

Interview with Madame Arlette TAÏB, née Cassuto in Bordeaux, France on September 6th, 2011¹

Track M4197003 (1 hour 16 minutes 39 seconds)

Arlette Cassuto was born in Sétif, Algeria, on April 10, 1930, the second of three daughters. Her father Albert, was born in Smyrna, Turkey, in 1898. His love of nature led him to study agronomy at a school in Tunisia, where he met his future wife, Angèle Portugais, whose mother Gracia Quenquès, was also from Smyrna and despite years in Tunisia, spoke only Judeo-Espagnol.

The father was *regisseur* or manager for a wealthy Jew of Italian descent, Monsieur Zermatti, who owned a large domain of 5,000 *hectares* of wheat (or other grains) and great flocks of sheep and goats. He returned home only once a week for *shabbat* dinner with his wife, mother-in-law, and daughters in the city of Sétif, on a high plateau. Madame Taïb explains that the women were uneducated and did not have much exposure to the outside world: no newspapers and only a local radio. They did not live in a Jewish section of the city.

Arlette has the painful memory of arriving at her school, the equivalent of 6th grade (« *la sixième* »), and the teacher, Mademoiselle Bagnus, with tears in her eyes, telling the Jewish students they could not return to school the next day because of the Vichy anti-Jewish laws. The local Jewish community organized education as best it could. The Jewish teachers who had been expelled set-up classes at the local synagogue and tried to continue providing an education to Jewish students as best they could. Arlette remembers receiving a special biscuit and real milk every morning at the synagogue. (This may have been provided by the Jewish Joint Distribution Committee.)

Madame Taïb remembers that because her father was not a French citizen, he was not mobilized to join the French army. Despite rationing, the family fared rather well because they had eggs, butter, and other farm products to barter for sugar and other necessities. She describes how the Arab agricultural laborers, who lived in *gourbi* made out of dried cow dung, made *barrettes* of delicious cow and goat butter in dried animal skins, and how they wove wool from the sheep fleece.

Once Algeria was liberated by the Allies, she remembers that American soldiers who attended services at the synagogue, were invited to eat with families in Sétif. Three of the soldiers were from South America and could speak with Arlette's grandmother and mother in Judeo-Espagnol.

The Cassuto family lived in a building owned by a Muslim. The Kling family, French Alsatisians, on the same landing belonged to the ultra-right organization, *la Croix de feu*. When news came that France had capitulated to the Germans in June, 1940, Madame Kling stood out on the landing and started screaming that it was the fault of those filthy Jews and they should all be burned at the stake in public! Nonetheless, the women were close friends and Madame Cassuto had even helped reconcile the estranged Kling couple.....

Arlette Cassuto wanted to pursue her studies after obtaining the baccalaureate, but the family did not have the means to send her to Constantine. Therefore, she sent out letters to banks and various possible employers. The French education system sorely needed teachers and took her on as a substitute. She learned on the job and before long, she was assigned classes of her own, sometimes

¹ Please excuse a technical error : during the first 20 minutes or so, the interviewer's microphone was not plugged-in and the sound quality of the questions is not excellent. Also, because the interviewee could not climb stairs, the locale used for the interview was quite noisy, with sounds of the local tram and visitors to the Jean Moulin Resistance Museum.

up to 60 students. She adored teaching young children to read, to write, and basic mathematics. Even today, her face lights up speaking of the joy of achieving this. She taught in a secular school where the students were of all backgrounds.

Madame Taïb's husband was a tax inspector. They lived in on the edge of Sétif in a pleasant wooded area.

There were public meetings of a group of French and Muslims who worked together, « *le Parti Franco-Musulman* ». The Mayor of Sétif was a Muslim woman, Madame Keptani. Madame Taïb, having participated in the public meetings, was practically part of the municipal council. The sub-prefect of the region was a Muslim.

[Madame Taïb echoes the sentiment expressed by many of the Algerian Jews: no one could imagine that the French would ever « divest » itself of « abandon » Algeria. After all, it included three French *départements*.]

Attacks against Europeans were more frequent in the isolated country villages and mountains. However, the turning-point for Madame Taïb and her family came while they were on vacation in Kerrata, by the sea, in 1961. Everyone there was supposed to attend some public celebration in honor of French soldiers leaving the area and the *fellaga* assassinated a family. The Taïb's quickly left for home and started making plans to leave Algeria for good. Since both she and her husband were French civil servants, they asked to be transferred to jobs on mainland France. They were placed in the small town of Barbezieux in the *département* of Charente.

Madame Taïb said that she and her husband made it known that they were Jewish when they started their new jobs, but that their religion never posed any problem in this small, rural community. They worked there until they retired and Madame Taïb moved to Bordeaux eleven years ago. She is active in local Jewish charities.