

## **Interview with Daisy CHELLY, née Seror, in Paris, France October 19, 2011**

**(1 hour 12 minutes 50 seconds)**

Daisy Seror was born in Gabès, Tunisia, on January 20, 1933. Her grandfather, Simon Seror, was a highly-respected man, head of the Jewish community of Gabès. A self-made man, he provided the indigent Jews with something every Friday to buy food for Shabbat. A neighborhood in central Gabès was named after him. He and his wife dressed in the traditional dress and spoke Arabic, but they were open to innovation. His department store was named “Le Petit Louvre” on one of the main thoroughfares of Gabès-Ville. One of his two sons taught him to read and write.

The Region of Gabès is in the south of Tunisia, on the Libyan border, and includes the Island of Djerba. There was a French military base there and the city was so pleasant, the Europeans who visited did not want to leave. There was a beautiful beach and the Jewish community had some land on the waterfront, reserved for the poor. The city of Gabès was divided into three districts: Gabès-Ville, Djara, and Menzel. Daisy’s family lived in the center of the city.

Daisy remembers going to a public nursery school quite early, around the age of three. She does not remember any incidents of anti-Semitism.

Although Gabès was not wealthy and the Jews received no ration tickets, the community got along. Her father would ask the Muslim fishermen to bring in his catch and he would buy enough for the entire neighborhood. She recounts that at the beginning of the war with Germany in 1939, a Consul from Tunis came to ask all the Jews to enroll in the French army. Her grandfather, accompanied by either her father or her uncle, made the trip to Tunis, to meet with officials. He said that the indigenous Jews, who did not have French citizenship, would enroll and fight for the French, if “the French would treat them like their children.” The Consul never replied and none of the Jews enrolled. (She does mention a cousin who studied law and had French citizenship. He was enrolled in the French army and sent to France to fight. After the armistice with Germany, he went into hiding, but was denounced, deported, and perished in a concentration camp.)

However, Madame Chelly remembers that Jews were requisitioned for forced labor, to clear the landing areas after they were bombarded. She mentions a Commandant Mauricet who ran the local army base. He issued papers certifying that a number of Jewish men were working on his base, either in engineering or for the war effort. At one point, he was asked to report to the Gestapo because of this. Madame Chelly tells a miraculous story involving the Commandant and the Great Rabbi Haïm Horé.

She remembers the continual bombing before Tunisia was liberated. She says that the Germans were retreating and that they wreaked destruction on Gabès before they left.<sup>1</sup> [Actually, Gabès was practically completely destroyed during the war and was not rebuilt until 1945, but apparently, her home did not suffer.] She remembers that the Muslims were close to the German soldiers and that once the Allies arrived; they completely disappeared from Gabès-ville for about a week. She remembers how the Jewish soldiers were welcomed by the Jewish community.

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<sup>1</sup> A few weeks after the interview, Mme. Chelly said that her cousin, Huguette Matouk, now living in Nice, reminded her that the Germans had come to the homes of the wealthy Jews to select whatever they wanted or needed.....

Daisy Seror passed her *Certificat d'études* at the age of 13 and then her mother sent her to a school to learn how to sew. Her father died at the age of 52, when she was 14, so she had to go to work right away.

OSE, supported by the American Jewish Joint Distribution Committee, sent the first Jewish doctor Gabès had ever had, Dr. Benmoussa, to a medical dispensary there. He needed someone to keep records and also keep track of infant mortality, venturing into the various neighborhoods. He taught Daisy how to administer medicine and later, sent her to Tunis to be trained by Dr. Roger Nataf to treat trachoma. Apparently, this highly-contagious disease was prevalent in the area. She later was adept in giving delicate injections into the eyes and taking blood samples for analysis.

The doctor had to perform check-ups on all those who wanted to emigrate to Israel. When immigration was finally allowed in 1948 – 1949, there was a huge exodus of the Jews, who “realized that there was no future for them in Tunisia.” When Tunisia became independent<sup>2</sup>, their houses and land were appropriated for a pittance. Bourguiba’s government used all sorts of subterfuges to lower the price they paid, claiming that the Jews had not paid municipal taxes on the property, or had not paid for water or electricity.

Madame Chelly describes how her beloved elder sister Ida emigrated from Tunisia to Israel. One of her sisters married a man whose family had been expelled from Libya, a “Tripolitaine” and settled in Tunis. They settled in a *moshav* “full of Hungarians” near Netanya.

Madame Chelly recounts that her marriage to Youna Chelly was arranged. He was an attractive man who had a tailor shop, but he was 18 years older than Daisy.<sup>3</sup> He was the treasurer of the local Jewish community. She says that he was kind and that they had 4 wonderful children. At one point, in the early 60’s, she was asked to run the Jewish child-care center (“garderie”) for around 60 children. Later, “at the time of the 6-day war” or the Israeli war of 1967, she was asked to become the deputy director of a child-care center in Tunis, run by a Madame Boutboul.

Rare for a Tunisian Jewish family, the Chelly’s remained in Gabès until 1973. Her four children<sup>4</sup> were studying in French, and when it came time to complete their studies for the baccalaureate, they could not continue in Gabès. The children chose to go to France. Her husband sold what he could and when the family arrived in France, he pulled out a sewing machine and did piece work to feed the family.<sup>5</sup> The family was helped by CASIP-COJASOR when it arrived, but they remained isolated from other Tunisian Jews. Family solidarity seems an important theme in Madame Chelly’s life and she admires the sacrifices her husband made to make sure his children had a future.

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<sup>2</sup> In 1956, although Madame Chelly cites 1955 as the year of independence.

<sup>3</sup> Her father-in-law was a jeweler and she showed me some traditional silver bracelets worn around the ankles, which he made for her, as well as the pins used to keep a shawl fixed to her head and chains that are placed across the front of the long dress. See scanned photo of her in her grandmother’s traditional attire taken when she was around 18.

<sup>4</sup> Alain, born in 1942, Yvan, born in 1953 or 1954, Fabienne, born in 1955, and Raymond, born in 1959.

<sup>5</sup> All the children passed their baccalaureate exam and the second son went to medical school and was qualified to practice dentistry. Fabienne gave up after her first year in medical school and married a young man from Belorussian family. The eldest son, Alain, started a clothing business selling jeans in a shopping center, Rosny 2. However, he died from the consequences of appendicitis surgery at the age of 30 [1982]. His brother had to take over the clothing business to make sure the family did not go hungry. Fabienne and her husband Michel Lichetin struggled to make ends meet with a small electrical cable company, but it now is successful. It seems that the youngest son was Deputy Mayor of the 13<sup>th</sup> arrondissement of Paris for several years, when the Socialist Serge Blisko was Mayor.

## Lexicon

Different parts (or *quartiers*) of the city of Gabès: Gabès Ville, Djara, and Menzel

*Quartier Seror* was named after her grandfather

*Le Petit Louvre*- a department store owned by her grandfather Simon Seror

Tripolitaine: relating to Tripoli. Many Libyan Jews were originally from Tunisia

Grand Rabbi of Gabès came from the Island of Djerba, Haïm Horé

Commandant Mauricet, commanded the French military base, where he certified that many of the Jews who had been requisitioned for forced labor were working on his base and were needed there (“ils travaillaient au *genie*” – for the war effort, engineering)

Dr. Benmoussa – first Jewish Tunisian doctor sent to Gabès

Dr. Uzan – his successor

Dr. Roger Nataf – directed training sessions for nurses concerning the treatment of trachoma

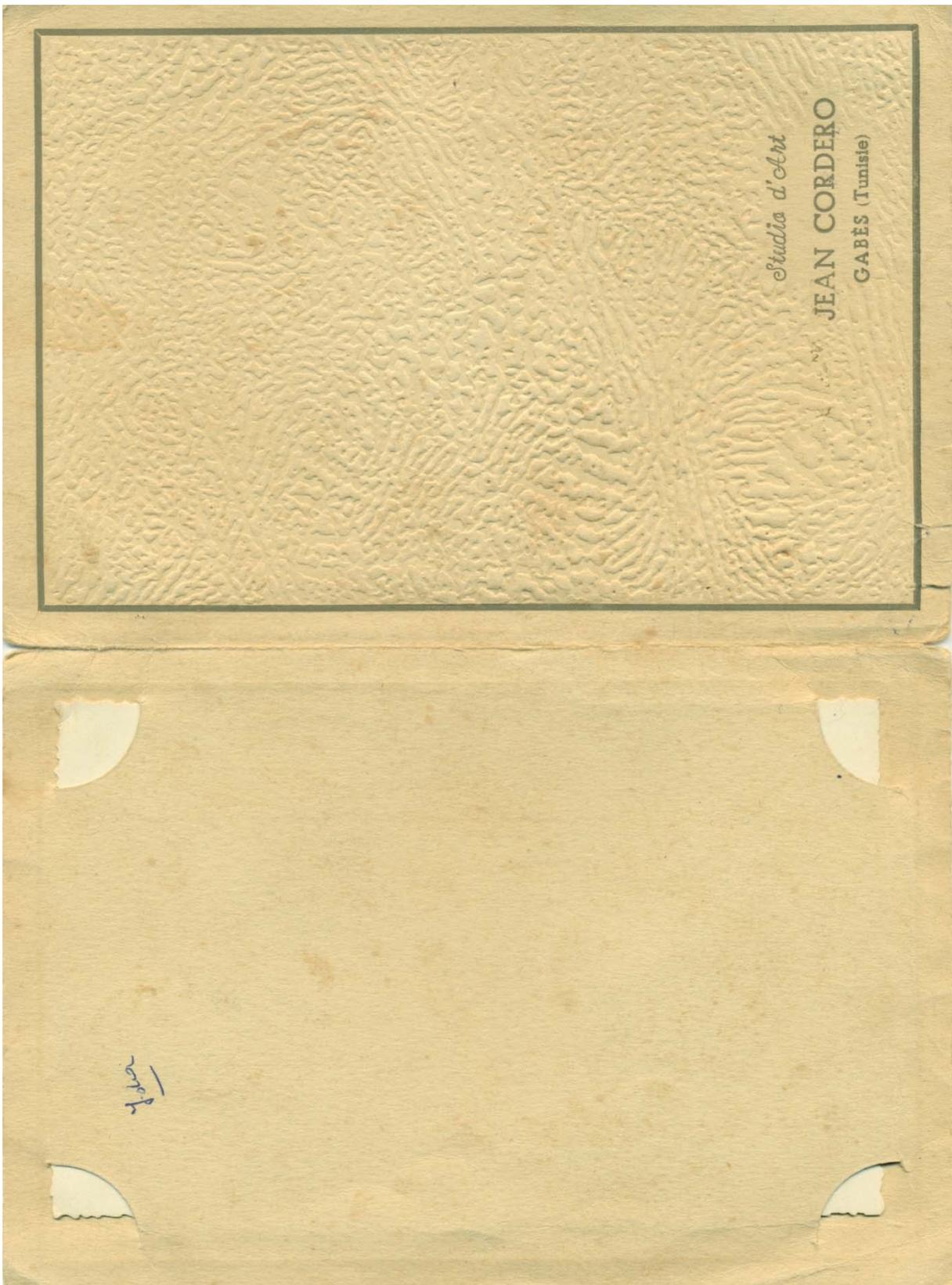
Traditional dress for women from Gabès, the *fouttah*

Jewelry made from copper and a little bit of gold

*La Ghriba* is an ancient synagogue on the Island of Djerba, dating from the 7<sup>th</sup> century. Every May, for Lag Bo’Omer, there is a pilgrimage and former Tunisian Jews from all over the world gather there for about ten days of celebration. There is a legend about a saint who lived in a hut.

Madame Chelly mentions that she went there with her sister a few years ago, returning to Gabès for the first time since she left for France.

The current Jewish community of Djerba, in the village of Hara Sghira, is poverty-stricken and uneducated. It survives through charitable donations. The entrance to the Jewish quarter of Djerba was guarded by Tunisian soldiers or the police under Ben Ali’s regime.







**Photos Donated by Madame Daisy Chelly, née Seror  
October 19, 2011**

- 1: cream-colored photo holder, 11cm x 16 cm, with glassine protector inside.  
Photographer is Jean Cordero, Gabès, Tunisia.  
“Ida” inscribed on back. It was probably sent to her sister Ida, in Israel.
- 2: photo of Daisy Seror in traditional dress of Jewish women of Gabès, Tunisia.  
Daisy is posing in her grandmother’s *fouttah* (long robe) with traditional jewelry.  
She is probably about 18, so that would be 1951.8.8 cm x 13.8 cm, semi-matte finish,  
“STUDIO D’ART Jean Cordero GABES” embossed on photo.
- 3: black-and-white photo on thick paper, cream-colored, 11 ¾ cm x 15 cm  
Daisy Seror, in nurse’s uniform, tending to a little girl, lying on her back.  
Daisy Seror worked in the OSE dispensary financed by the American Jewish Joint  
Distribution Committee as aid to Dr. Benmoussa, between 1948 – 1950, helping out with  
medical examinations prior to emigration to Israël. The Israeli officials wanted to make  
sure that new immigrants were not bringing disease into the country and that their health  
condition would not be a burden on the young country.

Daisy was sent to Tunis to be trained by Dr. Roger Nataf to learn how to treat trachoma.  
She was not a certified nurse, but she could do sub-cutaneous injections, take blood for  
Analysis, and give shots, recommend medical treatments.