

HOLOCAUST TESTIMONY

OF

ARMAND MEDNICK

Transcript of Audiotaped Interview

Interviewer: Janice Booker
Date: June 15, 1983

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AM - Armand Mednick [interviewee]

JB - Janice Booker [interviewer]

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Tape one, side one:

JB: ...bit of a repetition about what's here, and where and when you were born and a little bit about your family. And I think you'll need to move a little closer.

AM: O.K. I was born in Brussels, Belgium in 1933 and I lived there with my mother and father until 1940 when the war exploded and we ran away to France. My problem at the time was that I was in a hospital and in many ways I was responsible for saving my family's life because they thought that I should be in a sanitarium no matter what was happening. So, my father picked me up and we went off to France to find a place for me and the rest of the family stayed there and, of course, none of them survived. I lost my grandfather, all my uncles and aunts. One uncle survived, but he had married a Catholic and my grandfather disowned him so, to this day, he's still alive. We have difficulty in relating to him. An aunt survived. There were nine children in my father's family and of those everyone but two were killed. My mother's side were all from Warsaw, and she never heard from her parents again. But her sisters lived in Paris, and there were five sisters. Two of them went to concentration camps. One wound up in Russia and then came to America afterwards. She just died recently. And my Tante Burnka from Paris, she hid for four years behind a wall in Paris at my aunt's place where my uncle was the shoemaker. And he had been captured during the war as a prisoner of war. And they didn't know he was Jewish so he survived the camps over there as a prisoner of war. My cousin from Paris, when we got over there, joined the French underground and he was all of 16. He was six years older than I. And there he was quite an apparition when he showed up one day and he was a wild man. And he had joined the most militant of all the underground groups, which was a left-wing Jewish outfit. And he was into really getting the Germans to the point that even my father was scared of harboring him in our house. You know we were in the middle of France. I'm getting ahead of the story.

JB: You were in a hospital? You were sick?

AM: I was in the sanitarium in Belgium. I was seven years old. And I had a spot on my lungs, which nobody ever figured out how it got there. The myth is that I got a sun stroke and got burned or something happened, which other doctors claim was part of TB. And I was in the hospital for about a year when I was six to seven. Then the war started on May 10th, 1940 and I was still in a hospital in St. Charles when my father took me with my little sister and my mother. And we smuggled across the French border because we--evacuees were not allowed to go through to France. The French would try to stop the flow of people at the time.

JB: So you had a sister.

AM: My little sister was one year old. She was born in 1939. So the most momentous moment at that time was that when we were being smuggled across with her she would be crying. But, you know, we could be discovered up there. Luckily my mother was nursing her so that solved the problem. When we got to France the French army got a hold of my father and drafted him right then and there to go in the army. And he knew that the war was lost and if he got caught he probably would be a prisoner of war. So he had told my mother--he didn't speak hardly in French, I was the translator at seven actually, from Yiddish to French--so before we got to Paris my father said, "Well, you know, your name is Armand now. And you're not called, Avrum no more. And you're not to speak Yiddish anymore except when your mother speaks to you, and you translate in to French. And if anybody asks you, you tell them it's Flemish." Which, when we went to France most people didn't know what it was, in the part where we were. And he left us and he told us to go south and he would find us. And he gave us a train schedule and all that. The train was strafed and we were stopped right in the middle of France where the tracks had been blown up. And we were just let go in the middle of a town and somebody let us have a stall from the stable. My mother and my little sister and I were in there and I progressively got sicker, a fever and of course it wasn't very clean so I had lots of diseases from the bugs and all that kind of thing. But my father, which was I would say three months after that, had deserted the army and had managed to find us. And it was the most incredible kind of thing because he was able to trace us. We had left messages with a Belgian family and there weren't that many going in that direction. And he found us. And when he saw me he did something very dramatic and very adventurous. He just stopped the first truck he saw on the street, which happened to be a gasoline truck. And he had a rifle with him and he had the uniform of a French soldier and well he said to the man that, you know, he had to take his son to the hospital. And, after much protest, but not too much choice for the driver, he took us to a place which was a sanitarium, in the mountains of the Auvergne, Clermont-Ferrand. And in that sense, I think that I was responsible for saving my family because they wanted to be close to me and they found a town, Volvic, which was about four miles away, to be close to me. And I was put in this sanitarium for adults, in the woman's ward, which was a most unusual experience since I was the only little boy in a room full of, you know, women who were dying of TB. And I was there for about six months and they took very good care of me. Then I was transferred to a prevantorium. And this was 1941 when it was about the worst time. My father in the meantime, he was amazingly adaptable, to become everything, an electrician, a milkman, a cheese maker, and finally he fell into a job that was as a surgical orthopedist. He didn't know anything about it. He was a leather maker, I mean he was a glove maker originally. And there he made contacts with somebody who was in the underground, Captain Durain, that he still knows today. In the meanwhile I was getting to be nine years old and had skipped about three years of school by now and I was still in hospitals with this very fragile constitution. So my father was always looking for extra food and bread. And the only thing that at the time was possible was wine, which was supposedly

a medicine. So he would bring me a bottle of wine every week that the doctor recommended, which I suspect might have been my undoing for the future, but I think that when I finally got better and my little sister Eliane was already four, my other sister Yvette was born. And I joined them in this little town where we were completely hidden and that my mother was passed off as Dutch. I was put into a regular school. And my father didn't fight the church priest of the town from, you know, having me go to catechism and to Catholic school even though I knew that it was all a subterfuge. And I found that I could get along very well just assimilating and becoming invisible. To this day I don't speak Yiddish, but I understand it perfectly. But I think the affects of that are so long-lasting. We found that we had no contact with family. There was no way of finding out what had happened. And the contacts that I had were very tenuous because the Gestapo, after France was declared an open country all the way through, they started to come into our town and looking for the underground. So I was witness to a few raids and atrocities when I was nine, ten. And those are the stories I tell my students as I teach now.

JB: So you really grew up in those years from seven...

AM: To fourteen.

JB: To fourteen...

AM: Before I came here.

JB: In a subterfuge.

AM: Absolutely.

JB: Like a Marrano, really.

AM: That's right. And I knew that I was Jewish, and I enjoyed the games of fooling the priest. But I was doing it with Catholic boys who had no idea what I was about, so that I could never have an open friendship with anyone. And in that sense I always felt that I was very different. There was no antisemitism because there were no Jews. But when there was any mention in the church, it was always mostly economics so I knew that...

JB: What about the, your own little nuclear family? Did they, were they able at that time to maintain any semblance of Jewish life internally or were they afraid also to do that?

AM: No, my father was marvelous in trying to keep up, at least the rudiments, of the traditional holidays. And one time even I remember 1942, '43, he had found out through a network that there were a few Jews who lived in the countryside and that were gonna have a *seder*. So we walked there seven miles, just myself and my father because my mother was going to stay with my two sisters. And we went there and there was a farmhouse. It was all hidden. And it looked like a biblical scene. The men were at the window making sure that nobody was coming. And we had one *matzo* that somebody had made. It was a most moving and memorable kind of experience. We weren't very religious but that, everybody cried, of course.

JB: How many people were there at that *seder*?

AM: There were about, well, I think 15 men with children, men, I mean boys over ten. So they had a *minyan* and a few more. And there were no *Haggadahs* but people remembered enough. And we never saw anybody else who went to a *seder*, you know, meeting in any kind of way except casually on the street. But...

JB: What was the name of the town that you lived?

AM: We lived in Volvic, which is near Clermont-Ferrand in the Auvergne.

JB: Volvic?

AM: Volvic. And Clermont-Ferrand was, well that's where they make Michelin tires now. It was a place that was very important for the Resistance as well as being a place that the English would bomb to get rid of the Michelin tires. There weren't too many Jews in that area because most of them had been picked up and sent to Drancy. And we knew about that so we were [unclear] there.

JB: Do you remember anything of your life until you were seven, in Belgium? How much of it do you remember?

AM: Quite a bit because I was, I would say from five on, constantly exposed to my larger family for the holidays, for any kind of family gatherings. And the pictures that we had, hundreds and hundreds of pictures, always stimulated, you know, remembrances of the time. So I found that I remember quite a bit, in the sense that our family was left of center? Very left of center. My grandfather was, I don't know, he kept talking about Russia and thinking that, you know, they would come to their senses. And nobody believed him but still, he was a marvelous, marvelous man my grandfather. A long beard--I think I grew one because of him--and great hands. He was a skillful engraver. And he would pop up in the middle of the night at my house and just pick me up. And I remember that; I was five, six. Much ado was made by my parents. But still, he was a presence that was so overwhelming. Oh, my father too, who deferred to him on all matters, really. I don't recall ever going to synagogue before I was seven. But I do know one thing that as the war ended and I was just about 13, there was for sure going to be a *bar mitzvah*. And even though there was no time for me to learn Hebrew, the whole ceremony was transliterated into French and I did study for six weeks intensely, since I was going to be the first *bar mitzvah* in Brussels after the war. So that was very significant.

JB: You went back to Brussels then?

AM: We went back to Brussels after the war. My father was, had been involved with fighting at the end because he had come out as being part of the Resistance. And then we went to Paris just as, it had been liberated by the French, by the French Army or the American Army really. And there was nobody there. And my father was trying to find any survivor. And he found that my cousins, three children from a sister, had survived and had been put into a Catholic home and he wanted to get them out of there. The Jewish organization was able to reach them too, and they were interested in getting them to Palestine. And my father came and you know, said that they had the choice of going to America, since our cousins in Philadelphia had offered us passage. So they decided to come

along and then they came over here two years afterwards. But we went back to Belgium before the end of the war and we were bombed by the V-1s and V-2s that never got to England because at that time, during the Battle of the Bulge, we were in Brussels. And this was the end of, the winter of '44. And the war didn't end till the spring of '45. So that we were exposed to that kind of thing where there was nothing you could do, because if you were in a building and you could hear this bomb flying over and if it stopped, was silent, either it went straight down or the house would be blown up, whatever.

JB: When you went back to Belgium, was there anyone there from your family?

AM: One sister, Tante Raymonde, who somehow had managed to, I don't know how she did it, but she survived and she found us an apartment. And she's still alive today, very sick, and she has a disintegrating spine. She is getting a little...

JB: Where is she?

AM: She's in Belgium now and my father's there with her. She was just put into a home for incurables. She's 68. She was the youngest of the family. And...

JB: The parents? Your grandparents?

AM: Everybody was gone. They were taken in '42 and we got the lists back of their deaths confirmed from Buchenwald and their names are on a monument now in Belgium. So that's my grandparents, and my aunts, and my uncles, all cousins.

JB: When you were in school in the little town in France, hiding the fact that you were Jewish, what kind of association was there in terms of the townspeople knowing what was going on? Did they have any indication what was happening with the Nazis?

AM: Oh yes. They had an indication of what was happening because the Nazis always came in to try to get their goods. They were farmers. They wanted all their food and all that. And they were fairly patriotic. There weren't too many collaborators in that town because there was a strong bed of resistance. But as far as consciously being aware that I was different and that I might be in danger from the people in the town? No, I didn't feel that. As a matter of fact there was a raid from the Gestapo and all the important people in town were taken away of which the priest, the doctor, the head of the school. And this was a little town of maybe 500 people. So, they took all the leadership and sent them to concentration camp. And in that sense it made them certainly much more resistant to the Nazis.

JB: Did you know that Jews were the focus of...

AM: Oh certainly.

JB: You knew it. Your family knew it.

AM: Oh yes, sure, sure. We had heard stories from before the war, because my father was politically active, and he knew about concentration camps. And he was begging his father to run away because he believed the stories that were happening in Nazi Germany. My grandfather didn't believe them and he said that, you know, God would take care of him. Well, he certainly did.

JB: So you knew, living in a Catholic environment and passing yourselves off...

AM: Absolutely.

JB: ...as Catholics.

AM: No, no, not Catholics.

JB: Not Catholics.

AM: We said we were Christian, vaguely, non-den-, you know, not Catholics because then we would have had to go to Church officially as their members. But my father always played a whatever was the dominant, he would be the minority as long as it was still kosher. But in that sense I had to go to the Catholic school for Catholicism because all my friends in school were, and the priest would have raised an eyebrow and all that sort of thing. And I developed a real strong curiosity for history during that time. And that made me fairly objective too.

JB: When you were in Belgium until you were seven, eight, that age, did you live in a Jewish community?

AM: For a while, and then, which was completely Jewish and on the left. But then my father found a job as a glove maker in an ar-, working for, of course, for a Jewish concern. But there were no Jews around me, so that that made us feel like we were also strangers in a neighborhood. I guess it started us to guard ourselves at that time because I remember, at that time, being taught it was O.K. for antisemitic remarks in school, especially when St. Nicholas would come around and I didn't celebrate.

JB: As a young child in Belgium?

AM: As a very, first grade, you know. I was six or seven.

JB: Was there any interaction with the community as Jews, with the non-Jewish community?

AM: No, no, there weren't, because at the time the fascist party, the Rex party, was so, so dominant and antisemitic--it would have been the equivalent of the Klan--that Jews kept a very, very low profile.

JB: So that your experience, until you returned to Belgium, was pretty negative.

AM: Absolutely.

JB: Antisemitic remarks while you were...

AM: Very young.

JB: Very young, and then hiding the fact that you were Jewish, for survival.

AM: That's right.

JB: What prompted the decision at the end of the war to come to America?

AM: Well, there was a GI that showed up in Paris when we were there. It happened to be a cousin in Philadelphia who was looking for us. He knew that there was a brother who had children. And this was Hymie Nathanson from Strawberry Mansion. And he was an MP. And he came over, he brought presents and boxes and things. He said, "You have relatives. You know, you're not alone. Come to Philadelphia. We'll help you. You're a glove maker. We'll start you in business, whatever." My father at the time was debating whether really he shouldn't go with whatever friends were left in Belgium to Palestine, you

know. And at the time the decision was that, "Well, if somebody's gonna give us a hand then it will be easier in America." And so in 1947 with all the papers--luckily we were Belgians therefore on the quota list, we were way up there on the list, we never had too much difficulty--we got a boat in Göteborg, Sweden and landed in New York, which was a most amazing experience to see those buildings and all those lights and all that food! God!

JB: Who came with you?

AM: My mother, my two little sisters, and my father. And we were set up on Stanley Street in North Philadelphia, Strawberry Mansion. And my father promptly failed in business and then went to work for somebody else. And I learned English, since I didn't know any English. And I learned English at the Lawson School in South Philadelphia and then we to Fitzimmons for six months and then to Central.

JB: Armand, you indicate that your family and you knew during those years of the war what was going on. Do you feel that you knew the extent of it, of the concentration camps and the extermination policy of the Nazis or did you learn more after the war was over?

AM: I think that we had this unreasoning, nebulous fear that my father was able to inculcate in us because of his contacts, and telling us that the worst thing is what they did. And then it was confirmed when we saw actual Gestapo tactics in our villages and the stories of the tortures that they did in the Gestapo headquarters. So why wouldn't they do that to Jews if they took them to concentration camps? So that it wasn't proven until really the middle of the war, but by the end we were pretty certain, before they discovered the concentration camps. There was such a hatred of the Jews from the Belgians. They considered themselves blood brothers of the Germans, the Flemish part, that there was no doubt about their intentions if they had a chance. And lots of times countries like Belgium and France, the antisemitic element there was stronger than the Nazis in terms of turning in the Jews. So we always felt that if they could think it, they would do it.

JB: So essentially those of your family who came to the United States after the war, who were saved, was your immediate family...

AM: That's right.

JB: ...and the two female cousins you spoke of earlier.

AM: And one male cousin, Charlie Kimozhay. He was a doctor in Philadelphia. And that was it, out of a family of about 55.

JB: You remember all of them, or most of them?

AM: I remember most of them because we were very, very close in terms of meeting every week, at least twice a week. So that my little cousins, who were the same age, we grew up on, the only ones I could really let my guard down with. And we were intimates, just like brothers and sisters rather than cousins. So that I remember them very, very fondly and certainly nostalgically. Willy Boy, well Boy is a funny name. His

name was really, he had another name but my grandfather called him Boy so everybody called him Boy. Boychik. Yeah.

JB: You maintained your French name.

AM: I maintained my French name, yes, because there was a turnaround when I was 14, I came to this country. I mean, I was *bar mitzvahed* as Abraham, but my birth certificate had been burned and my new one with identity and all that kind of thing was changed so that, at the time, it seemed that it was more convenient. Then my father decided to go back to Mednicki and by that time I was a teenager and I decided, no, I would drop the "I" and be Mednick. And then a whole business of identity became important in America and I decided to become French rather than Jewish because it was a great help in high school.

JB: What, tell me about your *bar mitzvah*.

AM: Well, there was one synagogue in the center of Belgium, in Brussels that was rededicated after the war. And there weren't too many young people who had lived in Belgium who the rabbi had known about so that when my father found out that, you know, it would be possible to have the *bar mitzvah* there, he made arrangements then we moved pretty close to it, actually. And we gathered all the family that we could for my *bar mitzvah*. My uncle came back from a prisoner of war camp, from France, and my cousin, who was crippled because he had been in prison with the Germans and he had been put into some torturous thing. And he's still crippled but he's quite a brain. And the whole family was there. And it was standard in the sense that I got, all I remember at the end was really all these pens and watches. It was just like any other *bar mitzvah* except that it was all in French. And the first part of the *parshah* was *Vayakhel* that I remember to this day! But I never learned Hebrew really. And it was a symbolic day.

JB: Do you remember when you first heard the name Hitler?

AM: I'm sure I heard it all the time because there were political conversations all the time in my father's house. However, as far as being the genius of evil that, you know, he never struck me as being terribly different from the other names. I mean, they talked about Leon Blum and Daladier and Chamberlain in the same breath as they did Hitler at the time. You know, there was no war. But afterwards Hitler just became this absolute giant, god-like, evil figure that has pursued my memory for ever since the war has been over.

JB: You know, because you are younger than so many survivors, it's as if your total early life was involved with subterfugian escape.

AM: Mmm hmm, yes, it's true. And I'm sure that it has shaped my whole life from that. I am very reticent to socialize really. I don't go into community action of any sort. I, you know, very much keep to myself. And I'm sure that that has made it's mark on me. Just general staying back and making sure I don't get hurt again.

JB: Your father is still alive.

AM: My father is still alive. And he is 73, very gregarious, and an absolutely marvelous man whose, I'm afraid, also high point of his life was the war. Except there he was in his full glory in that he survived by, you know, using subterfuge and marvelous feats of wit.

JB: Your mother and sisters?

AM: My mother died in 1963 from a disease called demphigus, which is a form of lupus. And my sisters are alive, both married, one in Jersey, one in Texas, Austin.

JB: Because they are younger, do you think they have the same affect?

AM: No. I spoke to them about this. They don't recall any of it. All they remember is right after the war, a little bit in Belgium, but nothing from the war itself experience. Except some of the things that are memorable such as getting a present from the Red Cross in the middle of the war and my sister biting through the orange not knowing about the peel, or a banana that she had never seen--that kind of thing. But nothing that they experienced themselves.

JB: Do you, in your relationship with those cousins who have survived and are here, do you have a particular relationship with them that you think was formed because of these experiences?

AM: Absolutely, especially the older sister, the eldest, who is now becoming a doctor. She's 53 and she's been at it 20 years. It's amazing.

JB: Really.

AM: She is the one who has the best memory of it, because she was the oldest. And as a matter of fact about three months ago she came here and we spent a whole afternoon talking about things that she doesn't talk with her sister and brother that much: the day she saw her parents taken away by the Gestapo, the day that she knew that, you know, there's a good chance that they might not survive unless they actually became Catholic in the convent, her sister, and not knowing where her brother was, and the terrible kind of turmoil in knowing that there was nobody to rely on. And it's coming up now more frankly. The pain is still there but at least we can talk about it. But my relationship with my cousin is based mostly on the fact that we came ov-

Tape one, side two:

AM: Is it on now?

JB: Yes.

AM: My relationship with my cousin, Charlie, is based much more on the fact that we're both from Europe, speaking French, and survivors and being really like brothers in America for four years of intimate living--we lived in the same room, actually--and exchanging our reaction to, you know, the new country as well as the old, and not so much based on the war experiences as well. Very totally different. And we did discuss it, but never in depth when we were young. It was just too close. It takes about 30 years.

JB: Because I'm in a unique situation of knowing about your work, would you talk a little bit about the plaques that you've completed and why you undertook them, and what it's meant to you to have done that series?

AM: Well, just about the time that my mother died in '63 things began to happen to my work in terms of...

JB: Your work as a potter.

AM: As a potter, on the wheel and things. And figures were appearing that I had no idea where from. Eventually, by 1970, I knew that I had to exorcize this whole experience in some tangible way because I couldn't really talk about it to my father because we just, I mean we were just a mutual kind of crying society. But I worked it out so that from 1970 to 1982 I started to make the reliefs of a symbolic, mythical kind of personal view of the Holocaust. And I think that it took that long because if I had done it faster it would not have been as deep and as satisfying to my own peace of mind. I don't feel, or believe that it's over now but it certainly feels that I have set aside some of those nightmares that had no names because at that age you just cannot respond rationally. The things were certainly not exact or they are not representational. But they certainly represent a kind of journey through my mind about what I imagine my family, who went to these concentration camps, had to endure. I also felt that it was important for anyone that had any way of expressing it, aside from speaking, had a responsibility to pass on something tangible because we would go soon and I always believed that clay would last forever. And this was one way of doing it.

JB: Have you exorcized?

AM: No, but it's helped a lot.

JB: The interesting thing about the plaques is that they are experiences in your psyche. They are not experiences that you witnessed, because many of them are concentration camp scenes.

AM: That's right. That's right. It's artistic freedom to express one's deeper feelings about a horror that cannot be expressed in words really. And I found that the clay and the absolute irony of having to use an oven to fire them, just struck me as being something that had to be done.

JB: And maybe a way of putting those people to rest for yourself.

AM: For myself, yes, except that it's important in terms of my own peace of mind that remembrances be constant. Not every day but certainly on a regular basis. And if those things are around there's no way that the people that I care about would forget. Certainly I won't.

JB: O.K.