



A French survivor becomes a legendary photojournalist

BY DANIELLE BERRIN | PUBLISHED APR 27, 2016 | DANIELLE BERRIN

“The one thing that is very clear in my mind is that day in 1942, when the French police knocked on our door to come and take us,” Henri Dauman, 83, said, moments after taking his seat at a Beverly Hills café. The French-born Holocaust survivor paused to order a decaf cappuccino and make an approving comment on Badoit, the French sparkling water offered by the restaurant. “That’s a very good French water — the best,” he said. He wouldn’t compliment France again.

Seated across from Dauman was his granddaughter, Nicole Suarez, and her boyfriend, Peter Jones, who were trailing him to log every crumb of his story for the documentary they hope to make about his life. Suarez, 23, had never heard her grandfather’s Holocaust story until she discovered his testimony by accident during a Birthright visit to Yad Vashem in Jerusalem. Growing up, she had known him only as a prolific photojournalist, a hard-working immigrant whose lens captured some of the most iconic figures of the 20th century, including Elvis Presley, Marilyn Monroe, Elizabeth Taylor and Jackie Kennedy. By now, Suarez knew Dauman’s story well, sometimes finishing her grandfather’s sentences as he recounted that vivid day in 1942.



Mostly, he remembers the pounding. Dauman was 9 when the French police tried to break into the Paris apartment where he and his mother lived, the door of which she had dead-bolted twice over in the days following her husband's arrest. This act may have saved them, but the images of visiting his father at the Pithiviers internment camp in north central France flashed before Dauman's eyes as the banging became louder. "My mother implored my father to escape," Dauman recalled of their visit. "The French police were not that disciplined. But my father said, 'No, they're going to release us.'" Dauman lowered his eyes. "At that time in Europe, people had their heads in the sand."



Dauman would never again see his father, who perished in a concentration camp, though Dauman wouldn't discover that he'd died at Auschwitz until the 1980s. That day in the apartment, trapped and terror-stricken, they listened as a neighbor offered the police an ax with which to bash in their door.

Dauman still finds humor in the fact that the police quit their pursuit because they were, after all, French, and it was lunchtime. "Lunch is sacred," he said wryly. It was also the perfect moment for Dauman and his mother to escape.

They fled to the French countryside, where they would remain, albeit separately, for the next couple of years. Dauman lived with a family and attended school. Careful not to arouse suspicion, he saw his mother only once before the Allied invasion. When they finally reunited and returned to their Paris apartment after the war, Dauman's mother fell ill. She purchased a remedy from the local pharmacy, but the medicine had been contaminated on the black market, probably with rat poison, and promptly killed her. Dauman returned from school one day to find an ambulance outside their apartment. "I just knew it was my mother," he said. At the hospital, "I kissed her and she was cold."

At 13, Dauman had survived the Holocaust but was left an orphan. An aunt placed him in what he described as a "Zionist orphanage" near Versailles, run by a Conservative Jewish organization whose goal it was to encourage *aliyah* to Israel. Dauman was very unhappy there; he knew almost nothing about Judaism, having grown up at a time when "you couldn't talk about being a Jew or you'd lose your life."

He soon became a ward of the state and was transferred to another children's home in a suburb of Paris. His fate changed dramatically when, as a young teen, he helped organize a fundraising

gala for the home at a local cinema. He became addicted to movies and soon picked up a camera, finding work processing film at a local photo shop. "I loved film," Dauman recalled. "When I was young and alone, film took me to another world. It took me out of my misery. I looked at these American pictures and dreamed about [America]. I thought, 'My God, what a place this must be!' Film created a world I could not imagine; it was an escape."

Eventually, he earned enough money to rent his own room in the Saint Paul neighborhood and began assisting two professional photographers – one in fashion, one in journalism – before purchasing his own camera. "I saw that my eyes could be used to gain my independence," Dauman said. "I used my eyes to defend myself from all the things that had come to stop me."

An uncle who had immigrated to the United States before the war reached out to him to ask if he wanted to come to America. Dauman was 17 when he arrived in New York on Dec. 14, 1950. "I couldn't wait to get to Manhattan," he said.

With one solid skill to rely on, he began photographing his way into a new life. "I would read the newspaper [in the morning] and go to shoot what [news] I saw was forthcoming," he said. "I would make three or four sets of prints in my darkroom at night and send [them] to major publications in France, Italy, Germany and England. I became a one-man agency; I worked 24 hours a day."

He eventually landed a lucrative contract with Life magazine and made a name for himself photographing the world's biggest stars – Brigitte Bardot, Marlene Dietrich, Jane Fonda, Federico Fellini, Jean Renoir, Francois Truffaut and Jean-Luc Godard, to name a few. At President John F. Kennedy's funeral, he snapped a photo of the mourning Jacqueline Kennedy, which Andy Warhol later appropriated for a famous silkscreen and other works, though without attribution. (Dauman and Time Inc. sued the Warhol estate, and the case was settled for an undisclosed amount.)

Italian film director Federico Fellini

Film star Marilyn Monroe and her husband, playwright Arthur Miller

Dauman estimates he has amassed more than 1 million prints over his 60-year-career. "It turns out that I photographed ...

"The cultural landscape of America," Suarez interjected.

But until 2014, when he exhibited his work at a Paris gallery for the first time, Dauman had never thought of himself as an artist. "I was just realizing my dream," he said. Still, he described the

experience of showing his work to the public and observing their reception as “a window opening.”

“I saw so many people reacting to the work emotionally,” he said. “People know my pictures, but they don’t know the man behind the camera.”

That may change, if Suarez gets her way.

“She’s making me ‘Cary Grant the Second,’ ” Dauman joked of his potential film debut.

Jones will direct the documentary. “Don’t encourage him,” he said.

Distribution likely won’t be a problem, since Dauman’s son, Philippe, is president, CEO and chairman at Viacom, heir apparent to the media empire long helmed by Sumner Redstone. Henri Dauman also has a daughter, Suarez’s mother, and another son from a second marriage.

Of his six grandchildren, some are rediscovering their Jewish roots. A week before we met, Dauman had visited Arizona for his grandson Eric’s bar mitzvah. “When I handed him the *tallit*, I told him, what a privilege it is to give you this tallit, which I didn’t have the privilege to know anything about when I was your age. I could not afford to know what my background was. This is some of the damage that war causes.”

“The real miracle of this story,” Dauman added, “is I find myself in Paris in November 2014, and I’ve got more than 35 people sitting at a restaurant after the opening of the show, and these are all family members that were created since World War II.”

I ask Dauman what he thinks his parents would have said if they could see how his life turned out.

“I wish they would have seen ...” he began, but then his voice broke.

“My children,” Dauman continued. “Because, you know – from *nothing* came a pretty good family and big success.”