


8-12-2010

Marcel Diner oral history interview by Christopher Patti, August 12, 2010

Marcel Diner (Interviewee)

Chris J. Patti (Interviewer)

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Scholar Commons Citation

Diner, Marcel (Interviewee) and Patti, Chris J. (Interviewer), "Marcel Diner oral history interview by Christopher Patti, August 12, 2010" (2010). *Digital Collection - Holocaust & Genocide Studies Center Oral Histories*. Paper 181.
http://scholarcommons.usf.edu/hgstud_oh/181

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Holocaust Survivors Oral History Project
Oral History Program
Florida Studies Center
University of South Florida, Tampa Library

Digital Object Identifier: F60-00038
Interviewee: Marcel Diner (MD)
Interviewer: Christopher Patti (CP)
Interview date: August 12, 2010
Interview location: Sarasota, Florida
Transcribed by: Mary Beth Isaacson, MLS
Transcription date: January 10, 2011
Audit Edit by: Kimberly Nordon
Audit Edit date: January 12, 2011
Final Edit by: Dorian L. Thomas
Final Edit date: January 19, 2011

Christopher Patti: Okay, today's date is August 12, 2010. This is our interview with survivor Marcel Diner. My name is Chris Patti. We are in Sarasota, Florida, in the United States. The language is English, and the videographers are Jane Duncan and David Purnell.

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Okay, Mr. Diner, thank you so much for spending time with us today and telling us your story. We'll start with the basics. Can I ask you to tell us your name and to spell it?

Marcel Diner: Marcel Diner, and it's M-a-r-c-e-l, Diner, D-i-n-e-r.

CP: And you had a couple different—you had a different name at birth, and there were a couple different spellings of that. Would you tell me about those?

MD: At birth? My spelling was Dinerman, or D-i-n-e-r-m-a-n. And when I became a naturalized citizen of the United States, the name was changed to Diner, D-i-n-e-r.

CP: And would you pronounce it one time for me with the French accent?

MD: Diner.

CP: Thank you. Thank you.

MD: (in French accent) Marcel Diner. (laughs)

CP: Yes. That makes me happier. Can you tell me your date of birth and where you were born?

MD: I was born in Paris, France, on May 14, 1939.

CP: And that makes you how old today?

MD: Seventy-one and a few months. (laughs)

CP: When we first met, you talked to me about a recent visit that you made back to Paris. Can you tell me a little bit about that experience?

MD: Yes. That was—the reason for my visit was twofold. One, I wanted to take some courses at the Sorbonne, which I did. And also, I wanted to visit my old apartment where I lived, apparently, before and after the war. And I did so, and it was quite an experience, very emotional. I was able to visit the apartment itself, and it brought back the memories of the time at which I'd lived there.

CP: You have a very interesting story, because you're fairly young to be a Holocaust survivor, and you were pretty much born into the war. It was going on as you were born.

MD: Yeah.

CP: Can you tell me a little bit about your early childhood, what you remember, and about your parents?

MD: Well, like you said, that's my very early childhood. I don't remember very much, other than—in the apartment, what I remember vividly was waking up one morning, and I was calling for my mother or father. No one was in the apartment, and I started to cry, and I cried most of the day. So, that's one of the vivid memories that I have. And the other was—well, while we lived there, there was a wooden stove in the apartment. In the basement of the building where we lived, each tenant was provided with an area to store coal and wood. That was my job every day: to go down to the cellar, pitch black, with my little candle to fetch the wood and charcoal or whatever. So, that's another memory I've had.

CP: Was the memory of the crying, was that triggered only recently when you went back, or is that something that's been with you?

MD: No, that's been with me all along. I remembered. But when the door was open to the apartment and I walked in—there's only three rooms in the apartment: the kitchen, the family room, and a bedroom. But the family room was the bedroom. My parents' bed was in one corner of the room, and I was in the diagonally opposite side of the room. That was our bedroom. So I recognized it immediately, and that scene or that memory just popped into my mind, the fact that—well, there was no one; my parents weren't there, and I was there alone, again. It just triggered it, and it was very emotional for me.

CP: Do you have any thought or feeling about where your parents must have been?

MD: They were always busy with the business of making a living, so they must have been working on jobs or whatever. I don't really know.

CP: Can you tell me a little bit more about your folks?

MD: Well, my folks worked hard. They used the apartment as a little—I don't want to call it a studio. In French it's an *atelier*; it's a little shop to manufacture ladies' clothing. My father was a tailor by profession, and my mother was a seamstress. As I said, there's three rooms in the apartment. The actual bedroom was used for the little shop, to manufacture—they did sweaters, ladies' raincoats, and I can't remember. There were

several things that they manufactured. So there was the cutting table, there was the three sewing machines in the room, and that's how they made a living.

CP: What was your father's first name?

MD: Michel.

CP: And your mother's name?

MD: Alice—Alice.

CP: And her maiden name was?

MD: Chaja Sara Majufes.

CP: And that's C-h-a-j-a S-a-r-a M-a-j-u-f-e-s?

MD: Mm-hm. Yes.

CP: Do you have any other memories that stick out from your childhood that you can recall?

MD: Well, those are after the war. My parents loved the outdoors, and specifically camping. I don't know where he got the material for the tent, but he sewed up the tent himself, and he used parachute—an old used parachute material. Actually, it was light and it was water-repellent: it was everything—

CP: A strong tent?

MD: Very, very strong. And I remember we used to go—the most vivid memory of that is getting on a train from Paris to Marseille with our bicycles and our camping equipment, get off at Marseille, get on our bikes with our equipment, and camp the entire Côte

d'Azur, the French Riviera, up into Italy and then back to Marseille, and back on the train to Paris. So, that was a wonderful vacation. We took several trips to Morocco, because my aunt, during the war, that's where she lived. So we went to visit her. I had another aunt in Brussels, Belgium; we went to visit them. So, they took advantage of vacation time, which in France is huge: it's a month long, during the month of August. That's it, everybody's on vacation. That's still true today.

CP: You have a nice story of how your parents met.

MD: Oh, yes. Well, unbeknownst to me, my father played the mandolin, and he was the soloist at a concert. He had—of course, he was sitting center stage, front center stage, and my mother-to-be was sitting in the front row. During the performance, their eyes met, and, well, the rest is history. (laughs)

CP: (laughs) Well said.

MD: Yeah.

CP: So, when did things start to change? When did you have to leave Paris?

MD: That is vague to me, since they didn't speak about the war. I really don't know exactly when.

CP: You said you felt pretty insulated at that time from all that.

MD: Yeah, I was sheltered from everything. I mean, they did everything to make it easy for me. I didn't know what was going on; I didn't realize what was going on. So, I had, well, a childhood almost like normal, I would say.

CP: But things did change. Your family moved. You ended up in a different place, and your father ended up—can you tell me your father's story, what happened to him?

MD: Well, he joined the FFI [Forces françaises de l'intérieur]—

CP: Which was the French Force—

MD: The French Forces. That was in November of 1939, and at that time—approximately that time; I can't tell you exactly—I remember we moved to a little town called Le Menoux. We lived there during the war years. Of course, I didn't see my father for several years. He was—well, he became a prisoner soon after he joined the FFI. And I have documentation to show that he was a prisoner of war, and the day that he actually escaped from the camp, from the prison camp.

CP: Was that Hirson camp?

MD: Yes.

CP: H-i-r-s-o-n.

MD: Hirson, yeah.

CP: Did you know anything about what he must have been experiencing while he was there? Did you hear stories about that?

MD: He would never talk about it. I have no stories to tell. Sorry.

CP: At that time—well, actually, do you know how he escaped from?

MD: That particular time I don't know, but he escaped a total of three times. Again, I can't tell you the specifics on that. I only know that the unusual escape of one of those escapes was he was on a train going to Germany. I would think they were taking him to a camp, a concentration camp; I can't attest to that for sure. But anyway, the train stopped and they let off people near latrines. There were latrines alongside of the railroad tracks. And he decided at that time that he would never go back on the train. And so the way he escaped, he jumped into the cesspool and stayed there for several hours until nightfall. That's how he escaped.

CP: Wow.

MD: And then, from that time—which apparently, from what I was told, they were already in Germany—he actually walked from Germany back to France. I don't know how long it took him. As the story goes, he walked at night and slept during the day so that he wouldn't be seen, would have the best chance to escape. So, that was the one that the family talks about.

CP: It's miraculous.

MD: Not that he talks about it, but the family, the people.

CP: Do you have any recollection of his return home?

(phone rings)

MD: No. No, I don't.

CP: (laughs)

MD: Excuse me.

CP: I was wondering how—

MD: I'm sorry.

CP: It's okay.

MD: Let me just get rid of the—okay.

CP: How was religion treated in your family? Were you a very religious family?

MD: No, not at all. Not at all.

CP: So more—

MD: I can't give you reasons. Well, the only religious part that I experienced was the fact that my parents wanted me to be bar mitzvahed. So, when I became of age, they sent me to school for six months and I learned my lines, and I was bar mitzvahed. But before that and after that, there was no religious training or emphasis, nothing.

CP: Would you say that your family was very culturally or ethnically Jewish, in terms of the foods and traditions and holidays? Did you practice any of that?

MD: Well, yes, we practiced some of the holidays, but basically—I would say they tried to assimilate themselves wherever they were, whether it be France or America or wherever we were. Other than the holidays, no.

CP: It's just an interesting connection to me, because it makes sense with your name being Diner now, that the notion of assimilating into the new—yeah, makes sense. Your mother has an interesting story during this time, too. She ended up being a nurse in some of the camps, right?

MD: Well, assisting; she wasn't a nurse, but she assisted the nurses in the camps, yeah. And she came to visit me. That was in Le Menoux, just on the weekend, on Sunday there, I was told. Every week she came to visit me.

CP: Le Menoux was one of the places that you visited recently, is that correct?

MD: Yes, that's the place I visited this year. It was in April of this year. Yes.

CP: Would you tell us how that visit was sparked for you?

MD: Okay. Going through a box of pictures that my mother had, I found a small picture of myself next to a signpost of the name of the town, Le Menoux—with its correct

spelling, of course, because in France there's two Menouxes, one that has an X at the end and the other one does not. And I didn't know which one we lived in, until I found that picture. So, that triggered me to, when I went back to France, Paris, to take a course at the Sorbonne, that I would take a vacation for a week or two and visit that little town. And I did so, and because there are things that I remembered—I remembered my daily trip to the bakery to get baguettes for my mother, so I got on my little bicycle and went into town, which I found out was only a block and a half away, to the bakery.

But it was a street lined—I mean, a tree-lined street, and that picture was in my mind because it was so beautiful, having the trees arch the branches along that street. It was just gorgeous, and that picture was always in my mind. And the bakery was in my mind, because I loved the smell of the cakes and the Danishes and all of that, and so I enjoyed going there every day. So, I wanted to go back. I wanted to see if I could find that street, if I could find that home, that house in which we lived then, and the bakery. And sure enough, the town—it's such a small town, it wasn't very difficult. There's only one bakery in town. (laughs) And sure enough, it was the exact same bakery.

CP: Wow.

MD: Although, of course, it wasn't the same owners. But they knew of the history: they could tell me who owned it before they did and so on, and some history. They were able to help me find—they said, "Let's find people that lived during that period." And he made several calls, and sure enough, there was four gentlemen that came by. They just told me about the era—they were young themselves, but they knew a lot more about what went on then, and the people that helped the Jewish people. In fact, there were several families that hid Jewish families in that town. So, it was very interesting. They were very excited that I would come back and visit that little town.

CP: So, the local people embraced you and wanted to help you retrace your steps?

MD: Yes.

CP: Where did you go with them?

MD: Okay, I showed them the picture that triggered this whole thing, and one of the gentlemen said, "I know exactly where that is."

CP: Wow.

MD: It was about a block away from the bakery, and he said, “Come on, let’s go,” so we went down there to that spot. And, sure enough, it was—it’s a stone wall, so you could even recognize the design on the stones, because it’s visible in the picture. So we traced it back to see exactly where, and I found the exact spot. So I had them take a picture of—I was holding the little picture in my hand, so it was the before and after on that same spot. So, I have that picture.

CP: That must have been quite a meaningful feeling.

MD: Oh, yeah.

CP: Can you describe that at all to me?

MD: I mean, it was overwhelming. I just—I mean, I couldn’t thank them enough for what they did for my parents, for me, during the war. And they said, well, they will do some more research—if they could find people, you know—so they took my name and address and I have theirs, and we’re gonna be communicating. So, perhaps I can find out more about that time and what happened.

CP: Even though you were sort of insulated from what was happening with the war, there was still definitely danger. Your father came back, and he had to make a hideout for the family. Can you tell me about that?

MD: Yes. That was in Le Menoux, and that was right across from the house. There was an empty field, and in that field, he dug a little shelter. The only thing that was in the shelter was, I think, just a bench where we could sit, sit three people, and that was it. That was the size of it. And the cover was sod, a door that had sod on top of it, so when it was shut you couldn’t recognize that there was a door there. And so, that I remembered. So when I went back to Le Menoux this year, I went to look at that field. And as it turns out, there are no new buildings: the field is there, but there was a house built down the block and that’s somebody’s backyard now. But it’s still there. While I didn’t—I didn’t want to go and knock on the door and ask to see, you know, look for that hidden door. But I recognized the field, at any rate, because it had a wall, and the wall—I recognized the

wall, which was at the border of that field, and that's where he dug the hiding place. So, it was still there.

CP: Can you tell me anything else about your father's story, 'cause that's—it's so hard when we talk about the Holocaust, because there's so much that we can never know and we can never recover. Your father went through quite an ordeal.

MD: It is. It was quite an ordeal, but I don't have any details. I can't tell you. He never told me, he never spoke about the Holocaust. I only know that we lost family members in the Holocaust, on both sides. My mother's sisters and brother, they perished in the Holocaust, in the concentration camps. My father had five siblings; three of them—no, two of them that he knew perished in the concentration camp. And his brother and one of his sisters survived. His brother was twenty years older than him, and so his brother actually raised my father, because that was in Paris, in France. They were both in France, in Paris. His father—brother's father—they never left Poland. They stayed in Warsaw.

CP: It seems like—I don't remember if your father was gone at this time, but your mother had to do a lot to keep you guys safe, or keep you safe and keep you disguised.

MD: Oh, yeah.

CP: How did that work out?

MD: Well, yes. My mother transformed me into a girl, so that the Nazis wouldn't be looking for a boy and checking whether I was circumcised or not, which was a dead giveaway. So, she disguised me as a girl.

CP: And you have some lovely pictures.

MD: I have beautiful pictures that you can see of when I was a little girl, with the very long curls. And I also have a picture after the war, right after the war, when my father came back. He took me to (laughs) a barbershop, and he cut my curls and made me into a boy again. But for many years, my mother kept the curls, 'cause she asked my father, "Okay, you're gonna cut his curls, but I want them." So he did, and he brought the curls home and she kept them for many years; but somehow, with all these moves, they got lost.

CP: Do you remember your feeling about that at the time at all?

MD: No, not at all.

CP: Did your family have to pretend that you were Christian? How did that—

MD: No, I wasn't. No, that wasn't—to my knowledge, that wasn't the case.

CP: Le Menoux was just such a small—

MD: A very small community, yeah. As far as I know, the only transformation was into a girl. That's it.

CP: You told me another story about how your father got out of jail.

MD: Yeah—

CP: And his brothers and sisters. Can you tell me that story?

MD: All I know about that story is that it's my father's niece. He was captured, put in prison, and my father's niece went to the officers in charge, or whatever. And we don't know how it happened, but within—I believe it was just a week or so—he was released from prison. So, it's not so much an escape, but he was released from prison. So, one can only speculate what she had to do to get him out of prison, but she did.

CP: Well, we've already talked a little bit about how your—you have kind of a unique Holocaust experience, in that you were so young and so well-protected during that time. Do you have anything else to say about having that experience?

MD: No, I don't have any reaction, because I was so sheltered. No, I didn't experience the fears, the agonies that other people had. I just didn't. I was that well sheltered. They tried to make my life as normal as they could at the time.

CP: Are there any other stories or memories that you'd like to share?

MD: Nope. That's it. That's all I have.

CP: Well, thank you so much for your time. You asked—normally at the end of these interviews, we say, “What message do you have for the world?” and you brought up a great point, which is that it's a big responsibility to leave a message like that.

MD: Yeah. Well, other than this should never be forgotten and should never happen again, so we need to do whatever we can to avoid history to repeat itself. That's it.

CP: Well, thank you so much for sharing your story.

MD: Thank you.

End of interview