

Audio Recording of Interview with Dr. René Pariente on November 3, 2010

Dr. Pariente was born on September 1, 1929, in La Marsaa, just outside of Tunis, in Tunisia. He was part of “la grana”, the Italian Jews, mostly from Livorno, who had emigrated to Tunisia starting in the 18th century. He mentioned “La Livornina” in 1593, a decree that gave Jews who had been forced to convert to Catholicism during the Inquisition, the right to freely practice their religion and accorded them special privileges.

Dr. Pariente started the interview by giving some background about the Jews of Tunisia. About 3,000 or so were Italian, but according to him, around 100,000 indigenous Jews were Berber. The vast majority were illiterate and poor. The two groups did not mix and the indigenous Jews resented the wealth and social standing of the Italian Jews. He mentions that the Italians married among themselves and that it was surprising that there were not more defects due to intermarriage.

His mother Vera was from the prestigious Gutierrez family and her wedding to Jules Pariente was considered marrying beneath her station. Apparently, Dr. Pariente’s great-great uncle owned most of the land and fisheries on the Isle of Djerba. His father dealt in agricultural supplies. There was an older brother and sister. At the age of 7, when his little brother was born, René was sent to live with his grandmother (maternal?), the only person who kept the traditions of Judaism in the family. She was an unkind woman and René missed being at home with his siblings and parents.

[Around 32 minutes into the interview, Dr. Pariente uses the expression “mouche de coche”, which means a totally useless individual who considers himself indispensable].

As a boy, he remembers his father talking to him and his brother about what was happening in Germany and Italy. When Mussolini proclaimed the anti-Jewish laws of 1938, his father applied to obtain French citizenship. He also mentions that the Vichy racial laws were not applied with the same severity in Tunisia as on the mainland. For example, the family could keep their radio and a bicycle, items confiscated in France.

As a boy, he was fascinated by the battles as the war progressed. The battle of Kasserine was the first time the young American soldiers came up against a German army in North Africa.

He remembers his father being arrested by the French because he had an Italian passport. Jules Pariente died of a pulmonary embolism at the age of 46 on June 10, 1940, two days before the Germans invaded France. René’s older brother became a sort of father to him. In April, 1942, René celebrated his Bar Mitzvah. His little brother died of typhus two days later.

He remembers the Germans entering Tunis, but not in a martial parade. A room was requisitioned at his mother’s apartment and his grandmother’s, too. They had no contact with the soldier who lodged with them. He remembers being hungry continually. He gladly got up at 2 A.M. to stand in line at the baker’s for a type of fried bread. He remembers dozens of bombs falling on the city a day and his continual fear of perishing that way, or being deported and receiving a bullet in the head.

According to Dr. Pariente, the “Portuguese Jews” i.e. the Sephardic Jews like his family were not requisitioned for forced labor, like the poor, indigenous Tunisian Jews were. He mentions the only round-up which occurred on December 9th, 1942. He says that an Italian officer told his family that the Italian army had obtained concessions from the Germans: if Jews were to be deported, the Italian Jews be the last rounded-up and the Italian army be apprised of it beforehand so they could warn people.

Dr. Pariente remembers the day of the victory of the Russians at Stalingrad, late February 1943, as one of “unadulterated joy”. He says that from that moment on, “we had the distinct impression that the war had changed direction”.

He speaks of the continual bombardments, especially by the English. When the English later entered Tunis to liberate it, there was a military parade. A rightest collaborator from the S.O.L. (Service de'Ordre Légionnaire) showed up and one of the neighbors yelled, “A mort (the member of the S.O.L.)

Since Dr. Pariente's family was Italian (the father's application for French citizenship in 1938 had not been processed) and the Allies were still at war with Italian, their property and belongings were sequestered for a year and a half, making everyday existence difficult. At the age of 17, René's elder brother enlisted in a regiment of military engineers.

Dr. Pariente was sent to Paris for his university studies in 1946. Paris was under heavy rationing when he enrolled in the Faculty of Medecine. At first, he wanted to specialize in cardiology because his father had died of a heart attack at an earlier age, but later became a lung specialist, then specializing in reanimation. After his internship, he became the “Chef du service” at the Hôpital Laennec, then worked at the Hôpital Antoine Baeckler in Clamart and the Hôpital Beaujon in Clichy, which was part of the French research institute INSERM. He mentions that he was part of a commission at the NIH. He says that he had the good fortune to become a doctor when medicine was progressing by leaps and bounds.

Dr. Pariente wrote a book, published by L'Harmattan in 2009, about the “dangers of utopian socialism”, which modern democracy does not address. In his opinion, Saint Simon, Tom Paine, Fourier, and Proudhon were anti-feminists and anti-Semites. (The book is included with the CDs of the interview.)

Dr. Pariente has three children from a first marriage and two from his second marriage. His first-born son was baptised, but he is still considered Jewish because the name “Pariente” is a well-known Jewish name. His two sons from a second marriage are both doctors. One does not consider himself Jewish and the other is extremely religious. Neither his first nor his second wife is Jewish. When asked about his religion, he said that “in my home, it is forbidden to be religious”.

The end of the interview became an informal discussion of history, going back to the Roman conquest, and Dr. Pariente's questions about the interviewer's background.