

Interview with Maurice Asa  
Holocaust Oral History Project  
Date: 7/10/90  
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Tape 2 of 2

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Q: LET ME ASK YOU ONE OTHER QUESTION WHILE WE'RE TALKING ABOUT HOW THIS EXPERIENCE AFFECTED YOU? HOW DID IT AFFECT YOUR VALUES, WHAT YOU WANTED TO TEACH YOUR CHILDREN ABOUT WHAT IS IMPORTANT?

A: First my feelings. There was a great deal of anger. Essentially, anger at the death of my parents. Anger because, essentially, I lost a great section of my life. My life was, from 1939 when the war broke out until, my life, my normal life resumed when I married my wife in 1957. That's 18 years. A segment of 18 years of my life was essentially lost. Great anger about this.

What I taught my children? I don't think I consciously taught them, do this, or do not do that. I think they got it by osmosis. I mean, obviously we taught them to read and we made sure they were kept in good health. They did their homework, they went to Boy Scouts or campfire girls. You know, that sort of thing. They participated in sports, they learned to swim, they were good kids. I am proud to say that none of my children -they are grown up, my son is approaching 31, the other one just became a lawyer recently, he's 29 - they never experimented with

drugs, they never got involved in all the plagues of today's youth. My bond with my wife is very strong. We have a very strong family. We never divorced, and they had a strong, a lot of affection, a lot of love, so. I think it is not something where we told them, you do this, you love that person. I think they got it through osmosis.

Q: YOU SAID YOU HAD WANTED TO BECOME A LAWYER YOURSELF.

A: Well it's my parents. Either a lawyer or a doctor was another one. Every mother, even in France, wanted a boy to become a good Jewish doctor. If you couldn't become a doctor, maybe you could become a lawyer.

Q: YOUR DAUGHTER HAS BECOME A LAWYER.

A: My daughter became a lawyer.

Q: AND YOUR SON A DOCTOR?

A: No, no no no no. He has a factory. He is in the plastic businesses, the (injection molding) business.

Q: AND WHAT DID YOU FINALLY END UP DOING?

A: I worked for many years, from '54 to '55 I did odd jobs. I must say that the french give you a good grounding when you leave the lycee. Because of the background I had in science and math I ended up by taking correspondence courses etcetera and things like this, and learning quite a bit about electronics. I ended up by being a manufacturer representative for scientific research equipment sold to universities and medical schools from 1958 to last year when I retired.

Q: YOU MENTIONED THAT YOU HAD A POEM?

A: I had two or three things. (*He brings up a photo - a class picture*) First of all, I don't think it can be seen from such a distance. I don't know. Here is my good friend (Isadore Greenberg). In the text I had prepared I had used the same word. He was among the best and the brightest. He was tops in latin, tops in mathematics. He's a young man who died in 1942. This is (Pierre Almoter), he was one of my best friends. This is (Ajel Nick), he was one of my best friends. And here I am. I was always the small kid so I was always sitting in front.

Q: WE'LL TAKE A PICTURE OF THAT AFTERWARDS.

A: (*He reaches for a book*) Recently at the (Judah Magnus) museum there was an exhibit on the sephardic jews, and I visited that, obviously. I picked up that book here. The title is And

the World Stood Silent, Sephardic poetry of the holocaust. A lot of it is written in (ladino). It was translated by Isaac Jack Levy who is a PhD and professor of Spanish studies at the University of South Carolina.

This one, as it happens, was written in french, and it has, thank god, a translation in English. It was written by (Marcel Shalon), who happens to have been born in (Idiamay), which is a border town between Turkey and Bulgaria where my father was born. It struck a strong cord because it's a poem that was written...it says the title was "Nice," the town, "December 1943." This was the time when all the jews were rounded up. I will read it in English (*Transcriber's note: I am not attempting to guess at line breaks. Please see text in And the World Stood Silent for the poem's intended structure*):

"There were three of them: the husband, the wife, and their baby. There were three with so many thousands. They picked them up one fine day. They put them behind the barbed wire. They were young and full of life. Full of life like all their brethren. The father's name was David. It is criminal. So open they traded their hearts like a cry. Their eyes burned with the never-ending salt of their tears. On the barbed wire they hang the bloody shreds of their pain. Oh, there were many, these brothers of misfortune who remembered

at night the bitter gall of their past times. Having only the moon to warm their hearts, their teeth shattering the icy wind, their hearts wilted like (?) flowers, they wash their hands in a water without history. By their forced marches to death, they fed the furnaces of the crematorium. Poor David, you are gone. That is your fate. Your fate, like that of so many others whose very numbers drive one mad. There you are, buried in the ice of death, in a century that dares speak of glory and prestige. Oh my poor, poor Jewish brethren, you did not deserve to be struck down like dogs, and (reckoned) because of this wretched retreat of humanity."

It struck a cord because my father is named David, and it happened in Nice. And you know, in France - today it might be different - but in France when you were called David or Rachel or Samuel, it was not French quote-unquote. You were a foreigner. You were a Jew. And there was a lot of Anti-semitism and xenophobia in France. Even now, you know what happened in May. That's why it says in the poem "The father's name was David. It is criminal" It was considered in France to be criminal. To be named David was a blotch on your honor.

The other one - I thought I made a translation of that because it is not translated in English. (*He pulls up a other book*) I'm

afraid I may have to put my glasses on because it's so, I translated it quickly just in my car before I came here. It's a poem. The title of this book is Memoires De L'Ombre, Memory of the Shadow, meaning memory of the fighting in the shadow, by Captain Paris, who was the *nomme de guerre* of Lucienne (Dufour) who was the commander of our group in (La Drome).

He was born - I am translating quickly from the back - he was born in 1920 in Paris, the eighth child of a family. He was self-taught. He was deported to Germany in 1941 and was wounded twice while he tried to sabotage the German war machine. In other words, from that I infer that he was sent as a worker to Germany. Many french workers tried to sabotage them. He escapes in 1943 and joins the Maquis in the southern part of France. He becomes Captain Paris and forms the first battalion of (Frontierre Partisan Francais), which is the one I was part of.

My friend Doctor (Iroso), he became a doctor later on, was a french officer in one of the french (war) schools in (Sumeer) in 1939-40. He escaped being taken prisoner by the Germans, and went back to unoccupied part of France where his family resided. And then he joined the Maquis. Because he had formal military training not all of them had, he became one of the heads of our group, lieutenant. His *nomme de guerre* was lieutenant Yves. He kept his first name, his name was Yves also. He was struck by a bullet in the leg and his (sciatic) nerve was severed. About ten

years later they had to amputate it completely. He resumed his studies and became an MD, and in fact, Barbara and I visited him twice, in 1982 and 1984 in France, and we are in correspondence. Once every three, four or five months we write to each other.

He wrote a lovely poem at the end of the book called "Comrades who died at age 20."

"Comrades who died at age 20, where has our youth gone. Our fury, our tenderness, now that I am 60. Comrades who died at 20, we called each other brothers. We had the same anger, the same love, the same blood. Comrades who died at 20, we knew little about politics. We did calisthenics. We sang the same songs. Comrades who died at 20, we wore funny rages. We were dressed like gypsies or parrots. Comrades who died at 20, was your death useless? Could you have believed how many worthless politicians would come after you? Comrades who died at 20, who still remembers your acts of glory? Who thinks of your stories? The dead disturb the living. Comrades who died at 20, I saw your faces in the looks of those naughty little boys who could be my grandchildren. Comrades who died at 20, your youth is eternal. Our world lives in you, you are the living."

It is difficult to translate poetry, you know. In french it's superb.

A: IT'S A BEAUTIFUL TRIBUTE THOUGH. IS THERE ANYTHING ELSE YOU'D LIKE TO ADD, THAT YOU HAVEN'T COVERED?

Q: No, well, yes. I would like to thank the french people who saved me, who helped save me at great risk. My sister was in France in November of last year. By sheer luck she managed to find the Charrasse family who saved me, so I am planning to write to (Yad Vashem) to request that their name be entered among the names of the righteous gentiles.

Q: COULD YOU SPELL THAT FOR ME?

A: C-H-A-R-R-A-S-S-E. They live in the village of E-N-T-R-E-C-H-A-U-X. They live in the same farm my sister told me, but the farm has been completely remodeled and is a marvel of modern facilities.

I want to thank my wife and my children for the support they gave me all these years. And, I want to thank the United States. That's it.

GRAPHICS

*A description of the graphic appears in bold type inside square brackets []. Any comments about graphics follow the brackets.*

[Map]

[Family Tree]

[School - Class Picture] A: I was around 13, it must have been 1936, 1937. Lycee class. Here I am, in the front row. I was always a small kid.

Q: COULD YOU IDENTIFY YOUR FRIEND THERE?

A: (Isadore Greenberg).

Q: OK, NEXT.

[Drancy] A: This is the Drancy camp out of which 71,500 jews were shipped to their deaths to Auschwitz and other concentration camps. My parents were in convoy 66 and were sent out of Drancy to their deaths on January 20th, 1944. After the war I visited Drancy and took that picture. It was 1945 or 1946. There was a big ceremony to honor the dead.

Q: SO THESE PEOPLE ARE ALL VISITORS?

A: Precisely.

[Cell 17] A: This is the cell, cell 17 where my parents were in Drancy.

[Wedding photo of couple] Q: OK, THIS IS YOUR PARENT'S WEDDING PHOTOGRAPH?

A: Exactly. {Photo taken in} 1923, in Paris.

[Grandparents] Q: THIS IS YOUR PATERNAL GRANDPARENTS PHOTOGRAPHED IN TURKEY PROBABLY BEFORE THE FIRST WORLD WAR?

A: Yes, because my Grandfather is wearing a fez, which was Muslim head gear. After the war when (Kamil Atar Turk) came into power in Turkey he outlawed the wearing of the fez.

[Woman] A: She was a beautiful woman - (Straya) Tcherassi - my maternal Grandmother who died in Auschwitz in 1944, as soon as the convoy reached Auschwitz. She was in convoy #66 with my parents. Even as an old woman - she must have been very beautiful because that picture was taken when she was 72, 73, and she still has extremely attractive features.

[Book] A: This is (Klausfeld's) book. My parents are there; convoy #66.

[David Goldberg] A: I want to show, so he won't be forgotten. Lieutenant Garcia, who's real name was David Goldberg, was mortally wounded during one of our encounters against the Germans in the guerilla group I am still proud to be a member of.

[Two Documents] A: The large one is my discharge papers for the French forces, and certifying that I was part of the French Maquis. The second one is my membership in the - old codgers like us who still belong to the group of people who remain of the guerilla fighters from that particular region {Drome-Sud} in France. There are about 90 of us who are still alive.

[Musical notes on a wall] A: This is the graffiti that was in a cell at the camp of Drancy in France where the jews were gathered before being deported to Germany. And it reads, "Freedom is all the life." Some deportee wrote this before being deported to Auschwitz and I photographed this inside the cell when I visited the Drancy camp when there was a memorial ceremony there.

Q: AND IS THE PIECE OF MUSIC FAMILIAR? ORIGINAL?

A: No. Not at all. It's like a song, but the man who drew those notes may not even have known music at all. It was a symbol rather than a tune, I gather, but I'm not sure.

[Flag-draped Casket] A: These photos, later on there was a ceremony in memory of the deportees, with a symbolic casket draped with the French flag.

[Hand-written letter] A: This is the letter that my mother sent me from Drancy. It was written front and back. In that letter she expressed her love for my sister and I, and hoped we would be very brave. She ends the letter saying "Courage. Courage." Coming from a woman who was about to face death in a few weeks, you can have nothing but fantastic admiration. Were those words recorded?

[Document] A: This is my diploma of Baccalaureate in 1942, which I successfully passed. When I showed that to UC Berkeley upon my arrival in 1954, they gave me automatically two years credit if I wanted to continue my studies towards a bachelor's degree, but I didn't have any money. I could not continue my studies.

Q: I SEE YOUR NAME IS SPELLED DIFFERENTLY.

A: Yes, in order to have the sound /ay-sa/ with a soft "s" in French you need two "esses" between two syllables. In English it is not necessary, so I dropped one consonant, one "s."

[Book] A: A picture of the book, And the World Stood Silent: Sephardic Poetry of the Holocaust, by Isaac Jack Levy, who is a professor of Spanish Studies at the University of Southern Carolina. He gathered all the poems written by sephardic jews during the holocaust in memory of the 160,000 sephardic jews who died during the holocaust.

[Bulletin, in French] A: The latest bulletin I got from the society of the old guerilla fighters in my group. I don't know if you can focus on this, but at this point here my name is mentioned. They sent me that bulletin from France. My name is mentioned here. I had requested they publish a directory of all the members because they haven't done so yet. I know there are 90 of us surviving. I know some of them who were my friends in the Maquis, but I don't have the names of all the members, so I requested that a directory be printed and my name is there. Can my name be seen? It's an amazing camera you have.

[Family Photos] A: Those are pictures taken during the good holidays we had between 1930 and 1939. The bottom one, the large one is my father, my mother and my sister.

Q: DID YOU TAKE THAT PHOTO?

A: I don't remember. Probably, with a box camera. My father could have had a box camera in the middle 30's. Remember those little box cameras?

[Another family photo] A: This is a picture of my mother - if you can focus on that one - a picture of my mother, me here, my sister in the middle, my cousin, an uncle and an aunt. {It was taken} in (Jwa les fants), on the French Riviera.

[Another family photo] Forget these two here, if you can, focus on that one. It's my mother, my sister and I. I am sort of clowning, lifting up my cap. This is in the (Le Tourcay Par les Plage), a rather swanky resort in France.

[Two young boys] A: This one perhaps has significance. At the same place (Par les Plage, Le Tourcay), I made friends with a small Englishman who was four or five years younger than I am. Strangely enough, we saw him in the United States a year and a half ago. He had remembered where we lived. It's a small world.

[Hardware Store] A: Here is the hardware store of my father, in the 11th (arrondissement) in Paris. I am in a small chair, a stroller, I must be three years old.

[One Boy] A: Here in that fading picture on the top it's me. I must be six or seven years old.

[Woman and child] A: And in that one... I must be three or four years old. I am in the sand on a beach, I don't know where. I am sitting on the lap of my mother who is holding me in her arms. I would like to end up on that picture.

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