

Once we start, they're going to look at you for a while and adjust the lights. This one, what do you think? Sandy, is it distracting?

This is our roll one with Leo Bretholz. And this is camera one?

[INDISTINCT CONVERSATION]

[BEEP]

Take one.

Should I just lean back?

Yeah, you do whatever you want. But you can look at me. Can you briefly and simply tell me what the underground was like in France?

The French underground movement was made up of two major organizations. One was what was called the FFI. That was the abbreviation for Forces francaises de l'Intérieur, the French Forces of the Interior.

And the other one was FTPF, Francs-Tireurs et Partisans Francais, Snipers and Partisans-- what you might call a-- what do you call these organizations that fight the governments and the establishment? Francs-Tireurs-- what do call them in the Middle East? They're called the--

The guerillas?

The guerillas, right. That was the second group. The difference between these two groups were very fundamental. FFI was under the direction of the exiled French government in London. Charles de Gaulle was the man who gave the instructions and gave the directives.

The others were Francs-Tireurs Partisans guerrillas. And they worked on their own. They had their own command and did not listen to the directives that came from London because they had a special interest.

They had an interest to maintain, for instance, the French infrastructure. Because once they were coming back as victors, they wouldn't want to have to rebuild so much. Or they had an interest to protect, namely in properties.

Let's say there was an English-owned-- British-owned-- property somewhere in the center of France. And in that factory-- and that factory was now producing raw materials for the Germans. Now the FTPF would go after those places and bomb them or destroy them. The French Forces of the Interior would be interested in not having these factories produce those tanks or those weapons, but they would like to maintain the property as an entity.

So how to do one and not do the other without destroying? So there were these dichotomies. But FTPF didn't listen to it and did their own.

The French Forces of the Interior had a command, and that, as I said, came out of London. And they had their military or paramilitary commanders here and there. The FTPF chose their leaders from within their ranks who were ragtag people.

Now what did the FTPF include? This was 1941, '42. That was just six years after the end of the Spanish Civil War. So they had people who had come from Spain as refugees and were glad to take up arms against the German fascists again. There were deserters, to be sure, from the German Army.

Now the Germans had incorporated into their army some people from Russia, from the Eastern Occupied Territories-- the Georgians especially, and Ukrainians. They were rabidly pro German, in fact. So some of them, after having been

incorporated into the German Army and were then taken prisoners, escaped from the prison camps maybe and joined the FTPF. Or they were disenchanted with the German Army and decided, well, this is not for us, and deserted.

And then there were real German deserters. Then there were a lot of people from Alsace-Lorraine, those people who had been-- quite a few pro-German but many anti-German. So when the Lorraine people, who were taken into the German Army, refused to go along with them because at heart they were French. That reason had changed hands so many times. They were deserters.

And then last but not least, there were the Jews. And the Jews had formed a group that was called Armée Juive, the Jewish Army. That group was not so much into fighting as into more harassing. Roadblocks, blowing up tracks, going into little villages and attack gendarmerie station and get some arms if they were available. But mainly to produce false identification cards and administrative things that would help people hide out safely, escape safely, children to be transported to Spain-- to Portugal through Spain-- perhaps to North Africa or to Switzerland.

Now the group that I finally wound up with in Limoges was one of those Armée Juive. The group was called-- the whole Armée Juive was really called the Sixth. That was a nomenclature that was given, that we adopted. Or whoever was in charge decided that's what it will be called, the Sixth.

The Sixth didn't mean much. Didn't mean anything, in fact. It was just drawn out of the air. But to the French Milice especially-- that was the French collaborationist paramilitary group that was under Vichy. And they did the dirty work for the Gestapo, in fact. But to them the Sixth was something ominous, something to be watched, looked out for, watched for, or be afraid of perhaps. Why? Because in their mind, if we were called the Sixth, there must have been a first, and a second, and a third, and a fourth, and a fifth.

So to them the Sixth was something that was sixth in succession of a series. And to us it didn't mean much. This was mainly what I, personally, was engaged in after my various escapes, and when I finally acquired that nom de guerre, that French name Max Henri Lefevre. And our group did this, produced these false identification cards.

To be sure, the French Resistance, the Maquis, was formed in the southeast of France in the French Alps, and in the area where I first was, in the Rhone Valley. But that resistance group in northern part, in the northern part of France, above-- north of the demarcation line-- did not really mean much until shortly after the landing in Normandy in June of 1944. That's when they got more into action. And that's when the police in France joined up.

Up to that moment in the northern part of France, the Maquis and the Resistance was not so much organized as mainly people individually started resisting and grouping because in the northern part of France, the Germans had pretty much the run of things, if not the collaboration of many people in Paris, including perhaps the police.

And there's an interesting book out by Davy Jones. The book is called Paris in the Third Reich. Not "and" the Third Reich, in which he propounds the idea that had Germany won that war, Paris would have become the capital of his New Europe because that was the main gem in the crown of his conquests. He always wanted-- Hitler always wanted Paris to be the showpiece. So he propounds the idea that the French may have even gone along with the New Order.

So in the northern part of France there wasn't much resistance, to make a long story short. Our-- the southern part was where the beginning was. And this was basically what the resistance did.

There many arrests, many people killed, many people executed-- summarily executed. Very good friend of mine, Eugene Bass was killed in Saint-Junien in southern France when he delivered a pack of ID cards and was arrested at the train station by the Germans, and two shots into the head. He's listed in that book Déportation des Juifs as one summarily executed.

It was hit and miss. It was run-- what it amounted to be one step ahead of your pursuers then you had it made. It was not something that we could say was so well organized that if it had endured for much longer that we would have come out the winners. I don't think so.

Armies-- the German armies were defeated. And that spelled the end of it. But as an outfit, in hindsight, it was an adventure. But I don't think, as the outfit was constituted or the whole movement was constituted, they could have fought the Germans on an even playing field. They had all the tanks. They had all the ammunition. But things turned out differently.

How did your group get away with things?

Roll two. Take two.

[BEEP]

And I want to go back to your specific resistance activities in your group. And I want you to tell a little bit about how you were able to get away with it.

After my various escapes-- the one from the train in motion, the deportation train, and later a jail sentence and I served nine months. And again a forced labor camp, and again being taken to a train to a work detail, escaping again this time from a standing train.

I was contacted by my friend, a young fellow, who had escaped with me. We had communicated. And he knew where I was hiding after my last escape. And he sent me false identification papers. What he sent me, basically, was a birth certificate, which served later to establish an identity and identification cards and ration cards and everything that was connected with legalizing your-- legalizing as it were, my false identity. And I could live with that under the regime. And after the war, if I would have wanted to, I could have continued that particular identity-- in that identity.

So after my last escape and hiding out, I was sent these papers with a letter of recommendation to join up with a group in the Rhone Valley in a little town called Saint-Vallier, south of Lyon, which at the time was a hotbed of Gestapo activity under the aegis of Klaus Barbie. I joined with that group in November of 1943 not really knowing what that group was. To me it was a place where I'm going to go to hide out with other young people who had run away, with other-- not just young people-- men who had run away. It had nothing to do with children or women.

But when I got there, I knew after a few hours what it was. Speaking to people who they were, where they came from, and I realized I had just been sent to a place where we will do illegal underground activities. What happened in that particular area or in this particular camp was mainly instructions. How to circulate with our papers without being detected. What to say if we were in a place like a restaurant and an inspection team came in, a patrol came in. How to act, and act natural, and to never speak or let on that you speak the language other than what you are, a Frenchmen. Don't fall into traps.

And they were teaching some of us young people certain trades there too, so that the time should not go entirely with the knowledge that within some time, we will be sent to certain areas where they can use our services-- underground activity.

Little did we know at the time when I got there that in a few months later, we would be notified by the mayor of that village that there will be a raid. Evidently that mayor knew what this camp was all about. But we were notified that there will be a raid on the centre de prÃ©-apprentissage, a center for pre-apprenticeship. That's what it was called. A name that was innocuous. Didn't mean much.

They gave us the uniforms of the Compagnon de France so that we were incorporated into that whole image of New Europe. And the majority of the people in this camp were Jewish. My friend who had sent me to that camp with a letter had that from his brother. And his brother had a friend of his-- as he explained to me-- had already had a contact. That's what they did there.

And little did we know that when that mayor notified us that we will-- this is the time when we would have to disband. And the whole thing was disbanded. And 60 or 80 of us who were there-- that was less than 100-- were sent into various areas of Vichy France. And I was sent into an area near Limoges, a little town called Chalus.

And in Chalus, I connected with the Jewish underground. And we were there to produce false identification cards. That was our main endeavor. Very good friend of mine who was part of this group, a young lady by the name of Marianne Cohn, just a couple of weeks-- three or four weeks-- before the liberation, had been put in charge of a children's convoy to Switzerland.

And arriving near the border of Switzerland, near the town of Annemasse, she and her truck driver in the truck were stopped by a Nazi patrol that materialized at the last moment. And the kids were actually in plain view of the Swiss border. Soon freedom would be theirs. But that never came because they were arrested. They were beaten about, not the kids.

The kids were then handled by the mayor of Annemasse who said he was going to put himself in charge of these kids. Marianne Cohn was arrested. The truck driver was arrested. She was interrogated. She didn't divulge anything. And then the henchman from Lyon came to interrogate her in her cell.

The story wound up with her being killed with a spade to her skull. And for a week-- a few weeks later, after the liberation, her body was found in a shallow grave together with another prisoner lady who was with her in the cell.

And then a poem was found in her pocket of a jacket-- of a bloodstained jacket-- where she had written about the hobnailed boot and the-- you have key chains in your fists and you are-- but I am not giving in and all that sort of thing. And I'm not going to speak. I'll talk tomorrow but not today. And she never had a chance to talk or to not to talk because she was-- she said, tomorrow I will be betray, not today. You can't get me to betray today, tomorrow. I know what you are doing, but I know what I am going to do.

And then she was going to slit her wrists with a file, but she never got to that. She was killed. Anyway, that was the tragic story of one of our people.

And when you go on the war front and you shoot it out with the Milice or the Germans, that's a quick thing. It's either them or us. And that's sort of action out in the field. But there is more to the underground than the field and the confrontations. There is that resistance of-- sacrifice, and doing what you think is right.

And this, Marianne Cohn really personified everything that was good in a person, that knew what she was doing. She was very studious. She was very pert little person, loved children, and loved life. A poet a musician. And that was also part of that underground, that resistance, that had to be there because documentation was very important.

In fact, it was on the 10th of June 1944 that was the destruction of the village of Oradour-- that I was on my way to Oradour with a pack of cards, identification cards. And my friend Eugene Bass took a batch of cards to go to Saint-Junien, a village beyond. Why did he do that? Because his mother was in that village hiding out. So he took that area because at the same time he could visit with his mother.

So when he arrived at the train station, they caught him with these cards and killed him. And when we were on the train, on that commuter train between Limoges and Oradour-sur-Glane-- that's the village that on the 10th of May was burned to the ground, 900-some people. You may have heard of it. Women and children put into a church to be photographed. And then the church was burned down to the ground with straw and hay on the outside and gasoline poured over it. And that was the tragedy of Oradour.

And when we were on that train going to Oradour and we saw the German column proceed alongside on the country road next to the train, next to the railroad track, we knew that they're going somewhere for some sort of action. So some of us decided we are not going to go to Oradour. We're not going to go further. In fact, the next stop, we will get off because when the Germans go into that direction, we don't want to go in that same direction.

That was also part of the learning process. When you see trouble that you cannot-- don't want to be involved in, just find another way. Be one step ahead. Think ahead.

So we got off a station before. We found out that whoever descended from the train in Oradour, from the train, was also arrested, was part of the killing-- was killed right in Oradour. So there was another time when I escaped just by sheer luck because I decided not to go to Oradour. The first things were escapes. This was not an escape but just a preemptive sort of decision that had to be made. The cards were never delivered. And the people to whom they would have been delivered were no longer alive anyway.

--to deliver some cards when I collapsed because I had a hernia, a strangulation hernia. And I had an incident in a park where a nurse walked by and she says, you will have to be taken to the hospital. And I resisted that because they would recognize circumcision. And in France-- French people do not get circumcised, you see-- the non-Jews.

And I wound up in the hospital. And it was an emergency operation. And when I woke up there was this nun, a Catholic hospital nun. Her name was Saint Joan of Arc, a beautiful black-eyed young nun, about maybe 19, 20, 21 years old. And she-- when I woke up and I had a hot [INAUDIBLE] of-- hot water bottle at my feet because I had that infection, you know, and I had a drain in my stomach there, groin-- she said to me, you don't have to-- as long as I'm in this ward, she says, you don't have to worry about anything. That's what she said to me.

Later when I wrote to the hospital to get some documentation on that-- I needed that for Germany for compensation, that sort of thing-- I asked in that letter that I wrote to the administration, is Sister Joan of Arc by any chance still at your hospital? They said, no, she was transferred somewhere. They said, either Normandy or Brittany. I think it was Normandy. She's in another hospital, but if we have some communication with her, if we have a chance to speak to her, we'll tell her that you asked about her. And it's nice that you did ask about her.

So that was-- there was a rabbi in-- later was the Grand Rabbi of Strasbourg Abraham Deutsch. And he was the fellow through whose offices we always had our communication. But he was a rabbi in Limoges, but he had all this information and letters and instructions came through his office, really.

And when I was in that hospital, I still made sure that I was in touch with Rabbi Deutsch, that he knew what was happening to me because I had gone to deliver some cards and dropped right in the-- well, to get some information from kids in an orphanage to see what they needed to be done-- and all of a sudden had disappeared off the street. So I had to send message to Rabbi Deutsch later after a couple of days after I had sort of gotten out of anesthesia. So these were all little incidents that were part of that whole mosaic of events, you know.

All right, now let's not do the train now. Let's go back. And why don't you tell me how your distant cousin saved you when you were hiding. Just tell me that little story. Annie-- how she saved you when you were hiding in the attic.

Oh, Annie, yeah. She's now a lady of 69 living in Belgium. What happened was that before we were-- before I had my escape, I lived in this town Cauteerets. You know, all these-- all the information there-- lived in this town Cauteerets near the-- not I lived there. We were sent there as Jews to go into what was called forced residence, rÃ©sidence assignÃ©e, assigned residence.

Again there was a mayor responsible for letting us know that there will be a raid, so some of us took to the mountains. About a handful of us took to the mountains to hide out. Annie, who was with her parents there, was a Belgian citizen. And Belgians and Luxembourgers and Dutch people, at first, were never as much affected by that as people who had come from Austria, Germany, Poland, the East, or apatriide, meaning stateless people. And then she was a girl. And women were not immediately-- some of them were under some sort of dispensation there. But men and young men, of course, were taken.

When we came back from the mountain, I knew that I was no longer able to live in this town of Cauteerets, which was near the Spanish border, about two or three miles away from the Spanish border. An enclave from which it was very hard to get away and to get to. But that's what they wanted. Wanted us sort of captive.

I decided within a day or two we will have to get away from here. I will have to get away because I could no longer be there. Out of the 1,500 or so people who had been confined-- the Jews-- there was just about maybe a couple hundred left. And I went up to the attic in the place where we lived.

My family, distant cousin, they said, you will stay up in the attic until a few days from now when you will be able to leave here. When all the tumult had died down and there's no longer maybe inspection or patrols.

And I went up to that attic and stayed there with a little bit of provision that I took along. And there was a cot on the side that I was lying on, and a wooden door, as it is in attics, like a storage place with a lock-- a padlock on the outside. And that wooden door had panels. And through these panels there were cracks. You could actually peep and see what's going on. So I had to be sure that I was out of the range of vision if somebody would look in, and was right on the side standing against the wall or lying down or sitting on that bed.

At one point, I heard from time to time my cousin would come up anyway, would say-- would find out if I'm all right, if I need anything, water, or anything like that. And they would supply me in these couple of days.

But at one point one afternoon, I hear steps. And they were not the usual steps of that young woman or her mother. But there were several steps, and there were noises.

And I was in there and moved my head to the crack, and peeped out. And there was Annie and two gendarmes with her. And they wanted to know who had the key to that lock to the-- that's what I heard them ask her. She says, I don't know, we just moved in here a few months ago and never had access to this. But the person, the landlord who owns this-- what was called a villa or something like that, it was called la pergola, Spanish name-- they may have the key, but we would have to get in touch with them to get the key. But what is it? We are looking for this fellow that was living here with you-- like they looked for others also. She says, well, he ran away. He ran away, never heard from him or some such excuse.

And when they were debating the issue, the key, whether to get in or go get the key, they try to get near her. And touched her and sort of told her that if she would give in to their wishes, they would just forget about the whole thing. And when I heard that, it just sent a shiver down my spine. And they bent down over her, and tried to caress her and fondle her and kiss her. And she resisted to some extent, but also didn't want to make it to annoy them too much or anger them too much, so that they shouldn't get back.

And after a while, they just got down with her-- walked down the steps again with her. And I don't know really what happened after that. But there was Annie, and due to the fact that she sort of played along with them, I think they did not insist on getting the key or maybe breaking the door down. But in their perception, someone who just disappears overnight-- because they had all our names and we had to register every two weeks with the mayor.

Another thing, as a follow up to that. A couple of years ago, I sent a note to the city hall in Cauterets just to inquire about the name of the mayor because I never knew the name, telling him also that he had done some good for us by notifying us, and that I live now in America. And I might write some memoirs or just write some mementos on the-- and it would be good for me to know his name. And they said of course the mayor died since then but we have his son's name and he lives in Limoges, in fact. And he's about 80 years old now.

So that was the story in the attic in Cauterets. See, when you first said Annie, it so happens I have a cousin Annie who lives here in America. And for a moment I didn't-- Yeah. In fact, I'm going to see them in Belgium when I go there this May.

OK. We're probably running out of [INAUDIBLE]. Can you [BEEP] that comical story you mentioned once about the flash [BEEP] when you were stopped to have your--

God-- That was after my escape. It's interesting. You bring all that back, then you saw the film, naturally, the clip.

After my escape from the train in northern France, I made my way back to the southern zone below the demarcation line into a town called Bagneres-de-Bigorre. That was also a town where we were sent on assigned residence, forced residence. Had many friends there. There were many of us Jewish families there. And we lived there for, oh, maybe close to a year, over half a year anyway. And from that town we were later sent to Cauterets.

But when I came back, after my escape, I went down to Bagnères-de-Bigorre because there I had friends. And I knew the family Spierer, who lived there, would probably take me in because that's the family I stayed with after I ran away from Caunterets. And then I was deported, and then I came back to them.

OK, we got to stop. We got to change.

Camera roll four, take six.