

## Interview with Monsieur Guy SITBON on April 25<sup>th</sup>, 2016, Paris, France

WAV file M4197005

1 hour 8 minutes 25 seconds

WAV file M4197006

1 hour 6 minutes 49 seconds

Guy (“Isaac” SITBON) was born in Monastir, a coastal city near Sousse, Tunisia on January 9, 1934 to Sion or “Saul” (Maurice) Sibon and his wife. Guy had two older sisters, but he was the first male child. His brother Alain (“Jacob”) was 4 years younger than he. The family name was transcribed differently in some cases “Chetbon”. In Berber, this means Bedouin or a nomad. His father was first a money-lender and later, opened a soap factory.

The ultra-orthodox Jewish community of Monastir was made up of around 200 people, many of whom lived in an enclave in the old city. The first part of the interview gives a history of how this small community – probably Berbers – had survived from ancient times, although many people living in Tunisia converted upon the arrival of the Arab Muslims around the 8<sup>th</sup> century. Guy’s paternal grandparents lived with the family and only spoke Arabic. Guy’s mother and father spoke Arabic together and French with the children.

Guy’s father was adventurous, and built a home outside the enclave – the first to have electricity. The Sitbon’s were the only Jewish family on their street, but Guy does not remember any hostility or incidents of anti-Semitism. Muslim neighbors came and turned on the lights or the stove on Shabbat.

Guy gives a detailed description of a place where the Jews were still living as if they had never left the Middle Ages. Although his mother was very insistent that her children receive a modern education, neither she nor her husband had more than 3 years of schooling in French. His sisters attended a private school for girls, “Notre Dame de Sion”.

He went to “*le koteb*” – Hebrew school - to prepare for his “tefillin” – the local name for a *bar mitzvah*. The rabbi was strict and beat the boys’ feet with a rod if they did not learn their lessons.

Guy grew up in a home where there were no books, no radio, not even newspapers until after WW II.

He recounts that the Jews had no idea of what was going on in the outside world, even what was happening in Tunis. When the German soldiers arrived, they had no idea what was going to happen. He describes how two German officers made it a habit to come eat at the Sitbon table every Shabbat.

Guy confirms what many people have said in their oral history interviews – and what Louis-Charles Saumagne, the President of the *Conseil Supérieur d’enquête*, a French purge commission set-up after Tunisia was liberated in May, 1943, also wrote to the Resident General Mast – in a report on the liberation of Tunis: the only people in the streets, waving flags and welcoming the British soldiers and the Palestinian Brigades of Jewish soldiers, were the Jews. Neither the non-Jewish Europeans nor the Muslims were happy that the Germans were defeated and that Vichy was no longer ruling the protectorate.

The arrival of these troops marked a moment when the world opened up for him. He started reading newspapers, read about Bourguiba and his nationalist movement, and started attending Communist Party meetings. He had been attending a boarding school in Sousse, the nearest large city, but the family then moved to Tunis. Guy said that he kept getting thrown out of various high schools, sanctioned for his political activities.

In the early 1930's, Habib Bourguiba lived in the house across the street from the Sitbon family in Monastir. Relations between Bourguiba and Guy's father were cordial, but when Bourguiba finally came to power in 1956, his father refused invitations to come to government functions.

After independence in 1956, the new Tunisian State started expropriated private homes and enterprises. Jews tried to remain at their jobs, but were relegated to humble tasks in the new administration. Guy's parents fled in panic in 1961 – 1962. The five buildings his father owned and his business was taken away, but he never tried to reclaim them, insisting on pardoning the Tunisians.

Guy studied in Paris and later became North African correspondent for the daily paper *Le Monde* in the early 1960s. He then worked for *Jeune Afrique*...and for many years, *Le Nouvel Observateur* (called *France Observateur* when it was founded and now known as *l'Obs*) whose editor was Jean Daniel, a North African Jew. During this interview, Guy Sitbon did not elaborate on his long and prolific career in journalism and as a novelist, but discussed something that was quite relevant to an interview which dealt with WW II.

Guy thinks that modern Jews define themselves in two ways – not by their practice of rites and reading of the Torah – but by their relation to Israel and the Holocaust.

The “tragedy” of North African Jews is that they did not have a Holocaust they could call their own. In his opinion, it is a great frustration and they do not consider themselves “totally Jewish”. The Tunisian Jews who went to Israel never really assimilated and were not really accepted by the Ashkenazi Jewish establishment. They lost everything and became nostalgic for the life and customs they left. He compares the success of those Tunisian Jews, even of modest means, who immigrated to France – they are highly-respected doctors, lawyers, journalists, novelists, and involved in the media – to the Tunisian Jews who immigrated to Israel. He finds examples in his own family how the North African Jews, even the second generation, seem less ambitious and remain in low-level administrative jobs. They create their own “glass ceiling”.