

## Interview with Mr. Georges COHEN, on July 11<sup>th</sup>, 2014, Vincennes, France

WAV file M4197003

1 hour 10 minutes 21 seconds

WAV file M4197002

23 minutes 47 seconds

Georges Joseph COHEN was born on November 21<sup>st</sup>, 1932, in Tunis, Tunisia, the eldest of three children born to Esther-Frida (*née* Pariente) and Victor Cohen. His father imported cheese and dairy products from mainland France. His parents were Tunisian citizens. His sister Marie-Madeleine was born in 1937 and Janine, the youngest child, was born in 1939. The family spoke French at home, but his maternal grandmother only spoke Judeo-Arabic, so he learned to speak that, too.

The family lived in a house they rented on the rue d'Isly, near the Grande Synagogue of Tunis. The family was not strictly observant. Georges attended the Tunisian equivalent of a *heder* and learned the rudiments of Hebrew.

He also belonged to a group of scouts for members of the Jewish bourgeoisie, the UUIJ (*Union Universelle de la Jeunesse Juive*) where they sang songs in Hebrew, including the Hatikva. (He sings one of the scout songs near the end of the interview.)

At the age of 6 (after having been sent to an Italian kindergarten called "L'asilo" when he was younger, but being miserable away from his family) he started primary school in what was known as the "*Petit Lycée*", connected to the well-known French *Lycée Carnot*. He remembers that during one year, probably 1942 – 1943, during the German Occupation, he did not attend school, although he does not remember being expelled or being barred from entering because he was Jewish.

Certain memories of the wartime period are quite clear, such as the air raids and having to seek shelter in outdoor trenches, dug in a Jewish cemetery, or indoor shelters, at the local police station. He remembers that the Vichy laws obliged all Jews had to hand over their radios to the police. His family's house was not requisitioned or pillaged, but he mentions that the residents of the *Quartier Lafayette*, where many Jews lived, and the *Quartier Beaucy*, were not as fortunate. French militia, such as the SOL (*Service d'Ordre Legionnaire*, a far-right movement) took over people's apartments and stole their belongings with impunity.

Mr. Cohen mentions a phenomenon which in his opinion seems to be widespread in North Africa during the war: families moved in together, crowding apartments to the bursting point, and this was not because they had lost their apartments in the air raids or were without lodging (according to Mr. Cohen). His family moved into their grandmother's apartment on the rue de Constantine with 17 other people.

A cousin who had been requisitioned to work clearing debris in the port and airfield in Bizerte later told him about his experiences. A young uncle, René Pariente, was not allowed to practice law. His father was unable to obtain products from France to sell. Apparently, Victor's father, Joseph Cohen owned property and was able to help his son out.

An anecdote that is not in the recorded interview, but that Mr. Cohen remembered as he said good-bye, concerns an anti-Semitic experience during the war. He was walking outside during the German Occupation and an Italian crook recognized him and pointed him out to a German officer walking towards them: he pointed his finger at Georges and yelled, "Juden! Juden!" to the officer, who continued on his way, without stopping.

Georges passed his baccalaureate exam in 1951, was encouraged to study Italian by a dynamic teacher named Joseph Peretti, and continued his university studies in France to become a teacher. He gradually achieved accreditation by the French authorities and as a civil servant, he was guaranteed a job, although people must go to the place to which they are sent. (He was sent to the city of Sousse.) Things became complicated when some of the teachers were assigned to schools under Tunisian control and some to schools under French control.

Mr. Cohen says that many Tunisian Jews did not choose to leave Tunisia when it became an independent country in 1956, but the “*crise de Bizerte*” in 1961 incited them to emigrate *en masse*. Bourguiba tried to reclaim the small enclave that France had preserved after Tunisia’s independence, in Bizerte, where troops were stationed. There was fighting and a rupture of diplomatic relations.

Georges Cohen married his wife (*née* Boccara) in 1962 at the Grande Synagogue of Tunis. He was teaching at the Lycée Carnot and his wife taught mathematics at a girls’ school. He did not really want to leave Tunisia, but his wife’s parents had gone to mainland France and she wanted to be near them. He maintains that the transition was made fairly well.

Mr. Cohen mentions that before the French Protectorate in 1880, the Jews of Tunisia were backward and uneducated. In less than 50 years, they became an educated elite. He does say that, after 1956, although they were not expelled, there really was no place for Jews in Tunisia. The constitution states that the nation’s official religion is Islam and its language, Arabic.

He points out that, in his milieu, that of the fairly well-to-do Tunisian Jewish community, Zionism and *Aliyah* to Israel was not very popular. On the whole, there were fewer Tunisian Jews there, and those who went were those who were the poorest and the least educated Jews.

Mr. Cohen and his wife remain close to their Tunisian Jewish friends, a tight-knit community. They have two grown children.