Audio Oral History Interview with Mr. Charles MALKA  
recorded October 1st, 2010 in Sèvres, France by Peggy Frankston

Mr. Charles Malka was born in Mascara, Algeria, a small city of about 30,000 in inhabitants, on January 1st, 1922. The Arabic word, “mascara” has to do with a military garrison and apparently, there was one nearby. The city was situated about 120 kilometers south of Oran. There were about 300 Jewish families there.

His father was a shoemaker and made traditional footwear for the Muslim population. Apparently, the Muslims preferred buying from Jewish artisans and tradesmen. This is important because later, these people helped his family out. His mother, whose maiden name was Amsallem, was from a wealthier family. Apparently, he had an older brother who was about 5 years older than he, who was given a bicycle just before his bar mitzvah, and was killed in a traffic accident when he tried it out. He had an older sister who also died at an early age. Another sister was injured as a baby and was handicapped all her life.

Mr. Malka went to the public school in Mascara, where Christian, Muslim, and Jewish students studied together. He was not a particularly good student, so his parents told him to take typing lessons and stenography, which could come in handy. He was particularly good at all types of sports and belonged to the Eclaireurs Israélites from the age of 8 on. He said that this came in handy later when he was obliged to be part of the “Chantiers de Jeunesse”, the Vichy youth brigades, and also when later interned in the Camp de Bèdeau. He still sings the songs they sang (separate recording, apart from the interview).

From the age of 15-16, the young people prepared for the coming war by learning to fence, ride horses, and practice judo. It is not clear whether this was sponsored by the government or was part of an initiative by the Eclaireurs israélites.

[When the Vichy regime arrived in 1940, the Jews of Algeria, who had been made French citizens in 1870 by the Crémieux Decree, automatically lost their French citizenship. Marcel Peyrouton, the Minister of the Interior on the mainland, was responsible for this. Even after the liberation of Algeria in November, 1942, General Giraud, who the Americans maintained in place, kept the anti-Jewish laws in place. During the interview, Mr. Malka mentions that the Jews regained their French nationality for a short time (he says July 14, 1943) and then, the Crémieux Decree was again abolished. [This seemed absurd, but it is historically true, although the dates found in historical sources are different. Peyrouton joined Giraud in Algeria and again, invalidated the Crémieux Decree in March, 1943, in order not to rankle the Muslim population. Therefore, two successive regimes and the same man abrogated the Crémieux Decree during WW II.]

Mr. Malka lost his job as a court clerk in 1940. He mentions the name of the “procureur au tribunal”, Monsieur Bachelot. He said that the “chaouche” or “huissier” (bailiff) fired him. This probably has to do with the fact that all Jews lost administrative jobs, or any job paid by the state. He mentions the name of a “commis greffier”, Monsieur Partouche. He mentions the SOL (Service d’ordre legionnaire), a militia-like group on the far right, which collaborated with the enemy all over North Africa. In Algeria, many of its members were of Spanish descent.

Mr. Malka was recruited for the “Chantiers de la Jeunesse”, the work brigades instituted by Marshall Pétain. He spent about 6 months there, making telephone poles. He was the leader of his group. They played bridge, cooked, and put on athletic shows. He said that he received praise from the men responsible for sports training.

Around the middle of 1942, Mr. Malka returned to his parents’ home. Then, he received an order of mobilisation. (November 8th, 1942?). At this point in the interview, he mentions that he received 4 military citations, 2 medals for courage, and was wounded 3 times: a bullet went through him, he received pieces of shrapnel, and he had a serious accident in a jeep.
There is a long section of the interview where Mr. Malka recounts what he knows about Operation Torch, the plan the Allies used to liberate Algeria, with the help of Algerian resistant fighters. Of the 400 resistance fighters involved, he says 355 were Jewish. Mr. Malka was not actually in Algiers at the time it was liberated. [There is a discussion with the interviewer about the password that was used to set-off the plan. “Robert Franklin” was derived from a composite of the names of Robert Murphy and Franklin Roosevelt. At another moment, they participants said “whiskey” and the answer was “soda”.]

When Mr. Malka called up for military service on December 10, 1942, he had left to be a volunteer in the “corps franc”. He turned around, came home and reported for duty. He was put on a train for the military Camp of Bédeau. The Jews were the fourth category of recruits. They were put in Groups or Battalions of Jewish Pioneers. He said that there were other men in the camp, a ring of tents, when he arrived because the men who were already eligible for the army in 1939 were there first. His section was n° 2010. Everyone warned the new arrivals not to volunteer for duty: those who did (for example section n° 2005) ended up clearing out rubble in the ports and airports of Tunisia, during bombing raids.

Mr. Malka describes in detail what it was like to live in the Camp of Bédeau. He describes with anger how the Jews were treated differently - humiliated, made to shave their heads, given rags for clothes when the non-Jewish recruits had new uniforms. They soon had body and head lice. They had no soap and little access to water. The sun was unbearable during the day, the nights were extraordinarily cold. They had to pull up “alpha” [the interviewer was unable to find the English equivalent] with their bare hands. This plant had thorns and their hands became calloused. They also had to dig trenches.

Admiral Darlan was assassinated by Bonnier de La Chapelle, an Algerian-born French resistance fighter [executed after the incident]. The way was clear for General Giraud, his rival according to Mr. Malka, to take over Algeria. There is a note from Giraud dated January 30th, 1945 (Mr. Malka has papers with him and has tried to take the French government to trial, so he knows his facts) in which Giraud explains why the Jews should not be allowed to participate in combat – they could then claim French citizenship.

Thanks to De Gaulle, the Crémieux Decree was reinstituted in October, 1943.

At the time Mr. Malka and this Battallion of Jewish Pioneers were stationed in Bédeau, it was no longer considered an “internment camp”. [before the liberation of Algeria, it was considered an internment camp.] (Mr. Malka has been fighting for years to be recognized as an interned political prisoner.) The Jews were not allowed to bear or learn to use firearms.

A group was sent to Marrakech to fight with the French Forces. His 32nd group was 90% Jewish, led by non-Jewish officers. He mentions that most of the Jewish recruits had university degrees and should have been automatically made officers. During the period from May to October, 1943, he and his group underwent intensive military training with American weapons, wearing American-made uniforms. They got used to C and K rations, beer, chewing gum, and cigarettes.

They spent 11 days at sea and debarked south of Naples on December 1st, 1943. Mr. Malka fought at, and survived, the Battle of Monte Cassino. He speaks of General Juin bringing 4,000 mules from Morocco and Sicily to the battlefield in GMC trucks, 7 to a truck. The spearhead of the operation were the Moroccan Tabors. Mr. Malka describes the horror of the months they spent at the Battle of Monte Cassino in the winter of 1944 till the spring of 1944. He says that the ordeal he went through was worse than that experienced in the concentration camps or extermination centers.

After the battle, the troops sailed to Saint Tropez, where one of his close friends died under fire during the landing. They went up through the Vercors to the Ardennes. Mr. Malka maintains that 50% of the First French Army was composed of North Africans and 50% solders from the French mainland. The toughest battle was the one around Colmar. It was in this area that Mr. Malka was severely injured in a jeep accident.
Mr. Malka speaks of crossing the Rhine and entering Germany. He speaks of a town named Florsheim where the Germans took vengeance on the population in a similar manner to the way they had in Oradour-sur-Glane. For a while, he was stationed in Austria. He said that he was not with the part of the French army that liberated camps.

In mid-December, 1945, he was finally reached Port Vendres and was sent back to Algeria. He was unable to reclaim his former job as a court clerk because of the anti-Semitic judge at the courthouse where he worked. He decided to enter the police force and started a new career.

Mr. Malka made his way up the echelons and became a police inspector, although his Christian colleagues were often given credit for his work. He married, yet still supported his parents and handicapped sister. He recounts that because of bureaucracy and probably anti-Semitism, he could not get the proper medical care for his father, who needed surgery, and who died at a relatively young age.

When Algeria became independent in July, 1962, Mr. Malka insisted on getting a place on a ship to the mainland for his wife, his small children, and himself and left almost everything they owned in Algeria, especially a new house the French government had encouraged people to build. In the police force, Mr. Malka had hunted down terrorists and knew that part of the Muslim population would take revenge on any Frenchman, especially someone who had been in the police force.

Mr. Malka describes in detail how he arrived in Port Vendres in France and how no one was there to greet the thousands of “pieds noirs” who were fleeing Algeria. The family wandered the city, trying to find a room and even other southern cities were unprepared. He had expected that the Red Cross or some organization would be there to help them. He finally made it up to Paris, where his family moved into two rooms with 6 relatives who were already there. As luck would have it, he ran into one of the men with whom he became close in the army. The man offered him a job right away, in the textile industry.

Mr. Malka became quite successful financially. As this interview reveals, his resilience and energy are incredible. He has two sons, one an economics professor, and a daughter who works with non-governmental organizations. He has always enjoyed ballroom dancing and has won several contests. He paints and sculpts, which he learned on his own in Algeria at an early age. He is active in various associations of former prisoners and survivors. He has contributed to building a modest place of prayer in a state-subsidized apartment complex in Sèvres, where the interview took place. Unfortunately, the interviewer ran out of recording capacity on the digital recorder and the interview ended abruptly after over 3 hours. Another meeting will be arranged to add missing material.