

Interview with Odette COHEN-SOLAL, née Houri, in Créteil, France December 19, 2012

Madame Odette COHEN-SOLAL, née HOURI, was the youngest of a family of 4 boys and 4 girls, born in Tunis on October 22, 1921 to Allegra HOURI, née BRAMI (born 1890) and to Victor-Haïm HOURI, a tailor for men, who also sold cloth and accessories. The family spoke Judeo-Arabic, but Allegra knew French. She also mentioned that her father was scrupulously honest and did not hide his stock of cloth and merchandise to sell it at high prices when things were rare and rationed.

The family lived in an apartment on one of the streets that separated the predominantly Jewish neighborhood from the predominantly Arab one. The only anti-Semitic incident Odette remembers was from 1936, when she was told to seek refuge quickly because there was an Arab uprising.

Odette started her schooling at the *Alliance Israélite Universelle* and did so well, she did not even have to receive her *certificat d'études* (usually obtained around the age of 12 or 13) and transferred directly to the Lycée Armand Fallières. In 1939, she passed the first part of her baccalaureate exam, but could not take the oral part because France had declared war.

Although her father was considered well-off, he was not one of the members of the Jewish community taken hostage in the synagogue by the Germans to force the Jewish community to produce 3,000 able-bodied workers to perform forced labor within 24 hours. She said that some of her brothers escaped and hid in the countryside, but one of them did have to “live in the trenches” and “go to a concentration camp”.

Madame Cohen-Solal remembers that the German soldier sang “Lili Marlene” when they first entered Tunis to occupy the country. The moment that Tunisia was liberated by the Allies, she remembers that the English entered first. She mentions how, from the advantage point of her apartment, she could see several streets and she warned English troops that a contingent of German soldiers was right around the corner.

She and her friends started meeting English and American soldiers and boldly inviting them home. She remembers an American journalist, Ned Russell from United Press (?) who was covering the war with an English regiment. He promised that he would give her a copy of the article he was writing, with her help, but never did.

While looking over the photos, after the recorded interview, she remembered the names of American soldiers: Norbert Stern and a man named Salkanin. Since one of the photos had “Passover, 1944” on the back, that reminded her that Jewish families were called upon to host Jewish soldiers in the Allied armies for the major holidays.

After she was no longer allowed to attend public schools, she nonetheless studied stenography and English because she thought that this could be useful. She lived at home. Her first job was with the *Créditfrançais Algérie Tunisie* and then the *Banque française de Commerce extérieur*, where she continued to work after Tunisia gained its independence from France in 1956. She spoke Arabic and was highly regarded by the Muslim clients. She helped them put together their dossiers for official requests for loans and aid.

In 1949, she took a trip to Europe with a group of young people from all backgrounds. It seemed they spent a lot of time in Germany, where she felt that they were looked upon with hostility because they spoke French.

Madame Cohen-Solal mentioned something, which reveals a certain French colonial policy, but just in passing. She was Tunisian and so was her husband, a salesman. When he requested French citizenship, it was refused by the French authorities because of his health. He had a known heart condition. They were married in 1951 and ten years later, he died at the age of 42.

She took their two children (Nadine, born in 1953 and Simon, born in 1955) and moved to France, where some of her siblings had already settled. Undaunted, she found a job right away, and later became secretary to the Director of the *Banque française de Commerce extérieur* on the mainland until she retired.