

FARNOUX, Yvette Baumann
September 2, 1991
RG-50.027*0003
French

Abstract

Yvette Farnoux (née Baumann) was born on September 10, 1919 in Alsace, France. Her family was Jewish, but they were not at all religious. Alsatian Jews were very integrated into French society. Yvette did not know that she was Jewish until she went to school.

She saw the first signs of German anti-Semitism in 1934, while studying social work in England, where she saw Jewish refugees from Germany. When she heard news of potential war, she returned to France.

In Paris in 1941, she participated in minor anti-German activities to make their lives more difficult. She, her brother Jean Pierre, and her sister Claudine joined the Resistance. Yvette helped as a social worker, aiding Jewish families, including organizing escapes.

In January 1944, when Yvette was eight months pregnant, she was arrested by the French Gestapo. Yvette was taken to Blois, where she miscarried. She escaped with friends, but was detained again for one month in Fresnes. She was sent to Drancy at the end of March, then transported to Birkenau, where she was imprisoned from May 1944 to January 1945.

She says that she got used to hunger, but thirst was terrible. Her work consisted of moving stones back and forth inside the camp.

She attributes survival to chance. In Birkenau, she happened to meet up with her sister-in-law. They decided to never separate. Once, when her sister-in-law needed to use the latrine, Yvette went with her. During those moments, their 300-woman Kommando group was led away.

Yvette survived 17 selections. She describes horrors, including experimentation with twins and women.

She tells of a woman who escaped, and provided the Polish Resistance with detailed maps of the camp from memory. The woman was captured, tortured, and scheduled to be hanged. But someone cut the rope binding her wrists, and she slapped the would-be hangman. Yvette thinks that the woman was burned alive.

On January 28, 1945, the inmates were sent on a death march to Czechoslovakia. The column of people was seven kilometers long, but only three kilometers long when they arrived, in bitter cold, at a train station.

She was liberated from a camp in the Sudetenland. A man in an American military uniform assisted with repatriation. She later married him. They have children and grandchildren.

Yvette believes strongly it is very important to give testimony about Holocaust experiences, and she gives 20 to 30 talks a year to students. She believes that history is repeating itself, and people must be aware of potentially dangerous situations around the world.

At the time of the interview, she was living a comfortable life near Paris in Vanves, where she is surrounded by books, classical music, and children.

Tape 1

- 00:10** Yvette Farnoux (née Baumann) was born on September 10, 1919. (Note: her transport record shows birthdate of October 17, 1919.) Her father's name was Georges. Her older brother, Jean Pierre, was born in 1914. Her sister Claudine was three years younger. The three siblings were in the Resistance.
- 02:16** Yvette's address at the time of the interview was 2 Park Avenue, in Vanves near Paris. Yvette's father spent five years in the French army during the First World War, and as such considered himself an "*ancien combattant*" (war veteran), and therefore truly French. Her grandparents were from Alsace and were active in the Jewish Community. They emigrated to San Francisco.
- 03:25** Yvette's parents were not active in the Jewish community, they did not keep traditions, and were not at all religious. Yvette did not know she was Jewish until she went to school in the 1930s. One of her classmates was a granddaughter of Alfred Dreyfus. (The woman was later deported and killed at Auschwitz). Yvette had non-Jewish friends also, and said that religion made no difference to her or her friends. Alsatian Jews were very integrated. The family has been in Alsace back at least as far as 1620. It is very hard to trace a family tree, because it was customary to change names frequently. The family tree could be traced back to 1620, but not further.
- 04:50** The first impression she had of potential problems was around 1934 when she saw refugees from Germany, especially children, and she felt somewhat involved.
- 06:30** She panicked when the Munich Accord took place. In 1934-1935, she was in England, and when news of potential war circulated, she returned to France. She was vacationing with family in Tarascon, in the middle of France, when the war started. The family tried to stay in that community, but did not succeed.
- 08:30** Yvette was studying to become a social worker, and had no special activities beyond her studies. She was scheduled to take a driving test the day the Germans entered Paris, and so did not do it. She wanted to remain in Paris, and spent 1941 there. Activities against the Germans were minimal, such as writing "V"s on walls, changing directions on street signs, and so on.
- 10:30** She relates an episode of riding a bike, and misdirecting a German officer around La Defense; minor acts to make the life of Germans more difficult.
- 12:00** Yvette says that she was very lucky to get into the Resistance, after being introduced to an important member. She was not worried about being Jewish, and she never wore a yellow star.
- 13:55** Her father felt very strongly French, and he thought that he did not have to worry about being Jewish because he was an "*ancien combattant*" (war veteran). But he was denounced as a Jew in 1942, probably by somebody living in the same

building. A French policeman visited him and asked if he was a Jew. As her father never lied, he answered that he was Jewish. The policeman, an "*ancien combattant*" as well, said he would check to see whether Georges was in danger, and let him know.

- 15:15** The policeman later told Georges he had 15 minutes to take his wife and himself to Lyon, where his daughter Claudine was, and from there to Cannes and other locations. They moved often during the rest of the war.
- 15:45** Very few people from Yvette's family were taken by the Germans. She says that the problem was more acute for foreign Jews in France, because they did not have family and friends who could move them to safe places and help them change locations as needed. She says it was easy for Resistance members to get false papers, food coupons, etc., but hard for others without such contacts.
- 17:10** Yvette worked in the Resistance, helping people whose family members had been taken, and also helping organize escapes.
- 18:12** Yvette lists the names of many Resistance members she knew and had worked with. She mentions that Resistance members were not supposed to know more than three names of fellow members, but she knew many more because she had worked at the national level.
- 19:20** On January 28, 1944, when Yvette was eight months pregnant, she was detained in Paris by the French Gestapo. She says the event was silly and should not have happened. One young woman had been detained, and when that happened, the group of "resistants" were told to leave their place of residence for three to four days. But she says in her case they stayed away for eight days. Unknown to them, this young woman did not speak for three weeks until she gave their address.
- 20:27** Yvette was taken to Blois, where she miscarried. A group of friends helped her escape with them, but she could not keep up with them because she was losing a lot of blood. Therefore, it was easy to follow her. Detained again, she stayed one month in Fresnes, and was transferred to Drancy at the end of March.
- 22:34** She was sent to Birkenau on the convoy that left on April 27, 1944. The convoy, carrying people of all ages, was in transit for three days and nights. From May 1, 1944 to January 28, 1945, she was in Birkenau, and then was sent on a death march to a camp in Czechoslovakia.
- 30:47** Yvette makes the point that she was not a political detainee but a "resistant". In the camp, she was with the Jewish women. She did not know Yiddish, their main language, but many translated for her, and she got along very well. She has kept many friends from that time, but they never talk about the "deportation time".
- 35:07** Yvette says she and her friends laugh a lot when they are together, reminiscing about events from that time; that is something nobody can imagine they do. There was hunger in the camp, but she says hunger is not so bad, somehow you get used to it, but thirst is terrible. Survival in camps was just a matter of chance.

Quite by accident, she met her sister-in-law, and they decided that they would stay together and not separate under any circumstances. In the camp, from her sister-in-law's group, a Kommando of 300 women was being formed, and she joined her sister-in-law in it. But her sister-in-law had to go to the latrines and because they did not want to separate, Yvette went along. When they returned, the Kommando had left, both of them most likely replaced by two other women. The fate of this Kommando was never known. She says that chance was a common event.

38:32 Yvette describes herself as healthy, and lucky not to get typhus. She worked in Kommandos that did not do anything useful, like moving stones back and forth inside the camp. Kommandos working outside of the camp worked much harder.

Yvette survived 17 selections. She describes horrors, including experiments with twins and women.

46:38 She says that she was determined to keep going, one more day, one more night and so on, to give extra duty to the Germans. She says she does not understand why they left even one person alive from the extermination camps, as witnesses.

They constantly had news of the war's progress. When the Kommandos went to work, the women who understood German were in the front, so they could report the officers' conversation to the other women. Also, they had information from a Belgian named Malar, who worked in the Germans' office. She and another individual escaped, wearing SS uniforms. They met with the Polish Resistance and provided, from memory, detailed maps of the camp. On one occasion, they went to buy bread in a Polish bakery and asked the price. The woman became suspicious and called the police. They were taken back to the camp, tortured, and the whole camp had to attend their hanging. Somebody in the camp (she does not know who or how) was able to cut the rope binding her wrists behind her back. She slapped the officer who was ready to hang her. She said it was quite a scene. What she thinks happened afterward is that she was burned alive. This was in October or November 1944.

54:50 Yvette describes the death march, which started in January 1945 in extreme cold. She does not know the number of people in it, but was told that the column leaving the camp was seven kilometers long, but only three kilometers long upon arrival at the train station, it was, so four kilometers of people died during this march. She says there was a great sense of companionship among all. Every 20 minutes, people moved spontaneously from the windy, cold sides of the column to the more sheltered center. Detainees were grouped by nationality.

1:00:50 Mongol soldiers of the Soviet Army liberated the camp in the Sudetenland where Yvette had been held. She described the soldiers as very violent. So for protection, the liberated campmates locked themselves in the camp. They remained there until May 17, when they were told that they were going to be returned to their countries. A man in an American military uniform appeared.

Tape 2

- 0000** She says that the man spoke in a strange way, and they were not sure whether to listen to him. But someone took him aside, spoke for a while with him, and then reassured them about leaving with him. Some did. The man did not speak either English or German well. She says he had escaped from a camp, encountered the American forces, joined them, and was assisting with repatriations.
- Yvette was back in Paris in May 1945. The “strange individual” is now her husband. In Paris, they participated in forming a group to help “revive” about 400 children. They had support from the governments of France, the United States, and Canada.
- 4:44** Yvette says that initially, survivors were told to talk about what had happened to them. They tried, but they felt the answer was to forget, so they all kept silent. At a meeting of survivors in Jerusalem, Yvette said that you have to give testimony. She gives 20 to 30 talks each year to students on the subject. She had begun after reading something by fellow survivor Primo Levi: A child had asked him, “Why didn’t you do something?” “Well, what? It was not easy.” The child said, “Go to the electricity center of the camp, break... No lights or electricity, attack the SS, take their weapons, and then all can leave the camp.”
- At one school where she lectured for two hours, a student said, “I would have acted differently.” After being pushed to explain, he said, “I would have divided the good from the bad Germans, and made a revolution with the good ones!” Obviously, this generation did not understand the situation and what resistance meant, Yvette says.
- 8:42** Yvette thinks that these testimonies might be seen differently in 40 or 50 years. History repeats itself, seeing on television what happens in Iraq, China... She says that the attitude is, “It is not our problem, nothing happened here.”
- She alleges that the media is responsible for our situation.
- 12:08** Yvette says that women give life, they do not take it. In Auschwitz, Yvette was marked with a number on her arm upon arrival. She thought it was written not tattooed. She says she laughed, it was stupid, number 80583. She knows the number in English, not in French. She was a courageous young woman, and others were much younger. There was great solidarity among all, and that was very important. It was much harder if you were with family members, losing children coming off the train and never seeing them again. You could see the ovens working and ...the smell. It was a desperate situation for some individuals, not finding anybody.
- 20:28** She believes that history is being revised, even by us. She saw the mother of a young woman, and could not tell her how she died. Her father-in law could never accept the way his son died on arrival at Auschwitz.

- 24:00** Yvette says that after us, there will not be much possibility of testimonies. She thinks that her children do not know as much as the interviewers. Her sister wanted to be present during the interview, but Yvette told her no, because she cannot speak about this to her family.
- She tells of one day when her six granddaughters, six to eight years old, showed her they had written her number on their arms. She laughed as she says she thought it was darling on their part.
- 28:13** Yvette believes that those who could not have children afterward (because of experimentations) had greater difficulties adapting to the new life.
- When asked whether, upon arriving at Auschwitz-Birkenau, she had thought about how long it would last, she replies she did not think that they would ever leave the camp. But how long? Who knows? You lived day to day, hour to hour.
- When asked about the willpower to keep going, she comments, every minute you could laugh, nobody could do anything.
- 31:21** She believes that the difference between life and death is so minimal. You did not know. The SS were bad, not the Germans.
- When asked about rats in the camps, she replies that she did not see any.
- 33:40** After the war, Yvette started buying art. She repeats the story of how she met her husband at war's end. Then she went to Senegal, stayed there for three years, got married there, and became pregnant.
- 36:20** She says she lives in a comfortable home with books, classical music (Bach is her favorite), and her children. But lately she listens to music less and less. She works for humanitarian associations, and works also to preserve the memory of deportees. She mentions that she never changed, although lately she does things more slowly, but her mind is active. She lives surrounded by many youngsters (friends of her children). She expects that the future will change for the best, but adds, who knows?
- 41:01** End