

## Follow-up Interview with Mr. Sylvain SMADJA on December 27<sup>th</sup>, 2013, Paris, France

WAV file M4197010

55 minutes 31 seconds

Mr. Smadja kindly accepted to answer some questions I had after listening to the interview conducted on December 9<sup>th</sup>, 2013, at his home in Paris, France. He also showed me some more documents he had from this period, but could not find a letter from the head of the *Chantiers de jeunesse*, Coudrioux. He then admitted that he had already been interviewed by the Director of the Jean Moulin and General Leclerc Resistance Museum in Paris, Christine Levisse-Touzé and that she had a copy.

I wanted to have some more specifics on everyday life in the forced labor camp in Bizerte, during the time between December, 1942, when he was obliged to participate, and his escape from the camp while working one day, requesting a ride to Tunis from an Italian soldier driving a truck.

I wanted to know how long he was in Giraud's army in Aïn Draham and what were the consequences of his desertion from this "official" French army around May, 1943, and how he signed up for the Free French Leclerc Division in Tunis. Since Giraud's anti-Semitism was notorious<sup>1</sup>, I was curious to know if the Jewish recruits suffered any discrimination. Contrary to what I have read about recruits in Morocco or Algeria, the Jewish French citizens in Tunisia were not separated from the others and they do not seem to have been restricted to only support activities.

I wanted to get more specifics on how long he was in training in Kairouan, and in Libya, and what exactly did he learn. He added the observation that there was a statue of Mussolini in Tripoli, with the inscription that he was the "Defender of Islam". He spoke of the beautiful city of Zabratah, with Roman antiquities.

Mr. Smadja made a point of declaring, before I hooked-up the Marantz recorder, that he had never actually killed anyone during the war. The closest he came was when he tested a high-precision rifle on a pigeon, though his friends the Borgo brothers, who were hunters in Tunisia, hunted deer for venison, which was greatly appreciated by the civilian German population who lodged them.

I wanted to know what precisely was his role in the Leclerc's Second Armored Division and what he and his fellow recruits expected while waiting for the Normandy invasion.

He said that he was in the artillery and assisted the officer in charge of the stock of arms and ammunition that the Leclerc Division obtained, from the British and the Americans. He said that because he had some language skills, he was a sort of liaison officer between English-speaking brigades and the French. He mentions that he might have been entrusted with more responsibilities because his commanding officer, Elkoubi, was also Jewish. General Leclerc wrote of his "great qualities of initiative and organization and his exemplary devotion to duty" in the citation for the "Croix de Guerre" with Bronze Star he was attributed to him on June 21, 1945. (See digital photo #7616).

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<sup>1</sup> The anti-Semitic legislation instituted by Vichy remained in place many months after Algeria and Morocco were liberated under his rule.

I tried to obtain more knowledge of what exactly he and his fellow soldiers did as they progressed east, capturing Strasbourg, and moving on to Germany. He mentioned being billeted with the civilian German population and how this population showed a strong preference for the French since they were afraid of the Russians.

During this second session, Mr. Smadja reiterated some of the memories that he shared in the first interview, especially how the Americans had set-up two anti-aircraft posts (“DCA” or “Défense Contre les Avions”) at Avranches and how they were utterly destroyed by the German Stuka’s flying low.

I wanted to know exactly what his military unit did as they moved toward Hitler’s “Eagles Nest”.

Mr. Smadja was unable to give a more complete description of their military duties. He said that he and his friends were young and were mostly interested in having a good time.

Mr. Smadja mentioned that German women, young and old, were making themselves “available” for sexual encounters, which he declined.

Having learned that the French army had specifically set-up places where such services were provided for its soldiers in North Africa from Lucien UZAN, I was wondering if that were the case for the Leclerc Division.

Mr. Smadja said that he was released from military duty in the town of Montereau (in the Yonne). He was given a letter that allowed him to take any transport to return to Tunisia.

I also requested the names of the two types of Islam that were present in Tunis, to which Mr. Smadja referred in the first interview. He said that they were the Hanafites and the Malikites.

During both interviews, Mr. Smadja refers to something he told me before the recording equipment was set-up in regards to de Maupassant. Apparently, the French writer Guy de Maupassant wrote about his travels and after a visit to Tunis, claimed that it was a “Jewish city”.<sup>2</sup>

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<sup>2</sup> « En vérité, Tunis n’est ni une ville française, ni une ville arabe, mais une ville juive. C’est une des rares points du monde où le juif semble être chez lui comme dans une patrie, où il est maître presque ostensiblement, où il montre une assurance tranquille, bien qu’un peu tremblante encore. » *La vie errante*, 1890.