

## **Interview with Mr. Simon COENCAS, on July 9<sup>th</sup>, 2014, Paris, France**

**WAV file M4197001**

35 minutes 47 seconds

**WAV file M4197002**

44 minutes

Simon Emmanuel COENCAS was born On January 28, 1927, in a working-class suburb, north of Paris, Saint-Denis, the third of 5 children. The eldest, his brother Jacques, was born in 1920. A brother Maurice was born between 1920 and 1927, and Claude and Eliette came later.

His father, Michel Coencas, was originally from Salonika in Greece, but emmigrated to France, perhaps before WW I. He owned a chain of stores selling ready-to-wear clothing at a variety of prices. His mother, Victorine Behar, was from a well-to-do Jewish family from Egypt. Her father was an important dignitary in the freemasons there. (See pictures of documents.) Apparently, neither family was especially religious and Simon thinks that their marriage was a civil ceremony in France.

Since his parents were often busy, Simon said that he and his siblings were raised by their maternal grandmother, who spoke Judeo-Spanish, which Simon still speaks. The children attended a local Catholic primary and elementary school in Saint-Denis. He does not remember any incidents of anti-Semitism, although the other students knew that he and his siblings were Jewish.

After the interview, Mr. Coencas said that the family moved to the village of Montignac in the Dordogne when France declared war on Germany in September, 1939, although it seems as if it may be that they left Paris when France capitulated to Germany in June, 1940. Simon liked to hike and do adventurous things with friends he made locally. They decided to try to find a subterranean passage that led to the local château. Instead, they came across the famous underground murals of Lascaux, paintings from the Upper Paleolithic period estimated to be over 17,000 years old. The Coencas family left Montignac for Paris on September 12<sup>th</sup>, 1940. Perhaps they feared that all the publicity surrounding the discovery would draw unneeded attention to them.

Apparently, Victorine registered all the members of the family at the local police station as Jewish in Octber, 1940. At one point, the entire family moved to their grandmother's apartment on the boulevard Davaud, in Paris. Michel Coencas's 5 stores were assigned an Aryan administrator, a one-armed WW I veteran named Charles Noyer, who later denounced Simon's father, which is described in the interview. Michel was sent to the Fresnes prison and Simon remembers visiting him there.

Mr. Coencas explains how he was arrested – at his brother's dance class. After the police station on the avenue Foch, he was finally sent to Drancy. A German officer at Drancy asked him why and how he was arrested. Simon said that he was at a dance class (probably social dancing, like the fox-trot and the waltz), but the officer did not believe him because he was wearing golf trousers and sports shoes.

There is a famous picture of a room of young men, wearing Jewish stars, at Drancy. Two men are seated at a table with a bowl for coffee, a frying pan and a thermos. The one on the right finally escaped. Standing behind them is a tall young man with a dark jacket, Albert Levaton. Simon, wearing his father's checked jacket in a light color, is next to him. [Albert Levaton and his mother were deported and never returned. His father did return and remarried. The son of Albert and his second wife had a son. The son, in turn, had a son named Ben who became Simon Coencas's grandson's best friend. When Ben met Simon to interview him for a school project, his mother looked at the picture and realized that this was the last known photo of her husband's half-brother, who her husband, of course, had never seen. It is through Diana Levaton, Ben's mother, that this contact was made.]

He was there for about a month and a half and ultimately released because the Red Cross decided that children under 16 should not be interned.

Meanwhile, the parents were arrested. Simon went to live in a tiny room under the roof of an apartment building in the 9<sup>th</sup> arrondissement, where his aunt lived. 15 square meters shared with cousins. Food was brought to them by the aunt's second husband, a Hungarian non-Jewish painter whose last name was Vilalik. Mr. Coencas said that he did not stay inside all the time because various Jewish organizations gave him small jobs to do.

Simon's younger brother, Claude, and younger sister, Eliette, were taken under the wings of a Jewish organization which hid children. They were taken in by a woman named Suanne Raynaud-Coet from the *département des Deux-Sèvres*, who was later honored as a "Righteous among Nations" by Yad Vashem in 1993. He mentions that his younger siblings were traumatized.

Simon and his cousin Raphael Nakache, later known as the popular musician "Miguel Cordoba", sold shoe polish on the streets to make a living when the war ended. Simon also was paid for trying to attract clients to a night club or to a hairdresser's.

While working in Saint-Denis, Simon met his future wife, Giselle Dufresnoy. Her father was a *brocanteur*, which can be anything from an antiques' dealer, someone who sells second-hand wears, or a junk dealer. Simon soon started his own business collecting scrap metal, a valuable commodity after the war. He describes how his business grew and how he moved from Charenton to Montreuil. He has two sons and a daughter. His eldest son, Michel, was born in 1949.

His younger son, Eddy, has taken over his father's business.

The French government has recognized Mr. Coencas's accomplishments in the discovery of the Lascaux murales. He is *Chevalier des Arts et des Lettres*. Under President Mitterand, the Prime Minister Pierre Mauroy bestowed the *Ordre de Mérite* on him.

Mr. Coencas and his wife do not practice any religion and their children were not baptized or given religious instruction of any kind. This is the first time he has been interviewed about his wartime experiences.