

Interview with Claudine CERF on October 30, 2018 Paris, France

WAV M4197005

1 hour 9 minutes 21 seconds

Claudine Jacqueline CERF was born in Saint-Nazaire, France, on December 13, 1939.

France was at war with Germany and her father, Marcel Jacques CERF¹ (1911 -2010), had been called up to fight. It seems that he had already been captured at this time (or was awaiting deployment with his unit). He ended up spending 5 years in a *stalag* and even though he was Jewish, he was protected as a POW. Before the war, he was a photographer for the leftist revue "Regards" and covered the *Front Populaire*. [There was an exhibition of his work at the Paris Town Hall in 2016 and another is planned at the modern art museum, the *Centre Pompidou* in 2019.]

Her mother, Cypora ("Cécile") CZALIT, had joined her husband's family in the coastal city of Saint-Nazaire and that is why Cécile is born there. As the wife of a POW, Cypora was protected, too. She had obtained her French citizenship when she married Marcel, whose father was an Alsatian Jew and whose mother, Jeanne, was not Jewish.

Cypora (1916-1973) was the eldest daughter of Moshe CZALIT, the President of the Union of Yiddish Writers in Vilna, (under German occupation at the time of her birth, later given to Poland, then Lithuania after 1939), and who was one of the founders of YIVO. [According to Claudine, the Gestapo may have asked him to be the head of the local *Judenrat* and he refused. Moshe, his wife, Deborah, and their younger daughter, Ita, were executed by the *Einsatzgruppen* during WW II.]

In the 1930's, Cypora moved to France, planning to study medicine. However, because of her Marxist political convictions and involvement in the Communist Party, she abandoned those plans and got a job in a factory. She met Marcel and they were married in a civil ceremony so that she could obtain French citizenship, which proved to be one of the factors that assured her survival during the war. Neither Cypora nor Marcel were practicing Jews.

Marcel's mother, Jeanne, though not religious herself, decided to have Claudine baptized at the church Saint-Pierre de Montrouge in the 14th arrondissement, where the couple lived. She thought this might protect the child.

At one point, it was decided that Claudine would be taken to a small town in the Oise, La Neuville-en-Hez, near Clermont, about 60 km from Paris, entrusted to the care of a widow who had lost her son in the war, Madame Dubois, and who Claudine was told to call "*marraine*" (godmother). Though Madame Dubois had socialist convictions and did not go to church, she sent Claudine and also enrolled her in catechism. There was a one-room schoolhouse, where she learned the rudiments of reading and writing (1943-1945). She does not remember suffering from hunger. Her mother would visit from time to time, arriving on a bicycle, and gave Madame Dubois money for Claudine's upkeep.

Claudine has several strong memories from this period.

¹ Marcel CERF was also a historian who specialized in the Paris Commune of the 1870's. While a prisoner of war in Germany, the subject began to interest him. After the war, to earn a living, he became an accountant and worked for the Ministry of Defense on their highly-secret operations.

One is when a German soldier picked her up to play with her and Claudine caught the look of terror in Madame Dubois's eyes. From then on, she was forbidden to have anything to do with German soldiers.

The second stems from the fact that she looked different from everyone else, with dark hair and eyes ("inherited from her non-Jewish grandmother"...): some people in the village told other children not to play with her and Claudine felt hurt and isolated.

Nonetheless, she has pleasant memories of this time. For the 3 years after the war, every summer, Claudine stayed with Madame Dubois. After Marcel was liberated and returned from Germany, he went to get his daughter, now 5 years old, who had never seen.

Although she never spoke about her wartime activities, Cécile was very active in the Jewish Communist resistance. Claudine said that her painful modesty and refusal to speak about what she did was unfortunate. Historians tried to question her and she refused to give interviews or to fill them in on what she had done because she felt that would be boasting.

She was a "cadre" (a high-ranking member) of the MOI (*Main d'oeuvre immigrée*) and entered into the FFI (*Forces Françaises de l'Intérieur*) in 1942. There was a clandestine press in Chatenay-Malabry, which she ran. She trained other women fighters, transported weapons, inspected the *maquis* fighters in the field, and helped hide Jewish children.

She also was one of the leaders of the "*Milices patriotiques*" which was preparing the civilian population to stage an insurrection and liberate Paris. (see armband and stamp donated by Claudine).

After the war, she was one of the 7 founders of the CCE (*Commission Centrale de l'Enfance*), a Communist-oriented organization created to take care of the many Jewish orphans who had survived the war, and children whose parents who were not able to care for them as they were recovering physically and mentally from the war. The CCE also ran summer camps.

Claudine was sent to one of the orphanages, Andrésy, to be with other children several times, but she really did not enjoy it and preferred being alone with her books.

Cécile worked for the *Naïe Presse*, the most widely-read Yiddish newspaper in Europe which was the mouth piece of the MOI and later, the *Presse nouvelle*, a French –language publication with the same orientation. It was the only Jewish newspaper that continued publication during the war. She translated Yiddish authors into French and organized a special gala in honor of *Scholem Aleichem*.

Cécile regretted not having continued her university studies and warned her daughter not to get involved in politics.

Claudine studied literature at the Sorbonne, went on to teach in middle and high schools, received a doctorate in comparative literature, and then followed her passion for film and photos as the person responsible for educational programs on the French T.V. station TV5.

Claudine's commitment to creating a virtual museum dedicated to the MJR-MOI is part of her way of paying homage to her mother and perpetrating the memory of all those who fought courageously to liberate France.

In 1991, she donated documents and artifacts attesting to her mother's role in the resistance to the U.S. Holocaust Memorial Museum (see RG-23.005: <https://collections.ushmm.org/search/catalog/irn503676>).

She also allowed the USHMM to copy many of her family photos, accessible at the Museum's Photo Archives.