

## Jacques Altmann

Wartime Experience: Participated in the Resistance in France

I was born March 3, 1923 and lived with my family in Romainville, a suburb Northeast of Paris. I never had any problems with anti-Semitism at school. Some did, but I never had any. My brothers had problems because they wore the yellow star. It was during the Occupation. But I no longer went to school. I didn't go to school after 1940. In France, there was a little of everything: courageous people and those who did nothing. One can't condemn everyone. I knew French people who helped me a great deal. But it was hard to know whom to trust. I knew collaborators and those who tried to help. There were both kinds of people.

I was arrested for the first time by French police in 1941. I was 17 and a half years old. I was arrested because I hit a French collaborator who was selling the newspaper "Le Pilon" in the face. I took the newspapers and threw them in the gutter. Meantime, I didn't know that I had really hurt him. He ran to the police station to denounce me and I was arrested. But I managed to escape from the police. I stole a bike and went to Sarthe.

The second time I was arrested by the Gestapo in Nantes in March 1943. I had been part of the Resistance. I don't know who denounced me because I was the only Jew. But the Germans, when they arrested me, didn't know who I was. I had excellent false papers. My name was Charrie, not Altmann. Many Jews had false papers at this time. That's what saved them. And so I was arrested and I was interrogated. Since my mother was a German Jew, I spoke German very well, as well as I spoke French so the Gestapo wanted me to work with them.

In the beginning, they didn't know I was Jewish. Later, they knew. They said: "Since he speaks German, let's use him to try and catch other members of the Resistance." They were interested in both Jews and Resistants. When they discovered I was Jewish, I did not deny it. They had been hitting me on the head and it was terrible.

I was deported to Auschwitz on February 2, 1944, where I spent two days. From Auschwitz, I was sent to a terrible "commando" in Poland called Lagischa. They didn't keep many of us at Auschwitz. They sent us to work in "commandos." One was either kept at Auschwitz or gassed at Birkenau. As long as you were strong, you could work. I was pretty tough. It wasn't a question of age, but of physical condition.

The other members of my family had been deported on November 3, 1942. And no one returned. Five brothers, my father, my mother. No one! I never had any news after their deportation. Since I was also there, I knew how it worked. I worked at Lagischa and later returned to Auschwitz-Birkenau where I worked for six months in a "commando" called "Le Canada." After a week or two, one knew very well what the procedure was. Before arriving, I suspected something. When our convoy arrived, there was a "selection". We were about 1200. All but about 100 were immediately gassed. At that moment, I had no more illusions. I saw it with my own eyes.

We left by train from Drancy. We were in cattle cars. As in all the trains, there were men, women and children, young people, old people, blind people, sick people, pregnant women... everything. It was awful! The trip lasted about ten days and, unfortunately, there were many deaths. There were suicides.

They said we were going to Poland. We tried to escape, but it was not possible. We tried to break down the doors and the women shouted. The SS came and threw water on us. We knew we were going to Poland, but we didn't know we were going to Auschwitz. I had heard on English radio that they were burning Jews in Poland, but we couldn't believe it. It was unthinkable that one could gas human beings. We didn't think it was possible, but they were talking about it.

I had a certain apprehension. You know, when one is put in prison by the Germans for six months, one hardly knows fear anymore. One is anxious, but not afraid. Rather, one wants to do something. But, upon arrival in Auschwitz nothing could be done. We were surrounded by dogs and members of the SS. There was nothing to do. We had to follow the orders and wait.

There is something in particular that I'd like to tell you regarding my war experiences. The saddest moment for me was to see my grandparents arrive in Theresienstadt in September 1944. I turned my head. Other moments of great sadness were when friends were killed fighting in the war, or by the SS, or beaten to death or starved to death. It was a very sad time.

We were evacuated. We were put in trains and taken to Sachsenhausen in Germany, next to Berlin. And from Berlin, I was in a "commando" at Ohrdruf. It was a satellite of Buchenwald. It was very difficult. We worked in the mountains.

I was liberated from Buchenwald by the Americans on April 11, 1945. The Americans. But I was unaware of what was going on because I was half-dead. I was lying down with the cadavers. I could no longer stand up; I had malaria and typhus. My weight when I was deported was 65 kilos and I went down to 29 kilos. In 1948 I decided to go to Rumania.

There's a post card from my brother that was given to me. I knew they (the members of my family) would not return. A neighbor said to me: "Mr. Altmann, I found a postcard written by your brother Joseph." And so the man gave me this postcard that said he was going to an unknown destination. He didn't know where they were going. They believed what they were told. When I received the card, it was also a very sad moment. I knew they would not return. And I cherish this postcard because it is all that I have of them. When Jewish families were arrested, everything was taken. They emptied the apartment, took all the furniture, the paintings, even the piano. We had seven rooms in our house since we were five sons.

I met my wife in 1956 when things started to go a bit better for me. And we rebuilt a life for ourselves. We have two magnificent daughters. Both live in Paris. And we have two grandchildren: a granddaughter and a grandson. The little boy is Cédric and the girl Laura.

Finally, it's very difficult to speak of this period. Very difficult. I think that French governments don't want us to speak too much about it because it bothers the politicians, whether on the Right or the Left. It bothers them because it is a shameful period. Many of the perpetrators are still alive and members of their families have been implicated. They really don't want to talk about it.

One can learn a great deal from our experience. One can learn from survivors like me what happened, that what is written in books is true. Fortunately I am still here to speak to the next generation.

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### Des dossiers du Mémorial de la Shoah–Paris

Jacques ALTMANN

né le 03/03/1923 à EBERFELD (Allemagne) de Sucher ALTMANN et Dina SCHWARZ

Déporté par convoi n° 68 du 10/02/1944 pour AUSCHWITZ, rescapé Résistant

J'habitais à ROMAINVILLE avec ma famille. Arrêté pour la 1ère fois en 1941 par les gendarmes français. J'avais corrigé un collaborateur qui aussitôt m'avait dénoncé. Conduit à la Préfecture, je me suis évadé en volant un vélo et suis arrivé dans la Sarthe. Mars 1943, je suis arrêté par la GESTAPO à NANTES. J'ai alors de faux-papiers au nom de CHARRIE. Comme je parlais très bien l'allemand, la GESTAPO m'a proposé de travailler avec eux. Déporté en 1944 à AUSCHWITZ, mais aussitôt envoyé dans le commando LAGISCHA. Les autres membres de ma famille ont été déportés le 3/11/1942, jamais rentrés. Je réintègre AUSCHWITZ et le commando « LE CANADA ». En septembre 1944 j'ai vu arriver mes grands-parents qui ont péri dès leur arrivée. Libéré le 11/04/1945 à BUCHENWALD par les américains. Je pesais seulement 29 kg, au lieu des 65kg à l'origine. J'étais couché parmi les cadavres, atteint de la malaria et du typhus. En 1956 j'ai rencontré ma femme. J'accompagne des groupes au camp d'AUSCHWITZ chaque année et je donne des conférences dans les écoles et à l'UNION DES DEPORTES D'AUSCHWITZ.