

LUCIEN DUCASTEL (France)

CLIP 1

My name is Lucien Ducastel. I am from the Seine-Maritime, in Normandy. For three years, I was an apprentice butcher, but did not like it at all. I started working in construction, a little bit as a metal worker. I worked very, very hard. That's how things went.

My parents, my father was a worker, he was a metal worker. He was a hard working man. He repaired ships. Sometimes he worked on two or three ships a week. He worked really hard. My mother was a textile worker. They both worked.

I have my elementary school certificate. I was barely twelve years old, eleven and a half. My birthday is in the end of August and I got the certificate in June. So, I got my elementary school certificate which was important to me.

Afterwards, I started working. And as I had very little ideas about what I wanted to do I became an apprentice butcher.

I worked there for three and a half years nevertheless. I ran errands, well, I worked. I started to learn about the work. But in the end I never became a butcher.

And then I started working in construction, in civil projects, doing repair work on ships.

I did all sorts of different things, always manual work though.

The Popular Front. Yes of course, 1936, 1937. I was 16 years old in 1936 and I had started working in factories. I had simply become a worker, a young worker and I got to know the whole period of 1936, the strikes and all that it represented.

Well, the strikes of 1936 were the beginning of it all. There was a labour movement that manifested itself. I myself was already part of the working class. It was in those conditions that the 1936 movement manifested itself a little bit everywhere and that there were these big demonstrations. It meant very much to the working class movement in France. It was very important. Certainly!

CLIP 2

Well listen, I started working in a factory in 1934/1935. And then there was 1936, the big days of 1936. It was then that I joined the labour movement. That means I participated in the strikes of 1936.

I was 16, worked in a factory, and participated in the big strikes of 1936.

Later on, in 1937/1938 I joined the Communist Youth Movement. That was a place you could fight for your demands. My friends at the time asked me, "Why don't you join the Communist Youth Movement?" So I did.

In 1936 we participated in the Trade Union's activities. We participated in the strikes and then I joined the Communist Youth Movement.

It meant a lot, that I belonged to the Communist Party. We had to prepare ourselves to go undercover. We were in a semi-undercover state. The Communist Party and the Communist Youth Movement had been outlawed, which caused a lot of turmoil. Everybody knew that and my father, who was slightly anarchist, at least he had anarchist tendencies, asked me if I was going to stop my activities as (he thought) I was going to pay dearly. I answered him, that it was my business. I was 17 at the time and argued:

"Should one stop just because..."

I asked him how he could work as a coppersmith on ships in 1936/1937 and not even join the trade union. So we had quite a discussion.

He himself was not politically active as that took quite some effort and he really worked a lot.

We had to keep a low profile. You can not really call it undercover; we were known to the police, etc.

So we had to take some precautionary measures: Like only going out at night, and also then being careful because of the police raids. It was extremely difficult. But we did not give up. We took some other precautions, for example when distributing leaflets we would try to go out at night, but also not too often at night, because one had to be careful.

It was under these circumstances that I became politically active, at work and in my daily life.

CLIP 3

The reason we distributed these leaflets was to alert the population, to alert the workers in the factories. We'd distribute leaflets in front of the factories and in the different neighborhoods. Often we would do that at night. But at night there were also police patrols. So there would be two or three of us to distribute the leaflets and two or three to watch out for the police. We had to be very careful.

We took many precautions: we'd hide the material to make the leaflets at the place of one of us, the paper with somebody else. And then we'd try to distribute them at night, to escape from the police.

But the police was there at night as well. It was definitely a difficult mission.

We also handed out leaflets in the factories, at the gates of the factories, even though we were quite visible there. We took precautions there as well. One of us would be on the look out for the police, etc.

We had to be very careful.

We'd leave around two or three o'clock in the morning to distribute the leaflets, we'd divide up the streets amongst each other. Sometimes we'd distribute them in front of the factory gates, even though that was very risky.

I would like to add something: there was also the difficulty of producing the leaflets. It was good to distribute them, but they had to be made first! So we tried to find friends that were not too well known, etc. and take the material there, the mimeograph machine, and the typewriter and hide them in the basement. We had to take several precautions to protect these friends as well. To protect them, but to be able to continue with our activities as well.

It was quite a difficult period.

We organized ourselves, trying to find places where we could secretly meet, where two or three of us could meet, maybe four, but never more than four. There we would meet, in a basement, or at friends' houses that were not at all known for their political activities, but who were willing to help. They would let us in. We'd arrive at different times. So we would meet there to do what we had to do. But then there was also the need to hide the material, the mimeograph, the typewriter etc... We had to be careful with all of that.

There was a sense of, let's say, big precaution. There were various newspaper publications in the Rouen region, talking about the number of political activists being arrested. It was really difficult. One had to be very careful.

We had a certain amount of support in the population. Some people said we shouldn't do that, or when we were arrested, they'd say: "they shouldn't have done that", but others did support us, some of them very quietly because they were afraid.

If the police detected a connection between a person and well-known political activists, that was very dangerous, you could be arrested. It was dangerous for us, as well as for the people we'd give the material to - if they were caught by the police etc. It was very difficult.

CLIP 4

I was not undercover, but I was arrested nevertheless on October 21st. 1941. I was arrested for being a politically active communist. The police from where I lived in Seine-Maritime knew all the people that belonged to the Communist Party or to the Communist Youth Movement. Before going undercover, or almost undercover, we were publicly very politically active and therefore we were known. And they knew quite well that we would continue after the banning of the party and kept a close watch on us.

My parents did not really approve of my activities. My father was more of an Anarchist and he did not accept that I was politically active. He'd say: "You will see what happens to you".

So I had this difficult life.

My arrest was not very spectacular.

When we went out to distribute the leaflets we'd hide them under our jacket (we didn't take 500 at once) and go out to distribute them. Petit Quevilly was a little town of 20,000 inhabitants and the police knew everyone, especially those they shouldn't have known.

So the French police and the German police came to arrest us in the middle of the night. They came at four, five o'clock in the morning, knocked on the door. My father had barely opened the door and they had already arrived on the second floor, as I slept up there. It all went very quickly: getting dressed, going downstairs. That was on October 21st, 1941. Afterwards, they took us to Rouen and

started interrogating us, asking us various questions. We were very careful to say as little as possible. Then we were taken to court in Rouen. It was a kangaroo court. We knew they would never let us go, but we did not know what was going to happen afterwards. At that time one did not yet know what would happen after imprisonment.

I knew the risk I was taking. But to be able to hide you needed a place to do so, you needed to know you could go to so-and-so or so-and-so. There were many people who were not ready to put us up, even if they were friends of ours. They were scared of the police, of being arrested as well. It was very difficult, so I stayed with my parents.

When I'd come home my father would give me a beating.

I didn't have the possibility to hide. I was actually getting ready to do so. But I was arrested two or three weeks before I was about to leave and really go undercover.

CLIP 5

I had been under observation by the police for some time. When the Communist Party and leftist organizations were banned and had to go underground, I was known by the police and they were watching me. So on October 21st, 1941, they knocked on my door at four o'clock in the morning and I was arrested by the French and the German police. I was taken to Rouen, along with another 100 resistance fighters from the region – some quite famous – that had been arrested the same night. Then we were interrogated, but not too harshly. We were not obliged to talk about things we didn't want to.

Then we were taken to the camp of Compiègne and from there to Auschwitz-Birkenau.

In Compiègne we were treated as hostages. It happened several times that comrades were taken away to be executed for attacks that had happened. On July 6th, 1942 we were taken to ... destination unknown.

We stayed in Compiègne for about 8 months. We were arrested on October 21st, 1941 and stayed there for about 8 months. Then they took us to Auschwitz-Birkenau. But in Compiègne we were already hostages. That means, that when there had been an attack in the evening, they would come and take some of our comrades - that could be us, or somebody else. I escaped this fate like another few - but they would come and take some of our comrades to be executed, as there had been this attack the night or the day before.

The following morning, at four o'clock, we were called up by buildings, as usual.

We were loaded up into the trains and we left to a destination unknown.

Question: Do you remember what you felt at that time?

What I felt, what we felt, was a certain fear, because we didn't know, where we were taken to.

We were led away in groups of ten. Ten people can easily be shot half an hour later. We didn't know what was going to happen. They loaded us up in the animal wagons and we were taken to Auschwitz-Birkenau.

You know, we arrived in Auschwitz. Auschwitz consisted of old barracks, big buildings. We realized we were somewhere foreign, but it was almost more comfortable than what we had left behind in Compiègne. The following day we were taken to Birkenau, 4 or 5km away and there it was totally different. Birkenau is a camp that was built on marshlands. There were old barracks. It made quiet an unsettling impression.

They gave us striped uniforms and took pictures of us. They tattooed our registration numbers onto us. They tattooed this number onto us.

Of course that had a big effect on us. We were no longer called so-and-so. We had this number and were supposed to respond to this number. We had to learn the number in German and in Polish, which was not easy. But we had to learn it quickly, there was no other way.

CLIP 6

Day to day life in the camp started with the morning role-call. The camp was huge. I think we were a hundred thousand prisoners. Birkenau was especially huge.

Then we found out that Birkenau was really not a holiday resort. The days were very long: from 4h00 or 5h00 in the morning 'til 21h00, 22h00 in the evening, because if one of the 22,300 people was missing during the evening role-call, he had to be found. We had to stay standing until this

person was found. Sometimes we spent whole nights outside, if the person could not be found. Some people hid, some were able to escape and then we had to stand until the following morning, in summer, and in winter as well. The winters in Upper Silesia are very cold, with lots of snow, terrible. We lost many men there.

Our days began at 4h00 or 5h00 in the morning with a first roll-call. They handed out a brew that they called herbata, a sort of tea in our mugs, which we should absolutely not lose, and which we could never wash. We had "that" to down and then we left for work.

Yes, we thought of it. There were three or four of us, one who was a little more responsible.

We tried to find ways of fighting, but it was basically impossible.

There was a room leader who was designated to keep control, there were also leaders for each building. And then there were also the team leaders, they themselves being deported prisoners as well. Often they were Germans, Poles as well. It was very difficult, very hard. We got lots of beatings. In the beginning we thought we shouldn't take that, but we soon saw that there was no way out, as life there was so terrible.

It was very difficult to form a group. Those of us that had been arrested as French resistance fighters were very scattered. They knew exactly who we were. That was very different from the camp in Compiègne. There we were still active, we resisted, we discussed, we talked. But up there we were far apart from each other and with all the block leaders, the Vorarbeiter, the team chiefs, the Kapos, etc. it was extremely difficult, as they were very loose with their batons.

We were not necessarily amongst French people at all. Sometimes there were 2 or 3 French people in a group of 150 or 200 men. Most of them were Poles. They did not like us very much. There were Germans as well, the so-called Reichsdeutsche. They had mostly been arrested for political reasons.

CLIP 7

Liberation came in 1945. It was a liberation for us as well. But it wasn't quite that simple because there were all these Kapos, the building leaders, that had taken on this bad habit of beating and massacring and liquidating people and they played this role until the end. So there again we lost many people.

Out of the 1175 of us deportees 19 returned, I think.

Gradually we felt a certain degree of liberation, but we were in such a state, that we barely reacted.

Take my case: I weighed 70kg/72kg upon my arrival, I used to do exercise, to bike,

I was strong. And in the end I had reached half my weight: 35kg/36kg. Under those conditions, in such a weakened state, things don't work the same way anymore, including reactions, including the way the brain works. It was a really hard time. But we also started to take deep breaths of fresh air, telling ourselves that it was over.

When we were liberated, they put us onto wagons, depending on the region we were going to and then they told us we were on our own. I went back to Rouen. There were three or four of us. We had lost hundreds of friends.

Upon our arrival there were ambulances waiting for us, taking us where we told them to. In my case, that was to my parents. It was a time during which we thought a lot, as we had been gone for three and a half years; three and a half years that they had barely had any news from us.

The arrival at home was different for each of us. The parents were all different from each other of course.

I arrived home in the morning and my mother was there. She was a textile worker, but they sometimes had days off, and she was home. Ah! That was ...! My father arrived in the evening. He worked very hard. He was a coppersmith and worked on ships. He was also very firm. He said: "So there you are! Where are you coming from?" Quite nice. That was how he was and I knew it. I had already imagined it would be that way. But things got straightened out in the end.

I had been called to the police headquarters because a family was asking for information about their son. I hesitated for a long time, but finally I decided to go, as it was to help this family. When I walked into the police officer's office, one of these individuals that had originally arrested me, enters the office. I did a huge leap, with my 35kg at the time, yelling at the police officer: "Ask that cop what he did in the night of October 21st, 1941!" I made a big fuss. The officer calmed me down and sent the other one out.

CLIP 8

I was invited as a witness to a school. I had met a teacher friend and as we talked he said: "You should come talk about all of this in schools, otherwise it will be forgotten history." And I agreed. But I hadn't really thought about what that meant.

So I went. That was very difficult. When you are in a classroom with 30 students, it is very difficult to talk about all these things: about the arrival of Jewish or Gypsy convoys, the children, sometimes babies in their mothers arms. It was awful. In the beginning,

I wondered if one should talk about it or rather not talk about it. But I decided to talk about what National Socialism had done, about what we had gone through and about what we had seen with our own eyes.

In Birkenau, the first big camp we went to, these convoys arrived, filled with Jews, with Gypsies. There were men and women, but there were children as well, and babies in their mother's arms. We saw them, we were not far away and we knew what was going to happen. That hurt a lot, and it still does. Whenever I go to a school and have to talk about these subjects, concerning children etc... the soup doesn't taste as good in the evening.

What is remarkable when you go into a classroom is that you never have to ask for silence. They are very attentive to what one says. That encourages us to go to the schools.

The message I want to get through is to show what National Socialism was about, with all its horror and its atrocities. And tell them how important it is to develop fraternity between human beings. You are young people. Don't fight with each other. Be collegial. Be friends because you don't know what tomorrow will be like.

Turn into people that will fight for a better world, for your future.

You are human beings and the future is in you, you carry tomorrow in you. So be fraternal, because that is the only way it will work. It doesn't matter how this person or that person looks like. You are all human beings, you can have dark-skinned, even black friends, why not? They are human beings like you. Be fraternal. That will also help you to work better, work more seriously. Be fraternal with each other no matter what origin you are from.

CLIP 9

We tried to go undercover as much as possible during the German occupation, even though I was not totally undercover, in the real sense of the word. I still lived with my parents. We thought about how we could distribute our leaflets. Our concern was the (French) population, not the Germans. We wanted to inform the population about the necessity to fight against the occupiers.

In the camps we met Germans, civilized, working Germans. Sometimes that led to discussions between ourselves. I always defended the idea that these people were not necessarily Nazis. They were working, as French people worked, here and that one had to respect that.

Then it is their responsibility. They knew who we were, in our striped uniforms and some had a friendly word for us, in German, which we had to learn to understand.

I always said that one should not mix up the SS and the Germans we met at work or wherever. The SS made a choice. They opted for the regime, the system. They are the ones that ...

Three, four years after coming back I was talking to some friends who said: "We are going to Germany, to meet some people. But of course we won't ask you to come along."

I said: "Why won't you ask me to go with you? Are you afraid that I will say that all Germans are fascists? Not at all. If you want me to come along, I will come along and I promise that I will behave correctly towards the Germans we meet. Of course that won't stop me from saying what happened in the camps. But I will not say THE Germans.

CLIP 10

Often the children ask me why I don't have the number removed. I tell them, I could have it removed, but that I won't. Because it was done by the Nazis, the people who worked for the Nazis, that we weren't called by our names anymore but by a number that we had to learn to say in German. It doesn't bother me to have it on the arm. I don't carry it around for advertisement. It's just reality, that's all.

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