

A JEWISH CHILD IN THE SECOND WORLD WAR

Read the testimony of Joséphine Yacob about her life in the Second World War.

Who are you ?

My name is Joséphine Yacob, I'm 94 years old. I'm a Jew and I'm a rescapee from the Second World War. When the war started, I was 11 years old.

What was the situation like in France ?

The war started on 3rd September 1939. In May 1940 France was invaded by the Nazis and was cut in two parts : the occupied zone and the free zone. The situation was critical in the occupied zone. Jews had to run away from the Nazis, so they fled to the free zone. The Jews had to wear yellow stars on their clothes or there were heavy consequences. We were under control, we couldn't take the public transports and we couldn't practise the job we wanted to.

How did you get arrested ?

It was in May 1944, I was 16 years old. I lived in Paris with my parents, my big brother who was 18 and my little sister who was 11. It was hard for us. So our parents decided to send us to Nice. We went to the station and got into the train which was ahead to Nice. When the train arrived to the French Demarcation Line, Nazis arrested us.

What happened to you ?

With my brother and sister, we were deported to Drancy which was a transit camp in France. It was terrible. There were miradors, barbed wires, all was done for prisoners not to escape. The conditions were bad, we didn't have a lot of food. We were many people in each dormitory, we slept on a thin straw mattress. We stayed there for 2 months and in the end of July 1944, we were deported to Auschwitz.



Camp of Drancy (transit camp) Paris (France), Wikipédia

How did you go to Auschwitz ?

We travelled on a livestock train. We were packed in multiple wagons during what seemed to be a long time. We didn't have food or water. Many of us died and it smelt putrid. We were frightened because we didn't know where we were sent nor what was going to happen...

Did you lose someone from your family ?

Unfortunately yes, I did. When we arrived in Auschwitz, we got out of the train and we were numerous. After that, Nazis came and selected people, by age and gender. For men if they were older than 16 they got selected and for women they needed to be strong and young to be selected. When a Nazi came to ask my age I said that I was 18 but in fact I was 16. With my brother, we were separated from my little sister who climbed up in a truck with the people who weren't selected. Now I know that she was driven to chambers to be gassed.

How was life in Auschwitz ?

When we arrived in the camp, we were undressed and showered and got our hair shaved by the Nazis. After that, Nazis made us a tattoo on the arm, each of us was just a number. Then, a job was assigned to each of us. The conditions were terrible: if you didn't work, you were hit or executed. We slept on a wood bunk bed and we were by gender, women with women and men with men. We didn't have much food to eat and if you didn't work, you did not get any food at all. We stayed in Auschwitz 5 months because Nazis needed to hide us from the Allies who had won territory back in France. So Nazis made us walk until we arrived to Bergen-Belsen.

How was the walk of death ?

It was terrific. We had to walk in line or we got shot. Everything was cold so if we tried to run away we could get shot. If someone succeeded they would die from cold. The weak ones died first and we couldn't stop to bury them. We walked for 3 days, then, we climbed up in a train. One day later, we arrived at Bergen-Belsen. We were 150 people, leaving from Auschwitz and when we arrived we were only twenty left.



Walk of death January 1945, wikipédia

What happened in Bergen-Belsen ?

We were assigned to a job, the rules were almost the same as Auschwitz. But the life was easier because the Nazis were occupied fighting the Allies. In April 1945 the Allies came to save us and bring us back to France. We stayed 1 extra month in Bergen-Belsen without working, we were waiting for a means of transport.

How was your life after the war?

After the war I came back to Paris exhausted and excited to see my family. But when I arrived there was only my brother and my father, my mother and my sister had died so my life extremely changed. People were staring at me because I was starving and my hair didn't grow as much as before. Some Jews were too disgraced to talk about the concentration camps and some others committed suicide. So, my life changed much after all that. I wish that no one will ever live this again.