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Summary of Oral Interview with André Assus

Part I

Born: Algiers, Aug. 13, 1917 **Father:** Armand—artist, painter **Mother:** Rachel Levy— no profession

Background: André Assus didn't receive a Jewish education. The events in Palestine-Israel during 1930s and 1940s didn't interest him at the time. He was 22 years old when WWII broke out and he was mobilized into the medical corps of the French army. He stayed in Algeria and was there when the Armistice was signed between France and Germany in June, 1940. His reaction to this was very negative and he decided to join de Gaulle's appeal and become a Resistance fighter. He had heard of Pétain, didn't know him, but thought it was a bad situation. (**Note:** Marshal Pétain was head of the French Vichy government.) He was upset when he received news about the new Pétain government, and his parents agreed with him.

Situation in Algeria, his reactions, the Arab population: The racists and antisemites were pleased with these events. When discussing reactions, Assus is referring to opinions among his close circle of friends and family, not including Arabs. Algeria was racist and antisemitic and the Europeans there were pleased with the consequences of the union between France and Germany. André was very disturbed when anti-Jewish laws were passed in France in October, 1940 but he wasn't surprised. He was also very upset when the Crémieux Decree was revoked in 1940. (**Note:** The Crémieux Decree of October 1870 gave French citizenship to Algerian Jews but not Muslims.) Asked whether he felt French or Jewish, he said he didn't distinguish between being French and Jewish.

He spent his childhood in Paris, arriving in Algeria when he was 17 years old and it's only then he found out he was Jewish. He was born in Algiers but left when he was 18 months old. He didn't see a big difference between attitudes in Algeria and France. The universities were antisemitic.

The reaction of Arabs toward Jews after the revocation of the Crémieux Decree: They expected it, weren't surprised, and the Jews knew it was the beginning of a bad period. The Arabs, who weren't antisemitic at this time, kept quiet and didn't join the German side.

The Resistance: Assus was a student when the Crémieux Decree was revoked, and this affected his social and professional life. University studies were stopped and he started contacting the Resistance movement in France starting in January 1941. His contact, Jean Attias, went to Nîmes and contacted *Libération Sud*, a Resistance group, and there they started organizing meetings for the Resistance in Algiers.

He became a member of the Resistance involved in the November 8, 1942 Operation Torch. Several groups participated—Jean Attias and André Achiari, chief of police in Algiers, were in the group. From that time forward, Assus was supposed to be silent and only act on orders. He rounded up a large number of students from the university and in his entourage, but only when given orders, and didn't personally make any decisions. Silence was total, so they didn't know each other well. Among the people he knew were Pierre Balkan, Gérard Moll, and Paul Levy. He

didn't have the right to make personal decisions but was asked to contact people as possible recruits for their group. He remarks that it's difficult to give the names of everyone, but talks about his cousin, Paul Levy, and his Resistance group. Levy was wounded and one arm was paralyzed. He mentions another cousin, Edmond Albou, who was imprisoned but liberated after 48 hours when the Americans landed. He had written a letter to his parents in case he was killed but lived. Others he contacted were medical students. His wife helped him recruit people (they weren't married at the time). There were also military officers.

There was no discussion of carrying arms but in the end he had them. Assus and his friends trained using firearms in the countryside in a forest area (*Forêt de Bellême*). He also had physical training at the *Salle Géo Gras* (**Note:** a sporting venue named after a boxer). Everything was secret, but the Resistance suggested he go there to train. He went two - three times a week to box and learn methods of exerting force. He can't give definitive answers about their plans because they were supposed to be discrete and vowed silence. Everything was secret. The interviewer mentions the names of people who could have been involved, and he remembers some of them: Paul Sebaoun, Paul Ankaoua, the interviewer's father Raoul, and Morali, among others. He talks about one member, Lucien Loufrani, whom he contacted, and Loufrani became an intermediary with (Henri) d'Astier de la Vigerie. He had met de la Vigerie once before, but he was in a different group. He discusses how contacts were made among some members of the group and d'Astier de la Vigerie.

Was he aware of the danger in opposing the government? Yes, but no one dissuaded him from doing it. What factors, in order of importance, affected his decision to fight the Vichy government? Was it as a Frenchman, a Jew, to defend his civil liberties, or de Gaulle's appeal? De Gaulle's appeal of June 18, 1940 convinced him to join the resistance. His impression of de Gaulle: he admired him but they didn't have much choice. He heard de Gaulle's speech with a friend in a bar whose owner was also a Resistance member. He immediately decided they would support him. He's not sure how many people heard the speech that day. There were also Germans eating dinner in the bar. The bar's owner pointed them out and they deflated the tires of the German vehicles—a big risk!

Activities of the Resistance, the leaders: What were the names of their leaders? They were not supposed to know but it was Achiari (Mr. X). A discussion follows regarding Achiari's function and how much others knew. Assus didn't know some of these details, but the interviewer believes that Achiari was being watched by the government and continued working anyway.

What were André's activities before November 8, such as training and procuring arms? How did he get arms? He doesn't know how weapons were obtained, but his friends had them. The kinds of weapons used were hand guns and rifles. Some were better than others at handling the weapons, but all had about the same level of skills. He was introduced into *Géo Gras* by friends.

To what extent did he participate in dangerous activities before the November 8 operation? He engaged in minor activities, like puncturing tires of German vehicles. He was also asked to arrange meetings with people in cafés, for example, to recruit them, but he needed orders to do this. He couldn't operate on his own. He interrogated about ten people, who had already

been vetted to some extent, so there were no problems with acceptance into the group. Some resented not being contacted. Did he think they were doing something important?

Part II

From the beginning, they knew they were preparing the American landing. Whatever the risk, there was no choice. They didn't know the exact date but were told two to three days ahead of the day the operation occurred.

November 8, 1942: What happened? Were there weapons? Did they wear uniforms? Who were his colleagues? Did they succeed in their goal? The day before, on November 7 in the evening, with Marguerite (who became his wife), contacts were made with certain military leaders in the area who were supposed to join them. He contacted his group, alerting them of any action that would occur, told them where to go, the passwords, etc. He also contacted his cousins. The principal role of Assus was to warn and round up the members of the group. He also went to the cinema and mounted the stage to alert and round up people, gathering five or six members. He went and hid in his house where there was a command post—his parents helped. This was the evening of November 7.

Pierre Balkan from another group came and said there were a lot of defections and they had to take over the central police station. They needed his help, so he joined José Aboulker's group. There were only seven - ten of them and they took German weapons at the central police station. Assus carried weapons with him when they occupied the police station. He's not sure how the arms were obtained, but thinks they had been stored in the Garage Lavesse. This was his second important action—occupying the central police station. Telephone specialists cut off all communication with the military and they contacted all the military leaders. When they came to see why they had been asked to come, they were locked in the basement.

People who were with him at the central police station: the Calvet brothers, with André acting as the liaison between Aboulker and Anselme (Anthelme—he says spelling of the name is uncertain). He describes his functions as go – between from the inside to the outside to see what was happening. He tried to convince Anthelme to come inside, but he wouldn't. He stayed until 2:00 or 3:00 a.m. and wore an armband with VP on it that allowed him to pass when the police stopped him. The band indicated he was a volunteer. Later, he burned his armband and destroyed documents. He was also told not to sleep in the same place more than one night. They were looking for them because many people had been killed in other places like Oran and Morocco, but not in Algiers. Only about two people were killed and one was wounded. They had stopped the army from acting, but it was different elsewhere. How long did he stay at the central police station? He arrived at midnight and stayed until about 3:00 a.m. He still had things to do but others stayed on. At home, people came to get information and refreshments as everyone waited for news. He had no guns at home but they had rifles at the central police station. There were no uniforms since they were a civilian group. He didn't have contact with the French Gaullist military nor with the Vichy government. Neither were there contacts with the Americans or the British.

Emotions on the day of the operation and subsequently: Was there a feeling of satisfaction or disappointment? What were the reactions of his friends and family—respect? Was he a hero?

He was respected but he was disappointed in the late arrival of the Americans who didn't abide by their commitment to them. What about the commander of the French troops, Gen. Giraud? They fought against Giraud. Assus met de Gaulle a few months later when he arrived.

There wasn't a noticeable change in the daily lives of the Resistance members but there was among the Vichyists. Their insignias were all strewn on the ground. What about the Gaullists? They weren't Gaullists until later. What about the Jews? Everyone he saw had hope, not despair. After November 8 there was some disappointment because they had no power, but there was no despair. They were determined to fight until the end. Among the Moslems there was no real change—they were rather sympathetic.

His thoughts on the delay in reinstating the Crémieux Decree in 1943: Assus claims that Americans always deal with whatever government is in place and they negotiated with Darlan and Giroud, who were both Piétenists; (**Note:** François Darlan was commander-in-chief of all Vichy French military forces at the time.) When de Gaulle came in May, 1943, Assus met him. He talks about contacts that were made with London and how de Gaulle changed things. De Gaulle asked their opinions about the situation and Assus had conversations with him about the French army. The Republic started when de Gaulle arrived. His impressions of de Gaulle: a real republican with republican, democratic qualities—he was the man who was needed at the time. Assus contrasts him to Giraud and Darlan who had communications with Pétain and the scuttling of the French fleet at Toulon.

Debate regarding the Operation: Asked if Assus was proud of what he had accomplished as a Jew or a Frenchman, he responded "both". The interviewer mentions a debate among Israeli historians as to whether this was a Jewish operation that succeeded due to Jewish participation, with José Aboulker as leader. Others deny the Jewish aspect of this operation. Assus says it is ridiculous to say this. Aboulker wasn't the commander. André's wife helped him a great deal at the time (they weren't married yet). He mentions others who were in charge. He also had contacts with the socialist and communist groups, who all left him disappointed. But the monarchists helped them and rallied to the cause. Thus, there were many Jews and monarchists involved in the operation. Was it a Jewish operation? He doesn't think it was exclusively a Jewish operation since they had to depend on others. There were several leaders and even Aboulker had to depend on others. Nevertheless, there were a lot of Jewish volunteers. He won't say anything negative about the monarchists and royalists because they supported them. They took up arms with the Jews.

His opinion regarding the establishment of the State of Israel in 1948: Was he affected positively or negatively by what was going on there? Assus answers that he admired Israel and the thinking of the people. After the Shoah, his attitudes changed but at the time there wasn't the Shoah and they thought of themselves as French. He didn't imagine that there would be the destruction of the Jewish people in Europe. However, they had an idea of what was going on from the beginning. He had sympathy for Israel but never thought of moving there. He was subsequently delegated by the State of Israel as a judge in certain trials concerning Jews who had behaved badly. The cases involved a few Moroccan Jews right after the establishment of the State of Israel who were involved with trafficking. He judged them, as did others as well.

André's wife, Marguerite, speaks: They were very naïve at the time. They had a friend, a pharmacist named Loufrani. His brother was a businessman accused of having committed a crime and went to prison. In jail he claimed to have met a Gaullist resistance fighter who was arrested but escaped. He was recommended to them — Marguerite received him and André's parents sheltered him. Then they realized he was a traitor. They emphasized how naïve they were. This was in 1941. Marguerite mentions her sister was part of a communist network.

Part III

Marguerite's sister, Communist Party: Marguerite talks about her sister and her friends. They were communists before, and became involved in the Resistance movement after the Armistice. There was a change in the Communist Party in France after Stalin changed camps and the Russians wanted the French to betray the war effort. This was in 1939. Her sister and her friends were worried. They had their picture taken, but from the back. Even so, they were arrested in 1941 but managed to get out. Achiary (**Note:** Police commissioner in Algiers) protected communists less than others and had to make arrests from time to time. Her sister's friends had careers after the war. One of them was on the jury at the Nuremberg trials. André and Marguerite met before the war in 1939 at the University, where they were studying medicine.

Marguerite's reaction, situation in universities: Her family was worried. They were anti-Piéténists. Her father took the train every day for work and made propaganda for de Gaulle, so he was denounced. But his boss was the mayor, talked to him, and said two accusations were needed to convict him, but there was only one. Consequently, he wasn't sent to a camp since the denunciation wasn't valid. There were several networks that were anti-Pétain and engaged in propaganda on the radio, etc. and some were denounced.

What about the general population? Could you speak freely? No, you had to keep quiet, especially at the hospital. After the abolishment of the Crémieux Decree, there was a lot of antisemitism. Marguerite mentions that there were student associations such as *l'Association des Etudiants* and *la Fédération des Etudiants*. The latter was liberal, others were very antisemitic. She mentions the son of a professor who headed the *Association des Etudiants* who claimed that Jewish children weren't yet eliminated from pre-school. What about professors? They were despicable. But she mentions two— Lafont and Montpellier—who were liberal. Lafont was a Gaullist. During the Algerian war, he was for the development of the Arabs. Father and son Lafont were obstetricians. At the time of the interview, the son (Edouard) was alive in Antibes.

Aboulker family: A discussion about political affiliations follows. They talk about the Aboulker family and how they knew them. André and Marguerite speak: Henri Aboulker was José's father—André's parents knew him well. The Aboulker children: Raphael was in the Resistance. He imitated Giraud's voice during their operation. Colette Aboulker is José's sister and lives in Israel.

Elaboration on the events of November 8: André describes the atmosphere when he went to round up the various groups —civilians, officers, and crowds of people were watching what was going on. He talks about his command post and when they were in touch with various radio

stations, the Americans, and others. He understood that it was a serious situation. Aboulker the father had given over his entire apartment so they could do this and it was very impressive. There were thousands of Americans and he felt they would win. In the apartment, people circulated, but there were also defections. He recognizes that they were a little naïve as well. The interviewer suggests that it was perhaps an advantage to be naïve because they may not have succeeded otherwise. She also mentions that there were bluffs that evening with misinformation going back and forth, so participants had to use their intelligence to act. Assus agrees with this assessment.

Concluding remarks: Assus then talks about his work in a theater group, *Théâtre de l'Equipe*, created in 1936-1937, and as a radio broadcaster after winning a contest in 1943. He was a professional actor on the new radio station in Algiers. He had a car and chauffeur. They wanted him to set up a radio station in Montichiari . He and Marguerite also talk about their grandson, Felicien, who acted in a soap opera on Radio France.

Marguerite talks about her father-in-law who had a little house in Sidi Ferruch near a forest. The Americans had built a rest camp there for the soldiers, equipped with showers and other comforts. As the Americans took walks, flirting with his pretty daughter, her father-in-law sketched portraits of the soldiers. She shows the drawings of the people who had come to save them. This was early in the war, before Normandy and Italy. She doesn't know their names but they had come to save their lives.

Translated by Felicia Berger Sturzer