

## **Gabriel Benichou**

### Wartime Experience: Concentration Camp Survivor

I was born December 15, 1926, in Tlemcen, Algeria into a French family which was Jewish and observant and I said my prayers every morning. In 1940-41 the anti-Semitic laws of the Vichy regime in France imposed a quota, 7% in Algeria and 2% in France, to limit the number of Jewish students. I was expelled from school. But my sister who was living in Marseille managed to get me accepted into the St. Charles high school there where I boarded. I never left the facility out of fear of being arrested because my identity card listed my nationality as “ French citizen native Algerian Jew”. One Thursday when everything seemed quiet, I went to see my sister and during the dinner we heard knocking at the door. It was the Gestapo who had come to arrest us. It was April 8, 1943. We were taken to the Saint Pierre prison for interrogation. Thus began a tragic chronology: Saint Pierre Prison, Marseille April 8- 20, 1943. The transit center at Drancy just outside Paris, April 21- July 18. Birkenau Auschwitz, July 21- October where I had the number 130509 tattooed on my left forearm. Warsaw in concentration camp inside the Ghetto after its destruction, October – August 1944, number 2150. Death march, Warsaw – Koutno. Dachau August 1944, Number 89143. Landsberg, October 1944 – April 1945. Death march Landsberg-Dachau towards the Tyrol.

### **Prison Saint Pierre**

Arriving in the evening we were thrown into the darkness in the middle of a large room in the prison. Just after the first terror and shock, we heard voices and we understood that we were not alone. Then we groped around in the dark and we found bundles of straw and so we managed to spend the night. The next day the first demand was to put all of our money and papers into a box which we never saw again. Then we were led to a large room where there were 25-30 people. All were Jews except two Protestant Ministers arrested because they had helped Jews. From that point on we had no contact or correspondence with the outside world until our departure for Drancy.

### **Drancy**

We were asked again to hand over all our identity papers, money and personal belongings, but we had nothing since we had given up all these things in Marseille. In May 1943, the Germans took control of Drancy from the French and immediately all letters and packages were forbidden. All the men were put to work and the lists for deportations began. My group was designated for the next convoy. We spent the last night in a dormitory isolated from the rest of the camp and left in a convoy of 40-50 men in each cattle car. We were kept locked in during the three-day journey living on the food we had managed to take with us.

## **Auschwitz Birkenau**

Just after the arrival at the camp, the weakest among us were put into trucks, and taken directly to the gas chamber (they were told it was to have a shower). The others, including myself, went by rows of ten to the interior of the camp. There we had to undress and to submit to a “disaffection”, meaning shaving the whole body followed by application of a disinfectant, then a shower and distribution of striped suits. The following day they tattooed a number on the left forearm of each person, and we were led to the so called “work camp.” In fact, Birkenau was a typical death camp with very hard labor, often without any purpose; not enough food to survive; brutal treatment by the “Kapos” who expressed their worst cruelty, sadistically beating us, stealing the little food we had, harassment without stop. There were also freezing weather and epidemics – but these horrors were only details. The most significant thing was the gas chamber and the crematorium. This was the logical end for any Jew entering Birkenau -Jews were no longer considered as human beings but as corpses in the process of elimination.

## **Warsaw**

In October 1943 the able-bodied men were sent to clear the Warsaw ghetto and to salvage the few for Germany. Because of my youth, I was lucky enough to be chosen to work in the kitchen peeling potatoes. Soon I contracted typhus and was in coma for one month. The epidemic had killed so many that there was not enough time to cremate them all. A new crematory was still under construction, so the corpses had to be burned in huge piles with alternating layers of wood and corpses the entire height. In July 1944 the Russians approached but they remained behind the Volga River so the uprising of the Polish partisans was pitilessly repressed before the entrance of the Red Army into Warsaw. The order came to evacuate all the way to Koutno on foot minus the 500 who were lost in the uprising. It was our first death march. We walked along the road in rows of five. The stragglers were shot in the neck and left in the ditches on the side of the road. In Koutno, we were put into cattle cars for three days without food or water until we reached Dachau.

## **Dachau**

I worked as a woodcutter. In and a mason because we were building the new camp. I also worked as a roofer, nurse, latrine digger and gravedigger. Towards the middle of April 1945, the approach of the Allies was clearly noticeable because of the sound of the bombing and gunning which could be heard from the camp. All the inmates of the camp were gathered and sent walking on a death march towards the Tyrol. The march lasted around a week. Towards the third day I escaped with two other men, but we were recaptured the next day. We were fortunate enough not to be killed immediately but were put back into the march.

I was liberated May 2, 1945 at Bad Tolts, Bavaria by the Americans and taken to Sarrebourg near the French border. The French took us to the Hotel Lutécia in Paris, center of the repatriation of the deportees in Paris. I returned to Tlemcen and my family and I resumed my

studies in pharmacy and medicine in Algeria and then in Paris. I directed a medical laboratory for 40 years and now I am retired.

**On a personal note:**

Upon my return, it was very difficult to readapt. My brother-in-law returned from the camps. He died in 1991. My sister never came back. Other deportees who knew her told me that she had been forced to submit to medical experimentation and died in Auschwitz around December 1943. A majority of the deportees had enormous difficulties adapting back to a “normal” life. In Algeria at that time no one knew what concentration camps were and when I spoke of the horrors that had taken place in them no one believed me. They took me for a storyteller who was trying to be clever. So I found refuge in silence, I never mentioned it. But every night I went back to Auschwitz. Since then, I have always worn long sleeved shirts to cover the number on my arm and to avoid indiscreet questions.

I was lucky enough to meet Hilda, a woman who became literally my lifesaver. She listened out of love until such time as she realized the evil reality of what I had experienced. I married her in 1976. We have a son, Pierre Isaac and a daughter Catherine Esther. Some years later, following a terrible depression, I took her with me to visit the camps where it had all happened. This helped me to exorcise the ghosts and today I can speak about my past and also accompany visits to Auschwitz.

It was at the request of my grandchildren that I started visiting their schools bearing witness to the atrocities I experienced.

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

Gabriel Benichou

né le 15/12/1926 à TLEMCEM (Algérie)

Déporté à AUSCHWITZ le 18/07/1943 par le convoi n°57, rescapé

Exclu de l'école à TLEMCEM parce que je suis juif, je rejoins ma sœur à MARSEILLE où j'étudie au lycée St Charles. Le 8/04/1943 nous sommes arrêtés par la Gestapo et conduits à la prison St Pierre. Puis DRANCY, AUSCHWITZ jusqu'en Octobre 1943. Ensuite VARSOVIE, DACHAU, LANDSBERG, où j'exerce plusieurs métiers tels que maçon, bucheron, couvreur, infirmier, nettoyeur de latrines et aussi fossoyeur. Marche de la mort vers le Tyrol et libéré le 2/05/1945 à BAD TOLTS (Bavière) par les Américains. Rapatrié en France puis en ALGERIE, où je reprends mes études pour devenir pharmacien puis médecin biologiste. Ma sœur n'est pas revenue d'AUSCHWITZ, elle est décédée à la suite d'expériences médicales.

Actuellement je fais des témoignages dans les écoles, les congrès et associations, aussi des accompagnements de voyages à AUSCHWITZ, des interviews à la radio et à la télévision.