

Interview with Monsieur C. Ézéchiel BLUMENFELD on October 28, 2019 in Paris, France

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C. Ézéchiel Blumenfeld was born on August 21, 1929 in Paris, but his family lived outside the city in the commune of Rancy. The year he was born, the 15th of the Hebrew month of Av fell on his birthday – it is an auspicious date and joyous. Both his parents were Polish, so though he was born in France, he was not automatically considered a French citizen. At the end of the interview, he explains how he nonetheless obtained French identity papers.

His father, Jacob, was an artist and painter, skilled in decorating. He had gone to Brazil to find work, in view of settling his family there, but did not do well. It was decided that his wife, Jade Cohen (whose brother became the Great Rabbi of Rio de Janeiro) and their two daughters would meet up again in France, probably in late 1926.

The Mayor of Rancy, Monsieur Conson welcomed the family and found work for Jacob. France was a “revelation” for them. When their son was about 3, his parents tried only to speak in French and abandoned the Yiddish language and culture of Poland, but their French was limited. Mr. Blumenfeld discusses his feeling of not having benefitted from either their culture of origin or the cultural heritage of France, with which they were not familiar.

Charles remembers being a victim of antisemitism from an early age, on the way to the *heder* in Drancy on Sundays and when he started public school. He was pummeled with stones, although he remembers that the Armenians were targeted even more than the Jews. He also remembers that his schoolteachers disliked Jews. His schooling was interrupted in 1938 when children were sent out to the countryside to escape possible air raids before the Munich Accords were signed.

Henri Schilli was the Rabbi of the synagogue of Rancy and later became the Great Rabbi of France by interim, with Jacob Kaplan. Charles says that he derived much of his strength in childhood from his Biblical studies.

One of his father’s sisters was married to a man named Charles Gelbard whom he remembers with distaste. Apparently, Jewish members of the Communist Party did no help other Jews if they were not Communists. They only provided false identity papers and other protective measures to other party members.

In May of 1940, the Mayor Conson told the family that they should flee to the south before the Germans arrived. The family, now with a new baby boy, went to the *Gare d’Austerlitz*, where thousands of people were pushing to get on any train. Charles was responsible for carrying the family’s 5 gas masks. Separated from the others by the crowd, he almost lost them in the exodus.

The train wound through France and finally stopped in Bordeaux. The Red Cross sent the family to a small village not far from Dax, in the *département* of the Landes. (However, Escos near Labastide is actually in the Pyrénées-Atlantiques, closer to the Spanish border. The name of the train station was “Escos-Labastide”.)

Charles remembers walking in the town park with his mother and being approached by a well-dressed man, who could tell that they were Jewish. He told them that they had better leave the village

because it would soon be declared “*zone limitée*”. (Jews could not reside in towns near the border or by the sea.) His mother said that they had no way to leave and the gentleman offered to place his automobile and chauffeur at their disposal. It turns out that the man was René Blum, an aesthete, art critic and entrepreneur, who helped create *les Ballets russes*. He was the brother of Léon Blum. His own destiny is tragic.

They were driven to Oloron-Sainte-Marie, near the internment camp of Gurs and where labor brigades for foreigners (GTE) existed. Miraculously, a Madame Lacomme, “an angel” took them in and shared her lodging. This was in June, 1940. October arrived and school was starting. He remembers continual hunger pangs and lice.

Their savings disappeared and Charles’ parents found various ways to make money. They made pastries and sold them to the rather wealthy Belgian and German “stateless” refugees interned in Gurs. His mother went to a factory known for making fine wool blankets and the director agreed to sell her a half-dozen blankets, which she sold on the black market.

In February-March, 1941, they received expulsion orders because Jews were not allowed in the “red zone” (*zone interdite*).

[At one point, Charles’ mother was arrested during round-ups on the street because she was considered “stateless” and was to be sent to Gurs, but his sister succeeded in having her released from the local police station in some way. He mentions that she was kicked in the rear-end when released....]

About 500 Jews received orders to gather in the town of Nay, not far from Pau. Lodging was found in the center of town and he was registered for school. He remembers refusing to sing “*Maréchal, nous voilà*” and the other students insulted him for being a Jew. Among the wealthier students, the bourgeois, there were anti-Semites. He did not do well in school and things were difficult at home, but he did make friends. The village of Nay was destabilized by the presence of the 500 Jews who had been placed there.

He recounts an incident which occurred as he was out one evening in June, 1941. A boy of about 14 tried to force him to kneel and recite a Catholic prayer, which he refused to do. The boy twisted his arm until it almost broke. It seems that a week later, his friends told him that this boy died of tetanus.....

Charles joined the “*Eclaireurs de France*”, a scout organization not affiliated to any religion.

He recounts how he was so hungry, he drank an entire bottle of wine to get drunk and ease his pain. His mother was so desperate to feed him, she went to the local baker, a renowned supporter of the *Maréchal Pétain* and a renowned anti-Semite, and asked him to sell her 20 kilos of flour, which surprisingly, he did!

Mr. Blumenfeld celebrated his bar mitzvah in Nay in August, 1942. It was difficult to bring together a *minyán* because people were afraid to gather together as Jews in one place. Mr. Blumenfeld is grateful to his parents to have had the courage to assure the continuity of the tradition and Judaism.

A week later, Bousquet, responding to orders by Heydrich to round-up and deport “*apatrides*” or stateless people in the “*Zone Libre*” or unoccupied zone, rounded-up the Jews in Nay.

However, the Blumenfeld family was separated from the others. They were put on a bus to the train station at Laruns and then changed to a train headed for Eaux-Bonnes, in the mountains near the

Spanish border - you could actually see Spain from the heights of the town. It seems there were other families with children born in France, around 400 people. There was no school in Eaux-Bonnes, but a Mademoiselle Levy organized activities for young Jews.

In the fall of 1942, Jacob Blumenfeld sent his son on a train to Pau to try to exchange a gold bracelet for money. He recounts the special instructions he was given and the terrifying encounter with the gendarmes who arrested him as he returned on the regional train the same evening.

In late February, 1943, a group of families was sent to the train station at Laruns and was told to get on a very old, ramshackled passenger train, guarded by what seemed to be *gendarmes*. [Charles thinks they were fake *gendarmes*.] They arrived in Toulouse, but though he mentions the Red Cross, they spent three days without food or water as this relic of a train pattered north toward the *département* of the Creuse, to the *chef-lieu*, Guéret. They were put onto a bus and sent to the village of Clugnat.

[There is no trace of this train in SNCF records and Mr. Blumenfeld suspects that it was a special convoy organized by a resistance network, maybe with the complicity of the prefects of the *Pyrénées-Atlantiques*, then called *les Bas-Pyrénées* and the *Creuse*. Apparently, Charles' sister had contacts with the Prefect's office in Pau, where she had gone for certain administrative affairs, and the prefect was in the resistance. Paul Grimaud was prefect in Pau in 1942 and was deported to Dachau. He survived.]

The family was given a place to live without indoor plumbing or running water in Clugnat. They procured two bicycles to ride into the country and find food.

Despite his erratic school attendance, Charles caught up with the students his age with the help of a kind and attentive schoolmaster, Monsieur Gillot. He was able to pass the test and obtain his *Certificat d'études* in 1943. [Mr. Blumenfeld would like his "courage and heroism" to be recognized by writing the mayor's office.]

During the month of June, 1944, after the Allied invasion, the Division *Das Reich* was moving north. German soldiers came to the Blumenfeld's home two times to arrest them. The soldiers insisted on taking the two daughters, Lea and Esther, and they finally agreed to go to the local Prefecture with them. It is not clear why, but they were released there. It may have been the intervention of the French at the prefecture.

Charles continued attending school, where he felt safe, but for some reason, one June day he decided to skip classes and enjoy the weather and surrounding countryside. It just so happens that on that day, the Germans came by to arrest him. He had been betrayed by a Polish woman working on a farm who came to the school looking for him.

The Blumenfelds were liberated at the end of August, 1944, and sent to Neris-les-Bains, a thermal spa near Montluçon, to rest and restore their health, both physical and mental.

Upon returning to Paris, Jacob Blumenfeld opened a wholesale business to sell cloth.

His son overcame the gaps in his education and in spite of paternal resistance, passed his baccalaureate and studied law for two years, but his expertise was in metal technology. He explains how the Mayor of Nancy obtained French papers for him by indicating that he would volunteer to serve in the French army when he came of age.

Mr. Blumenfeld feels that the circumstances of his birth, his place in his own family in the 1930s (upon which he elaborates during the interview), and the continual fear for his life that he experienced for over 5 years deprived him of a childhood and an adolescence.

He feels that his faith sustained him over this time and the challenges in his personal life he would face later on. Although his official papers read "Charles" Blumenfeld, he prefers to be known in the context of this interview, as "Ezéchiel".