

## Interview with Mr. Léon SZTAL on July 23<sup>rd</sup>, 2015, Paris, France

WAV file M4197011	1 hour 11 minutes 5 seconds
WAV file M4197012	1 hour 8 minutes 37 seconds
WAV file M4197013	15 minutes 5 seconds

Léon SZTAL was born in the 18<sup>th</sup> arrondissement of Paris on May 6, 1933, the youngest son of Chil Jankiel SZTAL (called “Jacob”) and Barbe Louise Hendrickx, a Belgian woman who spoke Yiddish and converted to Judaism after she married Léon’s father in 1931. Léon’s older brother, Jacques, was born in Belgium in 1925 and a sister was born in 1929.

Léon’s father, born in 1901, was from a large family from Strykow, Poland. He left for Berlin before 1920 and eventually immigrated to Palestine, where he lived between 1920 – 1925, doing heavy, manual labor, probably draining the marshes near Tel Aviv, where he caught malaria. No longer fit for such tasks, he returned to Europe and found work in Belgium, where his younger brother Moïse joined him. (See biographical material in description of photos Léon Sztal lent the USHMM to copy which accompanies this summary.)

Jacob worked in the famous Cockerill steel refineries in Liège, but his father-in-law suggested that he learn another trade because his health was going to suffer.

Jacob and Moïse opened a successful business selling leather goods and enjoyed a certain amount of material comfort. However, the eldest brother, who had moved to Paris and considered himself the head of the family, decided that the must all live in France. The transition was difficult. Finally, the older brother found a large house in Saint Maur-les-Fossés, on the eastern edge of Paris, and all the brothers and their families lived there. His father’s sister, who had married Jankiel Michalowicz, also lived there. The eldest brother contributed a certain amount of money for the construction of the synagogue on the rue du Château in la Varenne.

In 1938, Jacob signed-up voluntarily for military service, although he was a Polish citizen. Apparently, he may have had some training, but was never called up during the 1939 – 1940 war.

Léon attended the local public school and does not remember suffering from anti-Semitism. There were two or three other Jewish students (including a “Levy” who converted to Catholicism before the war).

Léon describes the family’s exodus by automobile when France was invaded in May, 1940. They all ended up in Saint-Fargeau in the *Charentes* for a few weeks and then returned to Paris.

Since his mother was originally Catholic, she did not go to the local authorities to sign-up as a Jew. Her children did not wear the yellow star. The neighbors did not denounce them to the police. Léon describes how the wife of a wealthy industrialist who lived nearby, Madame Duvivier, and her daughter often hid Léon’s uncle at night when there was word that a round-up would occur.

In May, 1941, the police came looking for Léon’s father, Moïse Sztal, and Jankiel Michalowicz. This was one of the first round-ups of foreign Jews, called “*le billet vert*” because they received a convocation on a green slip of paper. They were taken off to Beaune-la-Rolande, where they stayed until June, 1942.<sup>1</sup> Léon remembers going to visit his father there. The 3 men were deported on Convoy 5 on June 27, 1942.

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<sup>1</sup> See photo descriptions. The photos were taken in Beaune-la-Rolande and the writing on the back belongs to a Monsieur Levy because the Sztal brothers could not write in French.

Léon's mother was an extremely brave and caring human being. When her sister-in-law was under danger of being arrested, she ran to warn her, and later grabbed her three-year old nephew when the police took the woman away. She also took in three other children, whose parents had been arrested. She subsisted on hand-outs from the COSOR and whatever the eldest Sztal brother could contribute.

Apparently, a social worker was sent to check on the family. In early 1944, she suggested that Léon and his sister be sent to the country to avoid being hit by the bombs that were sure to come. They were sent to *Île sur le Doubs*, in the *département du Doubs*. In early June, his brother Jacques arrived. Léon recounts an anecdote about how the Germans, dealing with the local resistance group, *le maquis d'Écot*, arrested his brother, but not having any room to carry him off with the fighters they had trapped, let him go.

After the war, Léon's mother went regularly to the *Hôtel Lutétia* to obtain news about her husband. A man in Jacob's convoy, who she met in a hospital, told her that her husband had succumbed about a month after he arrived in Auschwitz, unable to keep up with the cadence imposed by the Nazi's.

Léon was *bar mitzvahed* with his cousin in 1947. He had no desire to continue his studies and left school at age 14. He started working for his uncle, who was struggling to support all the surviving family members, selling leather clothing and died of a heart attack at the age of 60.

When Léon was called up for military service, he became part of the *Groupe 2*, which succeeded the illustrious Second Armored Division, and was assigned to NATO. As part of NATO, he did not have to go to fight in Algeria, where civil war was raging.

Léon describes how an exhibition at the Great Arch at *La Défense* inspired him to find out more about what happened to his father and uncles during the war. He has become the official flag-bearer for the *Association of the Union des Déportés d'Auschwitz* and attends not only commemorative ceremonies linked to the Holocaust and World War II, but also any official French ceremony where flag-bearers are present.

His second wife, Michèle Benichou, was born in Algeria and they were married in a small synagogue in Toulouse. They have two daughters.