

Tape five, side one:

BM: And that question of language was always bothering me, because I am native of Flemish, and her accent was French, and I was always afraid not of Belgian shouldn't come there, but luckily no Belgian ever came back to *banker*¹³. He was from Paris, and he came to Volvic with all the books of the bank. And they rented a castle, the bank, and he was a high-falutin' person, and he looked down upon me. How come I'm a Belgian refugee in Volvic, when he came with the bank and he was the Belgian! So there was not too much conversation, but like I said, it was always in my mind, and therefore whenever, I had a chance, and not too often unfortunately, I would come down and see what's doing. Armand knew that I was in the Resistance. Armand was already ten, ten and a half years old, so, when they were short of food, I had told him, "Armand," I said, "Take your bag on the shoulders and go up to the mountains, go to the farmers and ask them for food and tell them papa will pay, and tell them your papa is the Belgian." I had a reputation the Belgian does everything, and so I was careful of my reputation, because once you make a boo-boo you sink. So my reputation wasn't bad. And Armand would go and beg for food. As he was begging for food, from Volvic, they would ask, "Armand, where you going?" And he would say, "I'm going to the mountains," and they would tell him, "You know what? Go where Papa is, and bring that envelope to him." Unknown, Armand would bring messages to us that somebody from *Guillaume le Limousin*, you know, Plaines de Limoge, where they brought and they would look for innocent people to bring it up. And Armand would bring messages to us, and he was a very brave little guy. And life wasn't easy, and he was really protecting and defending his sister, and he was going to school, and...

JF: Was there any time that you discussed his Jewish background with him?

BM: Never! The whole time we were away we were speaking Yiddish, Armand and I, but it was called Flemish.

JF: You told the children it was Flemish?

BM: No, we didn't tell nothing the children, and they didn't even pay attention. You see, if you don't pay attention and make a point of it, children ignore it. So the children know one thing; that we lived in Volvic, we are refugees from Belgium. And the main problems for Eliane was that on Sundays, she couldn't go to church, because mother never found her shoe, or her sock. Because we didn't want her to go to church.

JF: So you made up excuses?

BM: No, we looked for her shoe, every Sunday we looked for a shoe. And until we found the shoe, when the first bell rings, then mother would find her shoe and it was Eliane's fault. As a child, we told you to put your things away, although she may have put her things away, but we had to find ways of getting out from Judaism, for the time being.

¹³Probably a Belgian citizen who worked in a bank.

Armand had friends from the village, and he became a village boy, Armand. With the wooden shoes, with drinking the wine, eating cheese and the language and everything else. We adopted the customs. We are chameleons. We take the spots of the animal where we are hanging in what tree, what color we need. That was called survival. That's another gift that I think my people has. And if gypsies had a talent like that, they would have survived. Unfortunately, the gypsies didn't have that talent; they were free spirits and they were killed like flies in France.

JF: What experiences did you have with gypsies?

BM: None, but we heard that the collaborators sold out a group of thirty four and we never saw any of them back. And later, after we liberated our village, when we took the liberty to punish these collaborators, burned their farm. I was part of the expedition.

JF: Can you tell me other missions that you were on?

BM: Yes, later on, we had explosives, blowing up a tunnel. Yes, I had worked on the railroad before the event. I had worked on the railroad, and see, I needed work. And in the village they were hiring men to work on the railroad, chopping around the trees from the ravines. So I worked there. And, to work in the ravines, you attach yourself on a rope and one tree; it was primitive. You chopped the trees with one hand and the trees rolled down. And later on you would load platforms, take the wood away, or they would make planks, or they would use them for firewood, or whatever it is; we didn't know, but we had to load the trains. And I forgot, it must have been the winter of '40 to '41, I'm not so sure, for a certain time, and it was very cold. And I forget, I didn't have proper food, either. The blacksmith of the village had said, whoever can bring a piece of iron, he gives some wine. So I found a piece of railroad laying there, maybe 500 kilos. And the roads were frozen, and I took my red handkerchief, and I made some kind of a rope, and I pushed and pulled that piece of iron on the road and pulled it down to the blacksmith, a piece of railroad. After I brought it down, he gave me wine and he gave me a hunk of fatback. And I helped him to camouflage it because it was government property, so later on he used it for whatever he could, you know, he forged it and so on and so forth. Then I started working in the quarry because I, it was finished working on the railroad, and while I was working there the Germans wouldn't touch it, because it was public work.

JF: You were working where?

BM: On the railroad. You know, chopping the wood was for the railroad.

JF: I see.

BM: It was part of keeping the trains free to travel. Because they were afraid of sabotage from people in the woods. So after we cleaned this up, and therefore, when we had a mission, I know the tunnel very well, I went in deep in it, like all those guys make a little fire to warm up. You know, just until time, because we worked in very bad conditions.

JF: When you were working on the railroad, you were working...

BM: As a free refugee.

JF: As a refugee.

BM: As a refugee without anything connected to Resistance.

JF: So, during the time that you were in the Resistance ...

BM: That was before anything happening. Like I said, I'm jumping back.

JF: You're jumping back now.

BM: Of course. I'm jumping back before we...

JF: Most of the time--oh, this is before...

BM: 1940, before *Capitaine* [Captain] Duhin.

JF: All right, when you were in the Resistance, though, you were not employed in any other kind of job?

BM: Of course not, the only jobs I had before the Resistance was in the factory and in the orthopedic shop. Period. That's all. But after that, that's finished.

JF: Then you were totally working...

BM: Totally finish. My wife would receive her allocation from the Red Cross, and she was able to manage, and then whatever the priest would bring down, or whenever we were able to kill a cow, and bring down a piece of meat and I had found a way. One day in the village, while in the Resistance, the farmers could not slaughter anything unless they would declare it, and they would remove the food stamps from what they had slaughtered. So the mayor of the village, and the mayor in Europe is more important than a mayor here in that sense, no, not the mayor; the mayor was important, but that mayor was--he was the guy who could give the official stamp on everything you would need.

JF: He was the government representative.

BM: Like that, and he was with the Resistance, and he wanted to help a couple of Frenchmen to kill a cow or a bull.

JF: The mayor was with the Resistance also?

BM: The mayor, yeah, of course, he was in his own way, you know, he was with us, sympathizer; he was not active, because he was responsible. We needed somebody there that could take over the government. In fact, he was part of the new government after the war, after the liberation. So I heard him discussing about killing. I heard, you know, from the grapevine, you hear; they want to slaughter a bull. They don't know what to do, because the only way they know how to slaughter is with a sledge hammer, or with a gun, and both are very noisy, and both are dangerous because there is always in the village somebody, collaborators, who would spill the beans, or some Nazis going by who would hear the shot of a gun to kill the animal. I remember from the *shochet*, the slaughterer in Belgium, how he did it, because like I said, for long years I would help my mother and I would buy the chicken, and I would go to the slaughterer and he would slaughter it for us. Then I would also go and watch him, how he slaughters a cow, a bull, there is different ways of slaughtering. See, when you slaughter a cow, you must stay ready with water; with the udder, let the milk run out, and the blood, then you see that they shouldn't mix, so with water you wash them both away. And when he was killing a sheep, it was so sad, till they die, that big beautiful eyes you don't realize. So later, I said to one fellow, if they

would speak to me, I know a way, no sound. So the guy said to me, "What, you're going to strangle it?" I said, "No," I said, "but if they speak to me, I will do it my way--no sound. I need six men." So all kind of jokes were going around, and one of the fellows spoke to me, and I went to the blacksmith of the village, and I said to him "You make me a knife," I said, "that long." It was a knife about 15 inches, and I said to him, "I want it in the shape of a razor, very thin, going up a little thicker, but I don't want it curved. I want it straight like a triangle, but very sharp." I told him exactly what I want, and I gave him a pack of my tobacco. That was the most precious thing I had. We smoked potato skins and corn silk, to keep the tobacco. And the fellow did it. He had a piece of steel from a tank, from the first World War, in front of his blacksmith shop, and from there he cut out a piece of steel to make me that knife. After three days my knife was ready, and I sharpened it like the *shochet* would do, and it was a weapon. The evening of the slaughtering, we took the bull, who was a longhorn, maybe six hands tall, six foot tall, and in his nose he had a ring, and with the ring we could control him, because he was a wild one; he was not a gelded one. They pulled down the bull, and while he was controlled with that ring in the nose, four men attached ropes around his legs, and rope around his neck, and all together we pulled and we dropped him on the ground. Where we dropped him, on the--not far was a stream of the water running down from Volvic, the well from Volvic, the spring. As he fell down, we threw a burlap bag over his head, and I jumped on him with my knife and with two slices, I went through and I was stuck in the spine; no sound. The blood gushing all over and he was thrashing, naturally, but he was attached. So, with water, we were able to clean the blood out right into the stream, we yanked him up and I cleaned him. With the same knife, I sliced him open, and collected the bowels; that means the *kishke*. Well, they asked me "What do you want for your share?" I was trying to be a diplomat. I said, "Give me just the insides." They wanted the liver. I said, "Take the liver, give me the spleen, give me the lung, give me the intestines, the stomach, and give me the four feet, and the head." Fair enough. They did it. I carried all night, bags of intestines, not cleaned, of course. And I carried home the head and the hooves, and the hide. I had skinned it; I had a good knowledge of it. See, I was born in skin and leather when I was a youngster. I worked in tanneries. Belgium had a reputation for good sole leather, always had a good reputation. And so I had brought it home, and my wife said to me, "Bernard, what are going to do with it?" I said, "Leave me." I had come down from the *Maquis*, and they gave me the time to prepare the food for my family. I cleaned and washed all the intestines and the stomach. I had seen that done by my mother. See, I told you my mother was the daughter of a *treberer* [butcher who deveined meat], to clean out the veins from the body, to make the meat kosher. My mother, during the first World War, whenever she was able to get a piece of *kishke* or a piece stomach, or a piece of udder, she would tell me that's the way you prepare, because that's the way my father taught me. And he knew, because that was his profession in Russia. And to this--but there was no salt--salt is a weapon, I don't know why, but the village grew lots of garlic. I was able to get maybe 20 pound of garlic,

ten kilo garlic. I crushed that garlic, and I rubbed everything in garlic, and I put everything in huge pots, because in the other house--we had moved from the one room, and we had a three-room house. One room on the second floor, a room on third floor, a room. While I was working in the factory in Riom on doing sabotage, on the sides, the fellow, they would make a black market of a little electrical appliances, little stoves. And we had an electric steamer. We were allowed three hours of electricity a day. Now the cables with the electricity run in front of the dirt floor room. There was naked cable. So the fellows had make for me a jimjig, like two hooks on a stick, and the electric cable connected to a little radiator they had put up for me, so that I could warm the room for Armand. It was bitter cold, the winter was horrible. In the room downstairs, when I was home, I would slide myself in the crib of the baby, to warm it. The crib was immense; it was old fashioned. I had everything in the house. A pit--oh, I forgot, only a quarter a month, francs, that I had the rent from the Belgian Red Cross. And the landlord was the guy from the grocery, Jean Lemme. And he had gave me the house the way it came, with the pots and the pans, and I had pots from hundreds of years ago, big steel pots. And those steel pots, I filled everything with clean *kishke* and stomach and tripe. I wasted nothing, and I had to *schlep* the water from the fountain, because in the house I had a slab of marble like this, going through a hole in the wall like that, and that was my sewer and sink. So here I was working, and I cleaned everything. I worked two days and a night. Now in the walls of the house, the walls were a yard and a half thick, it's lava. And they are two yards high, like that table, black upon black. And, inside they had carved out 800 years ago, niches. And it was black, the whole inside is black. That's the black lava from Volvic. And the house is 900 years old. The cellar is vaulted. In the cellar I found a basket. I found wood prints of the year 1780, of the fables. I have them home, I'll show you later. That was some experience, that house. And there I picked everything else. When it came to the head, I split it in two, with an axe. And the eyes, the children would play with them instead of marbles. And I removed the brains, that was good food. I removed the cheeks, everything, we wasted nothing, and we lived for months on it.

JF: This was during the time you were...

BM: In the Resistance. I left my family with meat.

JF: As a refugee, did you have to register with the mayor or...

BM: Of course, I was registered!

JF: All right, was there any problem then in them checking to see where you were during the time you were in the Resistance?

BM: Well, the mayor was Resistance. There was one before, who had blown his brains out, because he could not keep the position of being mayor, and transmit to the Nazis what they wanted. So he blewed his brains out. So we had another mayor, and he was an elderly man, and he was a little darling. Whatever he knew, he knew, and he didn't say nothing. So we went through. The village was 97% sympathizers to the Resistance,

because they know we knew that Hitler is not going to win the war. The French hoped that they wouldn't win the war. The collaborators knew that he would win the war.

JF: How did this mayor then handle the Nazis when they asked things of him?

BM: He did the best he can and diddled-daddled; he was an old man; he did the best he could. I had know him for years. I have no women, I have no, and he did what he could. He was village mayor. But nevertheless, we had to keep track.

JF: Also, during that time that you were working in the Resistance, was there any way of you getting any news from Belgium? Did you have any word?

BM: Nothing, nothing, because after I received a letter from my sister, back, I didn't know anything about Belgium, and I didn't want to know, because we only knew that the Führer was winning the war, and I had to make provisions to save my family. So the less communications with Belgium; it was hard, but so it was.

JF: When you were that involved with the Resistance, did you have any additional information about the concentration camps?

BM: No, we didn't.

JF: Even in the Resistance?

BM: Nothing, because, like I said, we had no radio. And if we had a radio, we only could take London. That was our point of interest, the BBC, and anything else was never told to us, and we didn't have a radio. So we didn't know anything.

JF: Did you know anything about the camps in France?

BM: This we knew, because they had picked up Jews, and we know there was a Drancy, and there was a Gurs, and there was [unclear], this we knew.

JF: Did you know what was going on in those camps?

BM: No, this we didn't know.

JF: And did you know anything about the transports out of the camps?

BM: This we didn't know, either. We were completely in the dark; first of all, living in the mountains, and secondly, I have my own problems with my little family, keeping body and soul together. You realize very well that I passed [over] most of the stuff, the baby, of aggravations of life cannot be told because first of all, they already forgotten, or they are so numerous that you could not. The child needs a pair of shoes. So, I went to the blockmaker and I said make me a pair of *sabots* for Yvette. He said, the *sabots* like that cost a lot of money. I don't have lots of money. I said let me work a day for you. Not enough, you must come and work two days. So I worked, it was tough. Early in the morning, like just at the point of dawn, going to the forest and uproot an old walnut tree that you needed practically two men to hold around, uproot it, that means dig and cut the tiny roots, because it's the roots that made the good *sabots*. You know what *sabots* are? Over there on the ground, you see a pair of red ones? Sunday shoes; I'll bring them to you.

JF: These are wooden shoes?

BM: Wooden shoes. [Worn by the peasantry in various European countries.]

JF: Sunday shoes.

BM: Sunday shoes, and I wanted for Yvette, and he made me pair for Yvette. I needed for Armand. So for Armand, maybe I could take from the rack. So if I received from Belgian Red Cross, I would give away from me, because I could do without. And so I was keeping-- there was a million problems: like we would speak Yiddish, and I had to give some hope to my wife. "So," I would say, "Chanaleh." You speak Yiddish? I would say, "Tomorrow will be good." And she would look on my face. I weighed then maybe 145 pound. I was green from terror, and I was--my eyes were always like a hunted animal, and I was afraid. But I had to keep my sense of humor because the whole thing would have fall apart. And I did keep my sense of humor, in adversity. And, so we went through the war; we went to expeditions, we went to another mountain, helped them out to fight a group of collaborators who had sold out traitors. And then at certain times, we found out they were sending away a train with *travailleurs de forcé*, forced work to Germany, so we derailed the railroad at night. I didn't know where it was, but we went on expedition. So climbing the mountains, I was good, I was very strong. I had a varicose vein, the size of a big goose egg, hanging there until ten years ago. Ten years ago I went for surgery. There was a varicose vein like that, that I had climbing and carrying 40, 50 kilo. I was so strong, and I didn't have the proper food. I swear, it's a miracle that I am where I am. We were drinking water; it was all in that region a lot of springs, like Saratoga. You scratched the mountain, water comes out. Stinks like rotten eggs, it's *friginous* [phonetic, probably means cold]. When you have to, you drink. We would put snares and catch rabbit and skin 'em and cook 'em. How much cooking can you do? You don't want a fire to go so you ate raw stuff; same thing with a pig. We saw pigs in the fields, and to smell a pig is not easy. So a guy threw a knife and he got a pig. So we stuck it while it was still squeaking we removed the ham, and with a bottle of brandy, we'd burn the silks, and make believe it's cooked. And then we took pieces of meat and we ate, raw pork. If I didn't die, I eat pork meat five years in the barrel, that's called salted pork, that's all the fatback, it is white like cream, and it's salted meat, with the rind on top. And I ate a piece the size, *Gotenu* [dear God] a kilo practically.

JF: This was not cooked.

BM: Of course not! It's raw salt pork. And, you drink a bottle of brandy after that, and I tell you, there is a miracle, *Al'vai veiter* [would that it would continue], I have no stomach problems. I have a high cholesterol. I have triglyceride, I have everything that you have to have at my age. It's normal, although we don't touch butter and things like that, you know, we have eggs and if we eat two eggs a month, that's a lot.

JF: Was your wife also eating pork during that time?

BM: No! The poor thing, I don't know what she lived on. She had the most beautiful complexion, always red cheeks. She was eating a small piece of bread, and she would drink the *toriani* [phonetic] that was coffee, and the coffee was carbonized beans, carbonized grain, and corn, and every pound you had 12 beans of coffee. So people would

spread the coffee and take out the 12 beans, and through the year they had enough to make a pot of coffee. It was sad. So I don't know how she lived.

JF: She wouldn't eat the pork.

BM: She wouldn't. She wouldn't eat the rabbit, she wouldn't eat the crow, she wouldn't eat the donkey, nothing--it was a miracle.

JF: Now wait, did she not eat it for religious reasons? Or ...

BM: No, she couldn't. She couldn't.

JF: She couldn't eat it.

BM: She couldn't. My wife, should live and be well, she cannot swallow a pill mini. She can't! She chews an aspirin. She couldn't eat...

JF: Could not eat...

BM: She helped me skin it and prepare it, and everything else. She couldn't.

JF: The children, then, were they...

BM: They ate everything. I terrorized the kids. I said, you eat, because I had in mind they must survive, at least.

JF: You started to tell me a story the other day about the *seder*. Was this during this time, or was this later?

BM: Before.

JF: This was before.

BM: That was the beginning of '41.

JF: Could you go back for a minute and tell me that story about the Seder?

BM: I think I told you the Seder. When we walked up to the mountains with Armand...

JF: You and your wife...

BM: No, my wife, no, just Armand.

JF: You and Armand.

BM: We climbed up to the mountains...

JF: He was about eight.

BM: Seven, about seven. We climbed up to the mountains, and...

JF: How did you hear about the Seder?

BM: There was a young girl in the bus. I had told you I was working then in the pocketbook factory in Clermont-Ferrand, and I had taken the bus. And the bus was for 50 people, but being there was one bus a day, those who were lucky like I am, we taking the bus from Volvic and I was the first one standing on the street, because the bus driver lives on my street [unclear]. And everyday, when he walks out, and I would walk in front of him, to be able to get a seat. So I always had a seat near the window, and when I sat down, there was two seats. Now, there was three seats in a row. So a fourth squeezed in and then going from village to village, we would take in more people, until we were 100 in the bus. And the last village before coming to Clermont-Ferrand, we would stop and pick up about six girls, who would be working in different offices. And I always looked for a very tiny

one, because it breaks the legs to have a person riding in the bus with you, even if it's only 15-20 kilometers. And I had a young girl, very charming, 17, 18, maybe; maybe it was affinity, she was Jewish, but I didn't know, and I was Jewish and she didn't know. Until one day she said to me, just like that, "Are you a dentist?" I said, "Yes, and you?" She said, "Yes." "Are you from Brittany?" She said, "Yes." "And I am a Breton also," I said. She said, "You know, two weeks from now is going to be a big seder in Volvic. And there is going to be somebody waiting," and she told me the time. She told me how to go there. "From Volvic," she said, "you take the road--" but I didn't want to take the road.

JF: She told you this on the bus?

BM: On the bus, sitting on the bus; the driver, [unclear] and there's people speaking, and she was sitting on my lap, that side, and her mouth to my ear, you know, like that, speaking, and I made believe that we were kidding and I was smiling because people around, and you know, everybody was thinking, "Bernard has a pretty girl on his knee, the Belgian is a lucky guy," and I was hollering, "Don't tell my wife, don't tell my wife." And, then before going down, she would give me a peck on the cheek. Of course, like I said, I wasn't shaved, you saw my face. I was not bad looking, too. That's not my fault, because this has nothing to do--you know, I have never judged a person by their looks. You cannot be responsible. If we all would make ourselves, would be all the more gorgeous ones. So a person is always good if it's a person. And, then when I came back to Volvic, in the evening I said to my wife, of course, again, all the conversations were in Yiddish. Oh, I regret you don't speak it. It's so different. But all right, I said, "You know, Chanaleh," I said, "there is going to be a Seder. You know, the symbol of the Seder to us is very important, because this is really," I said, "the heart of our mystery. That symbol of freedom. We were slaves, we don't want to be slaves. We want freedom for every nation, but most for us. I want to go to that Seder with Armand. I don't want him to forget. Eliane is too small." Yvette wasn't born. She said, "I trust you, take Armand," and I said to Armand, "I had told you," I said, "that we are not Jews. However," I said--he was not in my Seder, in my father's last Seder, he wasn't the son, I tell you in Belgium, because he wasn't well with that sunburn on the lungs. The calcification. So he was not at the Seder, and here I wanted him to see a Seder.

JF: And yet, you had not told him that he was Jewish?

BM: Armand knew he was Jewish--I had told him to say that he was not Jewish.

JF: Okay, he knew that he was Jewish.

BM: Of course! Avrom--Abram, I had changed his name to Armand, but he was Abraham. And he was very mature for his age. A serious boy. As we walked up he was questioning me, we were in the forest walking along. I was explaining to him the history, Pharaoh in Egypt, the ten plagues, the miracles, what it means to be a Jew, that my ancestors fought for freedom, that my father fought in the pogrom in Kishinev. "And now my son," I said, "we..."

Tape five, side two:

BM: So I said to Armand that we have to remember that living as a Jew is not easy and I told him about the Spanish Inquisition. He was only a youngster, but I was feeling whatever I tell him, something would penetrate, in case I wouldn't be there forever, because everything was like an extra day to live. And as we came higher, higher, it was already dusk, and I had a good knowledge of the forest, because we lived there already for a few months. And I went through a winter and the forest was like a granary for me, a lot of grain, of nuts, a lot of berries, and wildlife. I had put snares to catch rabbits, and I climbed the trees to go to the nest of the crow, twist the neck of the babies, and all food. And as we come to an empty spot was a shack, and a man walking with a tool in front of the shack. He was a bearded man, very odd, because beards were not in unless he was really 100% a Gentile. So I go to the fellow and he said, "What do you want?" and I said, "Are you a dentist?" He said "Yes." I said, "Is there a Seder?" He said, "Yes," and he let me into the shack where I saw a lot of men standing and everybody converged their eyes to us and they saw Armand, a child. And the Seder was said in French on a few printed pieces of paper, and they had two *matzohs*, homemade not industrially made, and there was so much sadness in that Seder, and when it came to the four questions, all the eyes converged to Armand, but he didn't know the questions, he was too young to read. So we all said the questions, we all gave the answers, and Armand was like paralyzed! Standing, you know, looking up to all those men, and I realized that he was missing the most important part, so I took him and put him on my shoulders--he wasn't heavy--and I stood in the corner, where he could have a good picture of that oh, oh, a picture. A couple of lit candles, and the walls covered with blankets, the windows, and you heard like a murmur, and then when it came to the plagues of Egypt, the one who was the official said, "We drink, we pour the wine and we don't drink it, in commemoration that Egyptians died and therefore, we don't celebrate with joy, just a commemoration. And now," that man said, "we don't know where we are, but while we are together, we celebrate Passover, and we hope that we also will be liberated." And instead of *l'shana habah b'Yerushalayim* [next year in Jerusalem] we said, "May we all next year go back to our homes." And the tears were running freely, sobbing. And then I took Armand, and it was already night, and there was not much light because we lived in darkness in Volvic, and I made a joke out of it. We picked up a bundle of wood, in case anybody would ask me, "What are you doing so late in the street?" So I'll never forget, we picked up a bundle of wood, a bundle of wood on the shoulders, and we came back home, and I said to Armand, "What you have seen now," I said, "it is being imprinted in your mind, but never speak of it--never!" And so it was. And from this, Armand has made graphics now. And I think that in the summer he is going to have a show at the Y, a ceramic show depicting the pictures of the horrors of the Holocaust, and ...

JF: How many men do you think were there?

BM: About 30, I would say, roughly 30 men. That's all that could come in. Mostly from Alsace-Lorraine. From the east of France.

JF: No women?

BM: No.

JF: Only men. Were there able to be any of the traditional symbols of Passover in addition to the *matzoh*?

BM: Just the two matzohs and a candle. That's all. Bitter we had enough. Our *charoses*, we passed it.

JF: But one of the men had been able to make the matzoh.

BM: Of course, somebody made matzoh. There were men not from Volvic; they were from the limits from Clermont-Ferrand. So the hardship for those people to come up to Volvic!

JF: Did Armand ask you more questions?

BM: I had told him not to. Coming down I was explaining to him the history of our *haggadah* [book read at the *seder*], the symbols and the meaningful things, that since I was born, I always had a *seder* with my father, and we had a *seder* last year. I regret you were in the sanitarium. There was a *seder* with my parents. In fact, in my book I have all chapters speaking about the *S'darim*. In fact, I closed my stories, in my book, with my *seder* in America, my 35 years in America, and my *seder*, like my whole family gathered, we were in that room 38 people. We had put--I have a long table downstairs, and the tables go from there. Everything was removed. The boys came and moved around, and we had tables going from here all the way down there. And our *seder* this year was done in a rented hall, because we are *kenahora* [without invoking the evil eye] almost 50 this time, and sons and daughters have boyfriends, who are married already. And the small children grew up to be young men, and so on. So we went to the place and our *seder* was sad, because we recalled those who should be here and are not there, those who have been destroyed. We speak of freedom and liberty, we speak of America the beautiful, where we have to fight to keep our democracy alive. We speak of all of this.

JF: Were there any other occasions during those years in France when you were able to talk to Armand about Judaism or he asked questions?

BM: No.

JF: That was the one time...

BM: That was the one time, and I avoided anything. We never mentioned nothing; when I spoke, I spoke to my wife. So that we should at least have something to go--God forbid, it turns out bad, the children don't know.

JF: What about the girls?

BM: They didn't know nothing. Eliane and Yvette knew nothing. Yvette at that time even wasn't born, but later on even didn't know anything until--she knew anything until we came to Paris.

JF: She did not know that she was Jewish?

BM: She found out she was Jewish when she was understanding. Five years old, then she found out on her brother's *Bar Mitzvah*. "What is that?" So we told her: for Jewish people--What is Jewish? It's a religion like there is Catholics and there is Protestants; there is Jews. They have a church, we have a synagogue. They have a priest and we have a rabbi. And we make *Bar Mitzvah*, they make Communion. We have to give the children what to go, you see what I mean? They have Christmas, we have Chanukah. Not that the analogy is equal, but children's minds, it meant something to be understood, and being that you did not want to go into too many details, that's the way you spoke. So we came to liberations of different towns and cities around us.

JF: When were you liberated?

BM: Liberation means that when the Germans left because of the war turning against them. It was after Normandy¹⁴, it was after the *debarquement* [landing of troops], in Marseilles, the Italians were squashed already. And there was much before Pearl Harbor.¹⁵ And Hitler needed all these forces together, being that he had 3,000 here and 5,000 there. He had 50,000 here. He wanted everyone to assemble. And from London came an order, "Try to keep the Nazis where they are. It's easier to fight a small group than a big one." So in the--it must have been in August or September, the wheat was cut, this I remember. We were laying in a plain of Limoges, after we came to contain the Nazis. And my group in which I was with 17 fellows on a platform, two machine guns, and I had a bag of hand grenades. I also had a bag of mashed potatoes, from the German grenades, the big stick that you hit and throw very good, and...

JF: That was the nickname?

BM: Yes, the *mashecrass patate* [slang for mashed potatoes]. And so we divided eight fellows and nine fellows, and we received orders to see that they shouldn't move and they were stopped by wagons, loaded with hay on the road, and us, we made ourselves comfortable on top of a blanket. Coming down from Volvic to Riom was like a parade, the French people throwing cigarettes and cheese and stopping to pour wine and brandy, and I didn't have in mind brandy and wine, so I collected cheese and butter, and I hollered, "I wanted milk", so they brought me bottles of milk. And I had a spirit, maybe I'll be able to sneak away and run to the house, it's only three hours a run. And I collected in my helmet, I had put leaves from the side of the fields, big leaves, cabbage or rhubarb, and that's where I was keeping the butter and the cheese, and I kept it from the sun. But I didn't drink, because I could not afford to drink in case I lose control. I had my family. Otherwise, the most important thing in my mind was my family. As we stayed there, and they directed us to keep that group of Germans not to come over to Riom. We didn't know their strength. The Germans were terrorized by us, because they know that we were trying to pay 'em back what they had done to us. We had heard of villages burned by them, not far from Clermont from Riom in the plain of Limoges, there's a village called Oradour sur

¹⁴ D-Day in Normandy June 6, 1944.

¹⁵ Pearl Harbor: Dec. 7, 1941.

Glane, like another Lititz who was burned. And there was sabotage against the Nazis. They took the whole village, 1,600 people...

JF: How do you spell the name of that village?

BM: O-R-0-U-D, Oradour, I am very bad in spelling. I am only 35 years in America. O-R-A-D-O-U-R S-U-R G-L-A-N-E, that's in Le Limousin and Limoges and they took all the people and put them in the church, surrounded it with soldiers and threw fire grenades inside and burned the church. Only a few people escaped alive.

JF: This was around what year?

BM: 1940, '43, '44. Toward the end, they had nothing to lose anymore, and then that village has been cut off. Now it is a monument, they never moved in that village, never rebuilt it. The church stays there, just the rooms, and there is a big plaque, or there was, maybe they took it off now, because to please the Germans, because we forgive and forget now. And it's said, "This is a symbol of the brutality of the Nazi order." And this was an example of German justice. So we stood there. I would run to my son, and about 3:30 in the morning, from Le Cantal [there was another chain of mountains following the Puy de Dôme where we were operating] came down, huge trucks, with a lot of very heavily armed Senegali Blacks, part of the Resistance. And they came to take over that station that we were waiting. The commanding officer came to us very angry; he said, "You imbeciles, do you know what you did?" "We received orders to stay here." He said, "Well there are 3,500 panzer division, 3,500 mens with heavy artillery. You could have been smithered like that." We didn't know. So naturally, when we heard that, our heart fell out and we felt very weak. So I said, "Okay," then he realized that he bawled us out for nothing. So he said, "In fact, you deserve a medal for heroism." Then, in my mind came "Ignorance is bliss." We didn't know, so we weren't too much scared. They took us away from there and they put us in positions where there could be an influx of German Army, in a fighting position to hold back the Germans. In the meantime, the French were already in the southern part of France, with General--I forget names--and the Americans had to send--The Germans only wanted to surrender to an American. So from somewheres around Marseilles, they found a corporal they send over, they surrendered to one. Because the Americans observed the Convention of Geneva, they were treated with dignity, as prisoners of war. We couldn't afford to treat them like that. So they surrendered. Then in the city of Riom, was a *Kaserne*, a camp, a military camp.

JF: Excuse me, for one minute. Was there any occasion in which you captured Germans, and did not observe the...

BM: Yes, we had a group of 20 that we had to convoy from Riom to Clermont-Ferrand, and outside the city of Clermont-Ferrand, in the fields, we told them to run; as they run, we shot them down. Because they were escaping, that was our excuse. Then when we had German prisoners, individuals, that we were able to collect, and we kept them in the jail of the *Kaserne*, where we were billeted, they hanged themselves. They fought among themselves and they killed each other. Of course, there was no better resistance.

JF: This was done by the Resistance?

BM: Of course.

JF: But this is how it was reported?

BM: [Whispers] That's right. Until we received very strict orders. We are responsible for everyone of them, so they fell in the cages, and they hurt themselves. And our desire for revenge was big because we found out then, later on atrocities. Nothing yet from the concentration camps, but atrocities committed in our regions. They burned up families, wives and the children, like they did in Hotel Matignon in Volvic, and they had killed so many men in that village because somebody had thrown a grenade. And our desire for revenge was tremendous. Even I became bloody, although like I said previously, it was not in our genes; but sometimes you lose control, and when you lose control, it is not to be explained, even psychologically, what makes you tick. The adrenaline pumps, or there is a change in the hormones, or there is a bloody instinct. You know that you go into danger, but you don't care. Later on, before you go in, those are the two moments where you are terribly scared. Once you are in, it's *Kismet*, that's all. And later on, my children were asking me, when they were already young adults, "Papa tell me, were you afraid?" One would say, "No, Papa is not afraid." And I'd say, "Yes, child, not was I afraid, I was terrorized. I had loose bowels. I had a throat parched. I had butterflies in my stomach. I carried a bag with death, hand grenades. And that was frightening. But once I said, "You smell the odor of the explosions and you hear the shooting and everything else, what the heck, we all have to die. We don't want to die young, because we want to see what life brings, but if you die young, that's it. That's part of what's written in the book." Later on, of course, we understand better and after that liberation, we occupied the *Kaserne* of Riom.

JF: When you were sent to be in a position to face oncoming German troops, was there an encounter then with those troops?

BM: No, they were arrested by another group, much, much before us; we were a second line. Then we were sent to the *Kaserne*; the *Kaserne* was liberated the day before our arrival from the Nazis. So we had to look for booby traps. But I was always food conscious, so the first thing, I made a beeline direct to the kitchen, with a neighbor of mine by the name of Kosicki, a Polish refugee from Alsace-Lorraine, a fellow who lived on the same street with his father and mother, brothers and sisters. And we went to the kitchen, and opened the refrigerator, and there was hanging a half a veal, a half a calf, and we found a bag of real coffee, and we found a barrel of rum, 40 liters. So we called in a couple of guys and they took the rum, and they were billeted on the third floor of the *Kaserne*, huge steps to climb. So two guys grabbed the barrel of rum and scaddodled it away. And we took out our knives and we cut big slabs of the veal, opened the shirt and put it on our body and closed the shirt. We were wearing pants with chains attached on the bottom like knickers, and we took the coffee and we poured it in our pants and dropped in the foot, that we had like big sausages around our legs. So he said to me, "How long would it take us to run up to Volvic?" I said, "How long," I said, "But I don't want the meat to cook on me."

I must have left at least 15 pound of veal around my breast, my chest, and buttoned up and closed the leather jacket, and I had legs about 12 inches in circum--diameter from the coffee beans. The coffee beans were--I never saw coffee beans for four years, and we both run up the mountains, let me tell that was an epic run. Up-mountain running, that is something unheard. As I run, my wife was accustomed to my step because I had an automatic step. I made five kilometers an hour, three and a half miles an hour steady. My step was tack-tack-tack-tack, and I was wearing open toes shoes. As I come up, we came up, it was about sevenish, and it was getting dark already, dusk, and she opened the door. "Bernard." And I from far away, I said, in Yiddish, "Go upstairs and put a sheet on the floor." She don't ask questions. She goes upstairs, we had a [unclear] house, linen sheets handwoven, 100 years old, when you slept on it, you need no massage. Your body was one piece of red meat from the linen. She don't ask questions; she runs upstairs, on the floor put linen. And I came upstairs, opened the belt, the chain from my pants on the bottom and stay and shake, and she sees coffee running out from there and then I opened my shirt and I gave her the meat, and she don't know what to say. I said, "I cannot stay," and then I took a rag, washed my body, just, you know, I did not rest or nothing, wiped the stuff from the meat and the guy, Kosicki, he was ready and we run down the mountain. We came back to the *Kaserne* before anybody missed us in the commotion. When we came, they was throwing everything from the third floor outside. They had mattresses, and blankets and beds. Everything that belonged to the Germans; they was stealing 'em blind. They would steal everything they could. And the women, right away like magic, the women came out from everywheres, with carriages, with donkeys and everything else. I had nothing to steal, because I, thank God, I had nothing to load myself, and I go to my third floor room where all the guys were. They want that rum, that barrel of rum was almost empty, empty. And they went around naked measuring the size of their penises, drunk. Every obscene scenes, because they had not seen women for a long time. So the alcohol whipped them up to obscenities. Nothing to the extent of sexual contacts or whatever it is. I came in and it was like a Dantesque picture to me, to see all those drunken Frenchmen running around naked. All right, I'm not a saint, however, I'd still a symptom of civilization in me. But you have to dance how the music plays. So I came in, and I made myself--they poured me a glass rum, and I know I cannot afford to get drunk, and I screamed louder than them, and poured my rum right and left like a drunken sailor, and the Belgian is a regular guy. I said I have enough, I go to sleep. We slept on mattresses thrown on the floor. I laid down on the mattress, and those guys come and grab my mattress and start jumping me, they, you know, jokingly. Well, they made so much noise, until three-thirty in the morning, an officer came up. Regular French army, dressed in a French uniform and he barked a few orders that "This is enough," he said. "There is no more discipline consented." Because our discipline was freely given. Now, he said, "This is the French army." And I was the one Belgian. And I said nothing. "Everybody down," he said, "15 minutes to go down." I came down, pitch dark. He said because of our miserable behavior, we are out to hunt collaborators.

So, we left that night on arm length, and we walked a chain maybe two mile long, with all the men, not from our battalion, all the battalions, and we were collecting collaborators. We went through valleys and water and mountains and everything else.

JF: Now, how did you know the collaborators that you were to find?

BM: Somebody knew...

[multiple exchange]

... those who were there, because that's where we found a group of farmers who had sold out 30-odd gypsies. And the gypsies was shot on the spot by the Nazis, and that's what we were looking for.

JF: Now, you were given the information.

BM: We were given information to go.

JF: As to who to find?

BM: We--I don't know; officers knew. Officers knew, but we didn't; we just had to make a net like. We came back noontime, dead tired. And...

JF: What was done with those collaborators, by the way?

BM: Pardon me?

JF: What was done at that point with those collaborators?

BM: This, we don't know. They went to Clermont-Ferrand, because I don't think--but they burned the farm, this was done. The farm was burned and completely ransacked. We couldn't touch anything. There was a French officer in the Army, they wanted to know, that's the reason they didn't trust the FTPF, the *Francs Tireurs et Partisans Français*, because you know there was political bickering then. The communist wanted their share, and the socialists wanted, the liberals, so you know, General deGaulle wanted the whole pie for himself. So what's happening is then, we came back, exhausted, and six of us were designated to be on the entry of the gate from the *Kaserne*, when you come in, to keep the police--the traffic, you know, you don't go in and out like there's a carnival. We stood there. In the meantime, the jail was connected to what's that was the local jail from the *Kaserne*, and that's where the first collaborators were brought in by the *gendarmarie*. The French *gendarmarie* brought in the collaborators to us and that's where they start to let them have it. Because we all had a lot of resentment. That night we find out in the train station, we was like from here to Knights Road, was a old convoy with barrels of wine, stolen by the Germans going to Germany, and it came from the southern part of France. So the fellows went out with huge five-gallon pitchers, and with a machine gun, vrrrp, made ninety little holes, and they brought back maybe 100 liters of wine. Every wine from the south. They started drinking like they're pigs. And they became sick, and fell one on top of the other. I didn't drink, again for the same reason. The telephone rings. The commanding officer: "Any of the men?" I'm there. I say nothing. "I need a man." So I run over to him. He said, "What's doing, you?" I say, "Everything is fine." I don't say nothing, because--and I became his right arm. I'm not a drinker, and that was unique amongst the French, not to be a drinker. So that's where I had all those permit to travel

back and forth between Clermont-Ferrand and Vichy, and so on and so forth. I became his right arm.

JF: He knew you were a Belgian?

BM: Oh, yes, of course! Then a few days later, came an order, you must excuse me, and that order was for me to go to Clermont-Ferrand. It must have been September, or October, or maybe--I cannot remember dates--and as I came into Clermont-Ferrand, I had a pouch full of mail from another outfit, and as I came out from the train station and I looked to the little streets, I see a couple of men wearing prayer shawls in front of a building, and my heart started pounding and I didn't know what was going on. I know it was liberation, but--And as I come to the men, I said, "Excuse me," I said, "what is that?" The man was a little bit with fear and he said, "This is a prayer shawl," and I said, "So--" and he said, "This is today is *Yom Kippur*." As he said, "*Yom Kippur*" the tears came out from my eyes. Now, I am unshaved, I have eyes injected with blood, I am dressed like a guerilla, I carry a pouch, and I have a fearsome look on my face, and I have a weapon, and I carry--and I have two hand grenades and the guy couldn't understand. He said, "We are Jews," he said. And I said, "I'm a Jew, too! In five years," I said, "in four years, I had lost completely contact." The commotion became, the rabbi came out and there was a group of Jews from Alsace-Lorraine again. But not the same, none of them from there. So the rabbi took me in and I take off my weapons, put it near his little desk there, they gave me an *aliyah* [honor when the Torah is read], and I was completely lost--I became back with feelings of being a Jew, liberated. Now, I have a desire for my people.

JF: How could these men survive?

BM: I have no idea. Hidden in the mountain maybe like I did; maybe working in factories around Clermont-Ferrand, but I have no idea. I had no mind of asking anything. Everybody embraced and shook hands and we thank God we found the next door Jew. Then I accomplished my mission, came back. The same day, in the evening, came an order. And in the morning, while we were staying in the lines, he read the order, he said, "All those who are not French have the right to enlist; if not, they can go back to their previous activities. All Frenchmen are automatically in the army." Then I was debating myself, what to do. But when I found out that I don't have to stay in the army, I said, "Fine, I want to go back to Belgium anyway." So I came to the commanding officer and I told him my story, that I have a family in the mountains. Nobody said I am a Jew yet, nobody knows I am Jewish yet. Before that, we went and we made a raid, in almost the section where we lived, around Volvic, Chatel-Guyon, and Anval [phonetic], and we made a raid there trying to catch some collaborators. Gunfight, gunfire was exchanged, but I came out all right. We made a parade; we had national funeral for some heroes, you know, the pomp and circumstances, the glory, the flowers and all that stuff. And I received my discharge papers, and I went back to Volvic. And then, my wife and I decided that I will go to Vichy.

Tape six, side one:

BM: So the way I was in my uniform, and I had the privilege of riding the trains without paying, being in the Resistance, and it was old-fashioned. There was a lot of glory attached now, everybody wanted to put his foot in the Resistance. Everybody wanted to know he also has participated in the liberation. I rode the train freely and I went to Vichy to visit the Belgian Consul. The Belgian Consul see me coming in, and I present my papers. In the meantime, Capitain Duhin was back in the French Army, and in that time he had written to me letters; I was smart enough and I kept the letters. As of now, I have a whole file of letters, that in due time, if you are interested, we'll go through--that's another session. And, I went to the Consul and I brought those letters with me. Because he could have questioned it, "You're a Belgian. What have you done all that time? Where have you been? You collected Red Cross money?" So I brought the letters and I brought the discharge paper from the commanding officer. The Consul was extremely pleased of having received the first Belgian who had served in the French Resistance and he wrote a letter to the Belgium authorities, like a passport: "I recommend very highly that young Bernard Mednicki..." that's the way he wrote down, so to tell you that I wasn't old--I find that letter for you. I could spend all day going through my documents with you. AI recommend to you very highly that young Bernard Mednicki, who has done very great honor to Belgium by serving side by sides with the French Resistance. Please extend to him all the necessary courtesy to make his trip easy." And he gave me a ticket for a round trip to go to Belgium, and back to Vichy. And he gave me some money, because at that time, I had received money from the Resistance, but I wanted to leave it with my wife. So I told him that I don't have any money. And he gave me a few hundred francs. The way I was dressed, I had nothing else to wear. I took the train, and I said to my wife, "I don't know how long I will be away, but have confidence, I'll be back as soon as possible. I must see what's doing on." I took a direct train from Clermont-Ferrand to Paris, and from Paris to Brussels. I didn't stop in Paris.

JF: This was in what month?

BM: ...19--oh, I wouldn't remember. Well, let's see now, *quarante quarte, quarant cinq*, that must be, '45.

JF: This was '45, then?

BM: Yes, that must be before the Battle of the Bulge. Yes, that's before the Battle of the Bulge; I remember because I came to Brussels. I had my leather jacket and I was not too warm, because in Belgium is always cold. And I don't know where to go. The trip was a horrible trip, because, first of all, there was no trains running, bridges were blown, and so on and so forth. The trains, you had to take whatever you could, and I was in a train. I was--The train was--the trip was terrible, but it was not the point, the point is I came to Brussels. And I didn't know where to direct myself, so I looked where there was like a

Jewish Community Center before, and I went there. And I started asking questions. And my sister was registered there. That was called the REVJ, Help to the Israelites, Victims of the War. Because a Jew in Belgium is called an Israelite, in French, too. The word *Juif* is not a nice word, but in America, that's the way it goes. Israelite is the right name. So I go to them and I start asking questions and I found some people that I knew from before the war, and they asked me and I answered, and somehow the emotions is high. They give me the address of my sister, that's all there is. And they told me that my father and this one and that one, all of them have been deported in 1942.

JF: The whole family was deported...

BM: Deported in 1942.

JF: Did you know where?

BM: Not yet. So I started looking around and someone gave me an address of my sister. So...

JF: This is Rebecca.

BM: Rebecca, and she was married to a fellow from Antwerp, and she lived in Brussels. Her husband was deported, and, in the beginning, and she took back her maiden name, not his name, and she became Rebecca Mednicki. So then they were in view to escape the indignity of concentration camp and everything else. She lost herself in a certain part of Belgium, the French Wallonie, that's in the French part of Belgium where there is a lot of forest, and she lived there with farmers. She rent herself out doing odd things. She was very fortunate, because my sister and I--we don't have the characteristics--or we did not have the characteristics looked upon by the Nazis or the collaborators, what a Jew has to look like. We could blend with the public without being designated as Jews. And she suffered a lot of hunger, bad weather. When she came out from the war, she was hoping that somebody would come back. In the meantime, my father and my brother and sisters, nephews, uncles and everybody that's from my side, plus my wife's side, all together 87 people were taken away, and none of them came back. My brother-in-law Maurice lost his wife, my sister Rosa, and the children, of course. How was he saved? He was at work. As he came back, the neighbors told him that the Gestapo came and took my sister away and the children, and told him, "Run and save yourself," so he went away and hid, and he also could pass for a typical non-Jewish person.

JF: Did Rebecca pass as a non-Jew, or was she hidden?

BM: Rebecca was passed for a non-Jew but she hid herself, too.

JF: Was she hidden by Christian families?

BM: No, she was working for Christian families, and working for them, they did not know that she was Jewish. She had received the stamp in the beginning. She worked for a while and then she just disappeared from the neighborhood, from the region, and she didn't go by train. With trolley cars in Belgium you can go from one side of the country to another, cause the country is so small. That's what she did. She disappeared in the country, lived in the forest for a while. When she came back, her body was decalcified. That's

where I found her. She had rented an apartment. She had some money from previous. And she had found a job, she was a waitress. She was in touch with Americans, right after the war, and she was trying to find informations about where the family is, because she knew exactly when they were taken, where they were taken. The train was taken where she knew it. After we met, of course, the joy of seeing each other was tremendous. So she was asking me when do I bring my wife and the children, and I told her I didn't know anything, so I just came alone. "And now that you are there," I said "there is a reason to bring the family back." And while I was there, it was very sad times. Couldn't find anybody. Wherever I went, this one is gone, this one has been taken, this one didn't come back.

JF: Was this your first...

BM: ... first trip back to Belgium.

JF: ... the first knowledge that you had then of what had happened with the camps, and the death camps?

BM: Yes, that's right. So, after being a while there I went back to Volvic. Of course, there were adventures in the trains, and so on and so forth, I will pass up as no, no reportable story. Came back to Volvic. But before leaving, I could not leave the village without going to the priest and telling him that I am Jewish. Nobody knew.

JF: Why did you choose to do that?

BM: He was a gentleman with me. He was good with us, and I wanted him to know that we have survived, and something pushed me to tell him, not to leave on a lie. You never know, you must always leave a place clean. You never know if you have to come back. That's an old story that my parents always said, "Whatever you do in your life, if you walk through the bus, leave in good terms; if you move in a house, leave the house clean. If you deal with people in another town, leave the town without problems." I think I'm the only one who left Belgium after paying all the taxes that they claimed for the years I was not in Belgium, in view to get the legal papers to leave the country to come to America. When I left Belgium, before leaving, someone approached me from Antwerp, and wanted to give me 10,000 dollars to take with me in my baggage, a little purse, a little bag, full of diamonds, that I would not have to touch. He would put it in my baggage and I could swear on my honor that I don't have anything that I know of. And we decided to come to a new country, and we don't want to start out with the left foot. Although we were completely destitute, we had nothing. Just a few dollars I earned while in Belgium between '45 and '47, before we left. And then I didn't work too much either, because who could work? The mind was not at work. We were completely [unclear], out of the context of life, then Americans were coming down, then ...

JF: You went back then to Volvic, and got your family...

BM: Listen, and get my family, came back to Belgium and the V-1's were still flying. The Germans were still fighting, and the V-1's took away the roof from the house, and my wife said, "Bernard, we survived those years with Gestapo and fire, let's move."

So we smuggled the French border, and we came to the northern part of France, because we had a passport to come in, but no visa to go out. So we smuggled a border, with a parcel, a human parcel. And we came into the northern part of France to Lille; from there we took a train, we came into Paris, and my sister-in-laws were again waiting on the train station, knowing that we would escape, because we were like telepathically communicating. They gave me a little room, and...

JF: This is still before the end of the war?

BM: That was before the end. The fighting is going on in Germany, and my sister-in-laws were back in their apartment. My brother-in-law was still prisoner of war. My nephew had fought in the Resistance, and...

JF: In the French Resistance?

BM: Yes, in the French Resistance. He was 16 years old when he joined. He was a student. He came ...

JF: Had you known that before this time?

BM: Of course. He came in Volvic. I could--what a coincidence! I came down for a night, and I was there. It was tomato seasons, and on the way down I had brought tomatoes to the house. And we were sitting down having a bite, and a knock on the door, I jumped and I hide myself in a corner, where it was dark. And the door opens, and here is a young chap with black hair, no, with red hair, and he looks like David, my nephew from Paris. And my wife says, "David?," and he said, "Chana?," he knows her from *Tante Chana*. He said, "Ya", and then he came into the house, and in his pants, he had two American six-shooters. He was part of the French Resistance. They had committed sabotage on the outskirts of Paris, and there was a price on his head and the group; he was FTPF. He was on the side of the left wing, with the students, of course, and they had committed all kinds of a sabotage. And he knew my address, because I was sending food in the beginning of the war to his mother. So he came just for a rest, his urge to take a breather.

JF: But not knowing that you were also in the Resistance?

BM: Of course not. So the first thing, we took his revolvers; we put on the chimney, was a high chimney. The chimney you could put a whole tree in it, the house was so old, 900 years old. And he was there for a while with us for a few days. I left and I left him with the family, and then later on, I found out, after two days he had left, too. Because he didn't want to bring any problems to the house. But he was black-haired, beautiful, a typical Jewish boy from Warsaw; he was born in Warsaw. And then we met again in Paris.

JF: Where had your wife's sisters been then during the war?

BM: One was in Paris...

JF: She was able to stay in Paris?

BM: Because her husband was prisoner of war, she had the right to be free. The other one was hidden in a room, a little corner, three feet by three feet. Was a bathroom, three feet by three feet...

JF: By a Christian family?

BM: No, by my sister-in-law, in the house where she lived, in the court, and she only at night, opened the window for some air, and during the day, she never opened nothing. And my sister-in-law, having one ration for food, and there was very little. She would collect from the trash cans, from the German restaurants, where the Germans would eat. Then she would come home and she would cook it, and prepare and then she would feed her. When the war was finished, my sister-in-law was yellow from liver disease. And unfortunately, she died three years ago, after we took her one more time to Amsterdam, and to Paris. She wanted to see her sister and brother-in-law. That brother-in-law died last year. They're all dying. Not young, but they're dying. All the sisters have died.

JF: But your one sister, Rebecca, is still alive.

BM: She is alive. Then after I came to America, in '47, she didn't want to join us.

JF: Wait, before you get to your coming to America...

BM: So after being there, I came back to Volvic and I said to my wife, "You know what? I must go to the priest and tell him a few things. He was with us in the *Maquis*." So I went to him and I said, "Father Matieux, can I speak to you?" "Sure, my son," he said, "come in." And he was a very jovial old man, white, quite young for his age, and in his rectory he had a big Christ hanging, and his little desk, a couple of chairs. And I said, "Father, I'm ready to go back to Belgium." And he blessed me and he said, "Fine." I said, "But Father, I cannot leave with a lie." "Now what kind of a lie could you have told me?" he said. "Well, Father, all the time you've known me for a Protestant. Well," I said, "I am an Israelite." And his mouth opened, and he stood up from behind his desk and came to me, and he hold me in his arms and gave me an accolade. "My son," he said, "I am proud of you. Our Lord, Jesus Christ, was a Hebrew too." I said, "I know, Father," I said, "I know. Unfortunately," I said, "he didn't fight back, and look what the Romans did to Him." He said, "I'm proud of you." And he said, "You have really shown that you are a living nation," and he came with me to the house and he blessed my wife and the children. And he brought bars of chocolate for the children, and he brought a half dozen eggs that we should boil to take on the trip. And then we took the bus. We said nothing to nobody; we took the bus and went to Clermont-Ferrand, to take the train. Came to Clermont-Ferrand, took the train; we had to cross bridges that were blown. I carried Yvette on my shoulders and Eliane in my arms, and Armand was giving his mother the hand, and we made it to Paris. We came to Paris; we found out there is no trains for civilian people. And I had received a permit to take out from France toward Belgium. Because I was from the Resistance, I had the right to take with me two bottles of pure alcohol, five kilo of walnut flesh, two bottles of--Well, anyway, I had a bundle of food to take with me. It was still

wartime. And I come to the northern station to take a train to Brussels, everything is military. The Americans are traveling from France to Brussels, from Paris--from Brussels to Paris. And my wife gets excited. I said, "You sit with the children." And I go and look into a train. And the trains--there is no train like that in America. Two doors open in the center like a subway train, but modern and big. And all the luggage of American soldiers are in one corner. And there was young soldiers having a good time, eating chocolate, and I didn't see chocolate for five years. And I go up to the train, and I am dressed still with my costume from the Resistance, and I go to one, I said, "Anybody speaks French?," in French, of course. And they start laughing amongst them "Frog legs, frog legs", but I don't understand, so [unclear]. Then one said, he speaks a little bit, and I explained to him, I said, "I'm the Resistance. I want to go back to Belgium, but there is no room for civilians. Would you help me take my family back to Brussels?" He translated. Well, in three minutes I had room for my family. We put the children among the soldiers. We mixed my baggage with their luggage, and we sit amongst the guys. And that guy who spoke a little French, translated to me. He said, "You make believe that you are part of us. Don't move in case anybody comes in." "That's my sister, Rebecca." [Tape stops and starts] So my sister--I came back with my family and then we smuggled back the border. My sister-in-laws gave us hospitality, and they had the spare room, but it was too small for the five of us. So I took Armand and the young one to the Belgian Red Cross, who took the children and put 'em in a camp, like a vacation camp for children, like you would say in America; it's a camp, right, summer camp. In French it's called, *Une Colonie*. And the children were away about 60 miles out of Paris. And in the meantime, I found a job in a pocketbook factory; I had learned a lot of skill, remember. I was earning what to live--the winter came and it was a rough winter. You know, we had left in the winter, and it was a rough winter. One day there, I received a letter from a cousin who had found me in France. I received a check from my Uncle Boris, also a letter; I must have told you, I received a check from America through American friends. And there was one of my cousins in the army of General Patton, and because of that, he came to France with Patton. And while we were in Paris, a letter followed us all the way from where I was in Volvic, telling us that he was with General Patton in Paris, and I should look him up, on this and this date, in this hotel. The trains, the buses were all running and the trains and the subway was very hard to get, so my wife and her sister walked all the way from *Port de Clingnancourt* to *Place De La Republique* [in Paris]. That's a long trek. And they came to the place where I was working, about three p.m. I read the letter, very excited, "You have a cousin who is looking for you from America." Well, let me tell you the excitement; I became shaking. I never had a cousin of mine, from my side. While in Belgium we had no one, just my father and the children. Then I had family from my wife. That was a large family. But it was my family because once you are my family, we don't go with third cousins, second cousins, fifteen cousins. We are family, and blood is thicker than water. And I started looking for my cousin and I came on *Champs Elysees*, Hotel Georges V, and I asked for Herman Atenson

[phonetic], and the clerk spoke beautiful French. He said, "Let's find out." Loud speaker. No Herman Atenson. He said "Go look." Go look if you don't know what you're looking for? When I go look in the eyes of every American soldier, millions of them, maybe three million of them, on R&R, and the street is full of them, and my heart is sinking; it's getting a little darker already. In the meantime, my wife and my sister-in-law, they went back home, that was a long walk, and Yvette was left with a neighbor. And I walk and I feel the tears coming up to my throat; I am ready to cry. As I see this, I see three soldiers walking amongst the other soldiers, and unwillingly, I had a palpitation, like the adrenaline was pumping faster, for what reason, I don't know. And as closer I come, I see one that the face is familiar to me, and I wonder where have I seen him before. It hit me, my niece Cecile, looked like him. And I go to the guy in the middle and of course, I speak not a word of English, and I said in Yiddish, "You are Chaim." And he answered in the same intonation of Yiddish, same accent, "You are Bernard." And we fall into the arms of each other, in the middle of the street. Right away, whole group of soldiers, hey, they were delighted that somebody found somebody; they were missing home, too. And they were clapping in the shoulders. We cannot speak, he is choked, I am choked. In the meantime, from my pocket on the side, I take out the butts that I was saving from the cigarettes. You have five butts, makes one cigarette and he said, "No," he said, and he takes out a pack of cigarettes and gives them to me. Now to the Americans, cigarette is like candy. So they all--they drove me wacky. I shoved a couple of cigarettes in my mouth and start chewing. Well, I choked on it anyway. But it was a good feeling to know that I can afford to chew a cigarette. And my cousin took me under his arm, was a strong guy, and he was like a god to me. My flesh and blood! My father's sister's son. She went to America and my father wound up in Belgium on the same Kishinev pogrom. And Uncle Boris who was in Belgium came to America a few years later. And they had children; those children were the cousins. And cousins were married; and they all decided that the rest of the family from Europe had to come to America. We were five people. Now I had nothing and I was working enough to subside. I made a living while I was with my sister. So he said to me, "Bernard," he said, in Yiddish we speak, "Now you must come to America." I said, "Chaim," I said, "I don't know if I like to come to America because what we know from America is bluffers, gangsters and chewing gum. That's all we know from America." I had no more America in mind that you have in mind now to go to Guadaloupe, or Bekutchamba. But seeing the cousin made another thing. I said, "We have no mind of going to America." And at that time, unknowing about the situation, I was praying somebody in Palestine--I would have loved Palestine, but there was no one. And it was in the limbo, you know it was '45, and nothing was working. So that cousin, Chaim, he said, "Let's go to my hotel room." We get to the hotel room, and he gave a scream, and suddenly from all the steps they started bringing down cartons and boxes with bananas, dried, and food for the children, and tobacco, and cigarettes, and chocolate bars and soap. That was a treasure. I couldn't believe this is for me. Then, after everything was done, he was able to muster a jeep and with three

guys with him and me in the back, holding that treasure of boxes, of America, powdered milk, cereal, figs, dates, raisins, c-rations. You don't know what it means. We came to the court where we lived in Montmartre. As the jeep stopped, the remainder of the Jews over there, made a circle, and it was like a beehive. Somebody found somebody. Everybody was envying me, and I took my cousin into my sister-in-law's little rooms. Oh, a third of this, and they came in, they're not accustomed to that. They didn't live in luxury, but they lived like *menschen* and my sister-in-law made him comfortable. And they start smoking the cigarettes, those three guys, and half of them they throw out. I gave them a big pot; I saved all the butts. So under court was the concierge--you know what a concierge is--she was half decent enough *paskudyak* [disgusting unappetizing person] during the war. My sister-in-law received normal food because she was a prisoner of war's wife, but she had black market, and my sister-in-law couldn't go black market. So for the rations of my sister-in-law, she would give her the second brewing of her coffee, the grind from the second brewing. She would get out of my sister-in-law whatever she could. She had no heart, no heart. Then when my cousins came and they had those butts, she came into the house, you know, very friendly, and I was a dog. I said, "Sorry," I said, "this is a family affair," and I pushed her out. And my sister-in-law couldn't understand, because that's not me. Because I am a sharing person, but here I know what a horrible person she was during--I wouldn't share with her.

JF: Tell me when you were living in Paris, you lived there from '45 then until...

BM: To the beginning of '46. To the end of '45, '45-'46.

JF: Was there any antisemitism toward you?

BM: No, there was not enough Jews left.

JF: And the French themselves were ...

BM: They had their own problem, they had too much collaborators. If you were a collaborator you had to save your neck. If you were Resistance, you were looking for collaborators. They had enough to do with themselves. You know the tale of Babylon; God decided that so many tongues, He's going to confuse them; so He did, he confused them, and they left us alone.

JF: You also mentioned earlier that Armand was *Bar Mitzvahed*.

BM: Yes, well, let me tell you, in Belgium.

JF: Oh, in Belgium.

BM: In Belgium, he was *Bar Mitzvahed*. He was *Bar Mitzvahed* in '46, but late. The end of the winter, must have been in April.

JF: Why did you go back to Belgium then, after this time?

BM: Because of my sister, Rebecca.

JF: You went back to be with your sister?

BM: Naturally. After the war was finished, the Germans already surrendered, and I was an alien in France.

JF: I see.

BM: You know, it's not like you live in Chicago, you come to Philadelphia, you're still in America. You must have residence papers and passports and visa, and card *d'identité* and everything else, and then it was--I had better chance in Belgium, because it was still my homeland.

JF: What kind of work did you do?

BM: I was an orthopedic technician.

JF: Again?

BM: I was always, but I did everything else. I could make a pocketbook, I could be a furrier, and I could be a baker. I could--I was not lazy, and that was the part.

JF: Could you tell me how then, your son was *Bar Mitzvahed*?

BM: Well, at my son's *Bar Mitzvah*, there was not enough Jews in the city of Brussels, but in the whole congregation, Reformed. So my family from Paris, we had an aunt and an uncle who survived, elderly people, and they lived somewhere in Provence, the whole time of the war. She was French from six generations back, from Alsace-Lorraine. Tante Michele, we called her. There is only one daughter left and whenever we go to France, she is Miss Paris for us. She knows France inside out, of course. You know, she would never leave Paris, never. So I worked in Paris. And then that cousin had to leave, and then we came back to Belgium, already had given an address for my sister where she lived. Then we came back to Brussels. And I found employment in Belgium, gainful employment, and people wanted to go into partnership because I was a Belgian, and they had strict rules then, because they had to clear up the atmosphere of all those who had dealt with the Germans, who had made money with the Germans. One morning, on a Monday morning, all the banks closed up; the Belgian money is of no value. You have to bring all your money in, until 20,000 francs they won't question. Above 20,000 francs, they like to know where your money comes from. If your money is legitimate, you put it in the bank, they pay you an interest and within six months you can start taking your money out. But in the meantime...

Tape six, side two:

BM: There was many Jews who in view to save their lives, in view to save their lives, had been obliged to work for the Nazis. And they made mountains of money. It would have been easier to say "no" and then maybe shot or deported, but they saved their lives and made money, and then they gave the biggest part of the money to the Joint Distribution Committee who came immediately after the Allies invaded, the countries where some Jews were remained. And I had offers to go into partnership because I was a Belgian. I could have opened any kind of a place. But an alien could invest money and open a place under my name. Now, I had no money, so people approached me, "Bernard, we'll give you 100,000 francs. You declare it, you take 20,000 for you and when everything is cleared up you give me back sixty." Well, I have never been used to do any shady things, because I was a working man all my life, and I didn't have a big interest of saving rich people's monies, either. That's me. I was a working man and made a very pleasant living, comfortable. I worked out, but I never resented it. I worked and I enjoyed it. In America I worked 23 years for one firm and I loved every hour of it. And it was a lot of hard work. Maybe you know the firm, Henry Simon Company, on 8th and Spring Garden, previously. I was there when the oldtimers were there. And then, one day, I get a letter from America.

JF: You were in Belgium, then, from the end of 1945.

BM: The beginning of '46.

JF: Beginning of '46.

BM: The beginning of '46...

JF: Until...

BM: The beginning of '47.

JF: Until--okay.

BM: Almost a whole year.

JF: During that time, Armand was..

BM: During that time, Armand was *Bar Mitzvahed*.

JF: In the Hollander *Shule* [synagogue].

BM: In the Hollander *Shule*, and I was *Bar Mitzvahed* in the same *shule*. You see, the Jews had two ceremonies. There was a *Bar Mitzvah*, from the synagogue; and you remember I told you we had the religious school in our school system. So Shavuot, the congregation would take all the children from the Jewish school to public and make a communion¹⁶ in the Hollander school. So we were all wearing little uniforms, collars with the black ribbons, little Lord Fauntleroy's; and I remember, I'll never forget, I had high shoes with eight buttons, half leather, and the rest was--hey, I was born before the first World War!

JF: So you were not *Bar Mitzvahed*?

¹⁶Probably means confirmation.

BM: I was *Bar Mitzvahed* in the synagogue, and then I was communioned [see footnote]. You know, the communion [see footnote] was the day of real *Bar Mitzvah* that they give you, that you fulfill your religious initiation, and in the synagogue you became a man, because you are *Bar Mitzvahed*. Hot Potato! That's it! So when you made *Bar Mitzvah*, we invited Tante and Uncle Michele, my sister in-laws; my brother-in-law was not released from the army by then, he was still prisoner of war, and David came. David is my nephew. Then already, I had found my two nieces in the convent. And my nieces, in the convent, found their brother in a monastery.

JF: These were the children..

BM: From my sister Sheva, who never came back. And my brother-in-law, Adolf Rogers. Charles is an eminent physician now and a surgeon in Dresher, Pa. Very after sought for his plastic surgery, you know the women, and he is a fine otolaryngologist.

JF: He was in a monastery.

BM: That's right. Today he is in Belgium, making a pilgrimage with his wife, and his sister and his brother-in-law. The whole adventure over again. So Charles comes back the ninth, and I will be in Brussels the eighth.

JF: How was Armand's reaction then to being *Bar Mitzvahed* after all these years of not identifying?

BM: He felt good about it, because now he said, now I am myself. Until today, Armand is proud of being a Jew, but he has nothing to do with religion.

JF: Now.

BM: Now.

JF: He is not observant in any way?

BM: Not at all.

JF: But he identifies himself as a Jew.

BM: Oh, absolutely. Absolutely.

JF: This was also the first time, you mentioned before, that your daughters found out that they were Jewish.

BM: Right.

JF: Do they identify as Jews?

BM: Oh, very deeply. Both are involved in a synagogue; their children go to synagogue and they are--I am proud of them because I am like the Jew who said, "God, I have a quest. I am angry, explain to me." But I know that religion is a philosophy, but if not that religion, there wouldn't be a people. That's what hold us together, that Torah.

JF: They also all married Jews?

BM: Of course. So far, yes. We are lucky in that respect. All our children married Jews. Yes, it's sad, but today--Look at the question, *gotenu!* [My God!]

JF: Today it is a legitimate question.

BM: I am very fortunate, I know, my children married Jews, and all Jewish people, and they have Jewish homes and everything. And we keep the *yom tovim* [Jewish

holidays], and we have Jewish names and we keep tradition. And I am very traditionalist, very traditionalist. I believe if there is not tradition, there is no tomorrow. If I cannot give them what my grandfather left to my father, then I will have failed.

JF: When you finally came to the U.S. which was the beginning...

BM: Ooh, we struggled...

JF: ... of '47 ...

BM: We came in '47, in the winter of March.

JF: Why did you finally decide to come to the United States?

BM: Because the streets were empty and I saw blood everywhere. And I want for my children to know better and I was hoping that America would give 'em something better.

JF: And when you came you brought with you, your daughter...

BM: My wife and my three children.

JF: Did you also bring your three children and your sister?

BM: No the children were in the orphanage, because I couldn't get the papers and I couldn't get the financial means to bring 'em over. However, one year later when I was in America--and I struggled everything, that would be six pages to fulfill. After I found out, later on, that Charles, Cecile and Annie were in discussion to be adopted by a Canadian family, I start asking my relatives to try to impress upon, whoever wants them to go to Canada, they should come here. I want to be their ward. They are my sister's children, my brother-in-law; they have a nice name, a good name, a fine Jewish name; they should remain with their name. And if worse comes to worst, I'll adopt 'em, but there is no reason to adopt 'em out. I'll be their guardian. Well, I drove my family up the wall, until I was able to get 'em to the point where some relatives were very influential. They realized that to bring me over, they needed an affidavit of a million and a half dollars. The government of America was not keen to the Jews. That's--we are not anything but Jews. So, that family was able to impress upon the Joint, who made the necessary efforts, and the children came to us in one of the LSD ships, you know, those military. Their trip was horrible. We came like *menschen* on the Gripsholm, the ambassador ship. But they came under terrible conditions. When they came to America, Charles was then 13, Cecile was 17, and Annie was 18.

JF: This was what year that these children...

BM: '48.

JF: '48, okay. Is there anything else about your war experiences that you want to add?

BM: No, I think that I have concluded with this. There is details, but of no importance. I think so far, I have told everything I wanted to tell, and if there is anything else, it will come out in the book that I intend to write, that is being written. After the book is written and there is things that you find, who have not been told, then you can take excerpts and you give credit to the book, and that's all.

JF: Wonderful. Mr. Mednicki, thank you so much.

BM: Oh, you're very welcome. I thank you for your patience with me.