

Interview¹ with Monsieur Marcel CHARBIT in Bordeaux, France November 9, 2011

1 hour 17 minutes 11 seconds

Marcel Charbit was born on December 12, 1932, in Tlemcen, Algérie, the eldest of 4 boys and 2 girls. His mother (born 1913, died 2005), whose maiden name was Sebbag, came from a wealthy family. His father, Maklouf (born February 14, 1905), and his uncle, Moïse, owned a successful furniture store. During WW II, when they could not receive goods from France, they got by selling anything they could find locally: wine, wood, olive oil and other necessities.² After the war, they expanded into radios and other goods.

Tlemcen did not have a specifically Jewish quarter, though most of the Jews lived near the synagogue in the center of the city. The more successful Jews lived on the periphery of the city in a residential area with mostly Europeans. However, most of the neighborhoods had a mixture of Muslims, Jews, and Christians. The Jewish population of Tlemcen was about 5,000 out of 20,000 people. Mr. Charbit says that the Jews knew how to make sure that they were respected. He mentions an athletic club called *La Fraternelle*, where the Jewish members were not shy about fighting to defend their honor if anti-Semitism reared its head.

The Charbit family was not strictly religious and was flexible about kosher food. They spoke French at home.

Marcel attended public schools: first kindergarden, then elementary school and then *collège*, the equivalent of junior high school. He had friends from all backgrounds and did not limit himself to friends from only the Jewish community.

In September, 1939, his father and uncle were called up by the French army. His father was sent to do keep watch over the railroad from Tlemcen to Oran and also to Oujda, over the border in Morocco. He remembers that his father was able to work at his store from time to time. He also remembers that he and his brother were allowed to join their father for several days in his little hut near the railroad tracks.

Mr. Charbit thinks that Jewish students were forbidden to attend public schools, under the strict application of the Vichy laws, in the fall of 1941 or before that. [Other interviewees have situated this exclusion in the fall of 1942.] He and his siblings then attended a Jewish school set-up by the Jewish community. There were not enough teachers, space was limited, so the students attended classes, taught by Jewish teachers who had been forbidden to teach in public schools, in half-day or even two-hour shifts.

Mr. Charbit spoke of Jewish recruits in the French army who were sent to the camp of Bedeau in the desert of southern Algeria, where they were guarded as prisoners by members of the French Foreign Legion. He spoke of the horrible conditions: in the daytime, under the sun, temperatures could rise to 45° C, while at night; they fell to well below freezing. The men were made to do useless tasks, just to wear them out – digging ditches, for example. He thinks that this occurred before Algeria was liberated by the Allies, 1941 – 1942.

¹ The interview went backward and forward. In the first few minutes, in relation to his father's profession, we had covered his business career up to 1971.

² There were no factories, no manufacturing of any sort of goods. In that way, mainland France had a captive market for their products. Nothing could be shipped to Algeria during the war, but Mr. Charbit's father still had to nourish his family.

Although there was strict rationing during this period, his family did well because of his father's friends in the Muslim community. The French authorities were less strict with the Arabs and they were allowed to slaughter their livestock and dispose of it as they pleased.

The Allies liberated Algeria in November, 1942, in what he remembers as "an explosion of joy". His father was again called into the French army, but by this time, he had four children and was kept in the reserve. However, 12 people in this immediate family were called up.

Mr. Charbit notes that although Algeria was liberated at that time, the Jews did not regain their French citizenship until the fall of 1943. He attributes the restoration of their citizenship and civil rights to the Jews "who had influence" - since they had helped the Allies plan the invasion - in Oran and Alger.

After the liberation of Algeria, Mr. Charbit returned to public school, but had to work in his father's store and do his homework as well. He finally dropped out at the age of 16. He truly wanted to immigrate to Israel, but his father put pressure on him to stay because he needed help with his business. Once Marcel obtained his driver's license, he was sent all over to pick up merchandise or deliver it. Nonetheless, he always found time to collect money for Palestine.

In 1953, at the age of 21, Marcel was called-up to do his military service. From April to July, 1953, he was sent to Maison Carré, near Algiers, to learn how to direct fitness training. He was stationed in Blida, in the 65th artillery division.

The violent incidents that marked the beginning of the Algerian War occurred on November 1st, 1954 and they took the French army by surprise. Mr. Charbit was asked to train a commando of 12 men for anti-terrorist activities. An even greater shock occurred when Muslim soldiers incorporated into the French army and mixed in with all the other soldiers murdered their fellow recruits in their barracks and made off with all their firearms.

As soon as Mr. Charbit finished his military service and a second tour of duty as a "*territoriale*", he convinced his father and uncle to leave for mainland France. He had experienced the violence that the Arab population was capable of deploying and he knew that there was no future for him in France. The family moved to Bergerac in 1956, where his father and uncle purchased a small hotel. They thought that this would be easier to run than a business which relied on supply and demand. Mr. Charbit helped, as did his cousins, but it was tough work and the family was not making much money. Marcel returned to Tlemcen in 1958 and tried to sell as many of the family belongings as possible, although his father refused to sell the family home, which was later taken from them.

Mr. Charbit broke away from his family in 1958 and started selling household linens door-to-door. He married a woman, who had met at the family hotel and who was not Jewish, in 1964, which caused a break in relations with his father. He had moved to Bordeaux, where he worked for the Singer Company from 1961 to 1981. His parents moved there, too, and in 1963, at the age of 59, his father became a door-to-door salesman, too.

Three of Mr. Charbit's siblings moved to Israel. One of his brothers, quite brilliant in business dealings, built up the family fortune and now, they have several furniture stores in Bordeaux and the surrounding suburbs.

Mr. Charbit has actively supported Israel since 1948 and for the last two years, has been the President of the local chapter of AUJF (Appel Unifié des Juifs de France).

During the interview, Mr. Charbit states repeatedly the possibilities and potential difficulties of Jews living in harmony with Muslim Arabs.

However, just before the interview ended, he tells the very moving story of a young Muslim, Mohammed Saïn (?) or "Miemid") who was brought by his father to the Charbit family at the age of 12 and was raised with Marcel. He worked in the father's store and when the family went into exile in France, he followed. He remained attached to the family over the years and even though he has two children, when he died recently, it was Marcel Charbit who took care of the funeral arrangements and his nephew said the Kaddish at the burial, since he had no connections in the Muslim community. The name inscribed on the tombstone is "Saïn-Charbit".