews to relieve themselves.

1:13:00 After five days, Rene's train arrived in Auschwitz-Birkenau. The Jews were rushed off the train, having been ordered to leave everything on it. Rene says Dr. Mengele was there to "greet" the train, a man he calls the "Butcher of Auschwitz." Men and women were separated into two different lines. Rene's parents were selected to go on the track, and he and his brother were led off to work.

Rene remembers being happy because he thought his parents were going off to work together. He did not realize that they were being taken to their deaths in the crematorium. All those who were ill, crippled or weak were also selected for the crematorium. All the "able-bodied" people were taken to work in the camp.

1:14:40 Rene, with many others, was taken, undressed, tattooed and had his head shaved. They were all issued striped clothes, wooden shoes and a hat.

1:15:15 The Jews were kept in a quarantine camp for a few weeks and then sent into the regular camp. Rene's first job involved carrying bodies to the crematorium. He and his brother then realized his parents must have been gassed, but they could not believe it, even though they could smell flesh burning day and night. They could not grasp such a heinous reality.

1:16:15 The barracks Rene stayed in had tiers of bunk beds, into one of which beds he, his brother and cousin shared one blanket and huddled together at night. They were made to get up at 5 a.m. and were given burnt leaves to eat; they were fed again at noon, a little warm soup of boiled cabbage; at night they were given a little bread with cheese.

1:16:50 The Jews were given numbers to wear on their pants and left lapel- the Jews were no longer considered people, they were simply numbers.

1:17:30 Rene remembers the Jews not being allowed to leave their barracks at night and use the latrine. They had to relieve themselves in a pail in their barracks. Rene and some other prisoners often had to go out in the middle of the night and empty the full pail in the latrine. The latrines were huge holes in the ground, with cement completely surrounding them and water down below.

1:19:00 Rene remembers during the first week they were in camp that many of the men could not handle it. A number of them committed suicide by throwing themselves on the electric fences that surrounded the camp. After three months, Rene thinks that less than 5% of the people that had come in on his train were still alive.

1:20:00 The work that the Rene was soon assigned to do was very hard- he and a number of others had to build roads. Some of the kapos Rene dealt with were very harsh, breaking heads and jaws and letting their dogs kill Jews as if nothing were happening.

1:20:15 Rene remembers Dr. Mengele coming to their block one night and selecting 15-20 men, Rene's brother amongst them. These men were used in experiments that few of them survived. Rene's brother was killed in an experiment in which his testicles were x-rayed repeatedly in order to see if sperm could be killed in this manner. The Germans were looking for a method of x-ray birth control.

1:21:30 Rene remembers times when the Germans were bored and they would order a Jew to bend over and then begin to beat him 25 times. The Jew was made to count along with the beatings, and often the German would pretend he had lost count and make the counting begin again. Many people were beaten to a pulp in this manner.

1:22:15 Rene reached a point after some time in the camp that he felt dead and could barely walk. He was lucky enough to be allowed to work in the kitchen.

1:22:30 Rene remembers that as the Jews were being taken to the crematorium, loud music was always playing. An old friend of his was in the camp with him and watched one day as his daughter was taken off in a transport to the crematorium. Rene remembers the man going crazy and never recovering from the experience. Then the Germans did not have enough people to fill a transport, they would go to the camp and select the weakest to fill up the spots to be gassed and burned. This was an especially bad sensation for the Jews- waiting for the gas.

1:23:45 Rene remembers another time becoming very weak and, again, being lucky enough to get an easier job. He was given the job of meeting the transports when they came in, and after the prisoners had gone, he was to collect all of their belongings and put them in wagons to be sent back to Germany. He worked alongside with Germans, all of them completely surrounded by soldiers with guns who did not even trust their own people not to steal from them. Rene was able to steal food as he worked which is one of the reasons he thinks he survived. He knew it was risky and that he would be shot if he got caught stealing, but he said it did not matter, that he did not care.

1:26:00 One of the most awful things Rene ever witnessed was when a transport of 500,000 Jews came in. Pits were dug and all of the infants were thrown in and burned alive. Rene did not see the actual burning of the infants, but he saw the pits afterwards.

1:27:00 In the winter of 1944 the Jews realized that the Russians were approaching Auschwitz. The Germans were very frightened and emptied the camp, killing most of the prisoners so that there would be no witnesses left behind. The remaining Jews were packed in cattle trains and transported to Germany. This was one of the most horrible times Rene remembers. The train stopped only once to let them out over this trip of many days. Many people drank their own urine because they could not take it anymore. The people were so packed in that when some of them died, their corpses remained standing because there was no room to fall to the ground.

1:28:25 One day Rene's train rolled into Berlin and a group of red clad German women entered the train and gave out tea and food. Rene believes that this was a mistake, that the Germans never had any intention of doing this service for the Jews- but Rene said it was indeed a godsend.

1:29:00 The Jews were taken to Ragenbould (ph), a factory close to Berlin, where they remained for two weeks. The place was bombed so badly that they could not stay- there were no Germans left to supervise them- and they were sent to Dachau. They were in one of many satellite camps and were ordered to build a new camp.

1:30:30 Rene remembers how terrible it was to wake up in Auschwitz in the morning in the cold below zero weather and stand in the snow for hours at a time without coats. Waking up in Dachau in the early morning with no heat in the barracks, and then having to work all day carrying 2-3 sacks of cement at a time up stairs to build bunkers, was also awful.

1:31:30 Rene was lucky enough to soon be put on food detail with ten other prisoners. They had to push a carriage into town every day and get food for the camp. Rene was able to steal food, helping him to survive.

1:32:30 Rene remembers thinking there was some civility in the Germans' attitude now. Maybe because they were losing the war, he did not know. But there did not seem to be the same kind of hate as before. Also there was no crematorium at their new location, which made everyone feel a little better.

1:33:00 One day the camp was to be evacuated. The Jews could hear American guns approaching. The Jews were marched through the Black Forest, being given very little food. People dropped dead on the road in masses, and those who were just too weak to make the journey were shot on the spot. Somehow the Germans must have miscounted the Jews, and Rene and a Frenchmen were left behind. Rene remembers fainting and then the next thing he heard was the sound of American voices. He had been liberated.

1:34:00 Rene was very weak and in the hospital for a week after liberation. He worked for the American army for awhile, especially on investigations of war crimes.

1:34:30 Rene thinks the German people must have been brainwashed by propaganda to allow the atrocities of the Holocaust to occur. Even worse was that Jerusalem knew what was happening in the Holocaust and did nothing about it, as the Pope did nothing. Rene does not know why the crematorium was not bombed to slow the death process or why a helping hand was not given to the Jews. He feels that the whole civilized world is guilty of doing nothing and is to blame that so little was done to save Jewish lives.

1:39:30 Rene tributes his survival in the camps to luck and a willingness to live. He remembers being chosen in one of the selections because he was so weak. He had a friend who was in charge of the list of transportees selected who Rene was able to contact and who was able to get his name crossed off the list. Rene only wishes he had known someone who could have done that for his mother and saved her life as well.

1:41:00 Rene knew that he was lucky and that few people lived like he did in the concentration camps for so many years. Rene remembers that one of the things that constantly helped him to survive was that he lived in the past, the present not really being there for him. He had a very happy youth and even when he was being almost beaten to death, he would be thinking back to the good old times.

1:42:00-1:49:00 Rene reminisces about his wife and some of his post-war experiences (not relevant to this history).

1:49:30 One of the messages that Rene wants to leave with the world is that every human being should try to seek and read the signs of discrimination, hate and bigotry and to try to fight them as thoroughly as possible. Rene says that when he was in Salonika, when the Germans first came, no one read the signs.

1:50:00-1:55:00 More reminisces about the past (non relevant).

1:55:45 Rene remembers that in the camps that Jews were not very harsh against other Jews. Rene remembers one Jew once stole two bikes so that he and a friend could escape. This is one of the few escapes Rene knew of from Auschwitz. These two men that escaped went to England and spoke on the BBC, but the world did not listen to what they had to say.

1:58:00 Rene says that there was no medical care in the camps. If a Jew went to the hospital barracks, he would not come out alive. One day Rene was bitten very badly: he got a very bad infection, his glands swelled up and he had a high fever. He was scared to go the hospital and he asked a doctor friend of his to slice open his sores and drain out the pus without any anaesthesia.

2:00:15 Rene's role as a doctor's assistant in the camp was to gather all the medical supplies- books, instruments, etc.- together that he could find from incoming Jews in a transport who were doctors. He was also responsible for assisting the sick people in getting to the hospital. Rene remembers discouraging people from going, telling them that they would die if they went, but most of the Jews did not listen to him.

2:02:30 The first time Rene ever knew the Jews were being

exterminated was when he arrived at Auschwitz and the other prisoners told him. The Germans would trick the Jews into thinking they were going to take a bath. The men and women were divided into two rooms and told to undress. They were then all forced into a common room and gassed to death. The Germans would then open the doors to let air in; when it was safe they would enter the room and check all the mouths for gold teeth. They would then shave the dead Jews' heads and take them upstairs to the crematorium to be burned.

2:05:15 Rene says that he did think of trying to escape when he was in the camps. He knows of about 20 people that did escape, but were caught because there was no place to go. The Germans hung these prisoners as a deterrent to the rest of the camp; the entire camp was made to watch the hangings.

2:06:00 Rene says that there were no prisoners of other nationalities in his barrack, but there were Poles and Russians in other barracks. The Poles and Russians were able to receive care packages from home, which usually consisted of food. None of them were sent to the crematorium like the Jews were. There were also gypsies held in a different section of the camp. Whole families lived together and the children even went to school. Then one night, the Germans went in and gassed them all, thousands of them. Rene did not understand the total incongruity of the act.

2:07:15 Rene says that the Germans even gassed some of their own people, a well-kept secret. They would gas those who came to the camp very wounded from the war, who could not care for themselves and who the German state did not want to support.

2:08:15 Rene says that in the camps you would see both Jews helping Jews and Jews hurting other Jews. If one had a sick friend, he would help him walk or carry him on marches the best he could. On the other hand, some Jews who were given certain work positions would use them to their advantage and to the detriment of others: for example, a food rationer would take a little bit off everyone's plate for himself.

2:09:30 Rene says he thought it very odd the hatred between the Poles and Russians, often seeing them kill each other. Rene says the kapos were sometimes nice men, sometimes not and that often one individual would fluctuate between being harsh and more civil.

2:11:00 Some of Rene's lifelong physical effects include losing

all of his teeth and having an ulcer, which he has been nursing since he was in the concentration camps. Rene says that the physical effects are not nearly as bad as the mental effects. Rene could not discuss his Holocaust experiences with anyone other than close survivors for years and years. Then he started to work at the Holocaust Center, hoping that by telling of his experiences it would encourage others, especially non-Jews, to fight discrimination and bigotry. Rene is trying to do something, however small it may be.

2:16:00 Rene made two points about medicine: one, that no one that he knew of in the camps died of a common cold or pneumonia. He did not know why and it did not really make any sense to him, as all of the Jews were very weak and should have had little resistance to any sickness. Rene says that there was a lot of typhus amongst the prisoners, picked up from the lice that infested the camp. The Jews were all checked for lice regularly. Rene's second point was about mental degradation. Rene said that the physical effects were obvious, of course, but the mental effects- these were something else- they were there, just not plain for all to see.

2:17:15 Rene said that the Jews were like nothing to the German SS- they were objects and anything at all could be done to them. The Jews were subject to any and every whim of the Germans.

2:20:00 Rene remembers two things that were the most awful for him: one, when they took his brother away for awhile and then he was brought back to the camp for a week and then taken away again for more experiments. It was then that his brother died. The other memory that Rene will never forget is when his cousin was selected in the camp for gassing. Somehow his cousin got word to Rene that all he wanted before he died was to have a piece of bread. But Rene was not able to find any and his cousin was put to death. These two memories are the worst in Rene's life, things he will never forget. He feels very guilty for not being able to save his brother or help his cousin. Why was he able to survive when so many died, he wonders? He thinks he was just lucky.

2:24:00 The worse part, Rene says, was not the physical agony, but the emotional trauma- being made to feel that you were nothing.
.END.