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Summary of the oral history interview with Maurice Taouss

Part I

Notes added by translator.

Born: Algiers, Algeria, August 30, 1918

Father: Italian **Mother:** Tunisian. They met in Algiers when his father came looking for work as a maritime carpenter. His maternal grandparents also immigrated to Algeria from Tunisia. Work was available in Algeria since workers were needed to build the country. His father, married at the time, was sent to Marseilles to build and refurbish boats. There, a brother and sister were born, while four more children were born in Algiers when they returned from Marseilles. Maurice is the youngest of four sons and two daughters. His mother worked at home as a seamstress making uniforms for the army. He was in school until age 14, but wasn't a good student and had no interest in studies. He became a couturier for men and then women.

In 1938, Maurice Taouss was called up for army service but didn't go. At seventeen he had a run-in with the law but received a suspended sentence. He was mobilized at age twenty, but didn't respond and was sent to a disciplinary regiment in Auxerre just before the war. He went to prison but then served with the army in 1939. It lasted 29 days—he was wounded, taken care of in Lille and sent back to Algeria on crutches. Germans only wanted soldiers who were able-bodied, not wounded ones. He became a war veteran with serious injuries to his legs, arm, and hand, and was entitled a pension.

Background for Operation Torch: In 1940 there were small resistance movements being formed that contacted each other, especially men who had served in the war. They wanted people of good character and he was contacted. They would meet at *Salle Géo Gras*, a sports venue where they could box, etc. The owner of the building where Maurice lived had a son-in-law who was his contact. They didn't identify themselves as Jews. He went on his own to *Salle Géo Gras* but didn't know it was a meeting place for the resistance group. No one knew since names were not revealed. He knew the interviewer's father (Addad). The Jews in Algiers knew each other since it wasn't a large community. He didn't get a Jewish education at home because he resisted it. He heard about weapons hidden at *Salle Géo Gras* through hearsay and Paul Sebaoun, who told him about them. They moved the weapons to the garage Lavesse in the city and that's where they picked up the weapons on November 8. They used the car belonging to his brother Jacques to move them. There were secret meetings with Émile Atlan, André Temime, and the sons of Prof. Rafael Aboulker, among others. Aboulker would later imitate the voice of Gen. Henri Giraud after the landing (**Note:** Giraud was Commander of French troupes in North Africa). Maurice describes how Giraud was able to land in Algiers with the complicity of Pétain, Laval, and the Germans, when they heard De Gaulle was coming.

On November 6-7, a contact came to ask Maurice if he was free to meet some friends for a party with music at the house of André Temime on Barbazoun Street. This was the signal, and it was understood what everyone was supposed to do. They had trucks furnished by the garage Lavesse. Each group, led by a leader, had a task. They had armbands that showed they were volunteers. He has one left from his brother and there is one at the Invalides. He talks about fascists who were there, including François Darlan's police. (**Note:** Darlan was the Commander of French Vichy military forces.) The different factions in Algiers—Italians, Germans, etc.—had their own headquarters.

November 7 was like any other Saturday. Their group consisted of about thirty people. Taouss had a revolver and was on the second floor above the store where they met. He had a code word to give the guard. Police were everywhere since they were considered terrorists. Only resistance members could enter the apartment, among them Georges Benhamou. They had nothing to do until shortly after midnight, when they made contact with the Americans who landed, and Colonel Jousse, who was head of everything. Guy Pillafort was killed November 8 by a soldier (**Note:** He was a Free French captain who helped the resistance). Taouss describes the debarkation and parachuting of Americans on November 7. The resistance group controlled all the important posts like radio stations, the airport, and the headquarters of the French 19th Corps, where Gen. Koeltz was taken prisoner. Taouss stayed until 7:00 or 8:00 a.m. when a military officer came with the police. They also had police on their side, but things remained peaceful. They were given one hour to leave the premises.

Part II

They were told no one would be left alive if they didn't leave, but no one left. A half hour later Rafael Aboulker was able to get on an American boat and send a message imitating the voice of General Giraud telling everyone to put down their weapons, and that France would take up arms against their common enemy. So the policemen who had given them one hour to vacate now said they could leave when they wanted and both sides would put down their weapons to fight for France. The group left in triumph with people clapping. Maurice's most memorable emotion is seeing his father watching as he came out triumphant. His father wasn't an emotional man but he hugged him and was very proud. His brother, the only one with a car, had distributed supplies for the resistance. Taouss was free and very excited, and they were invited to all the Jewish families in the area to celebrate.

Palestine, 1930s, 1940s: He didn't know what was happening. In 1936 he was eighteen and was recruited by a civil officer with other volunteers to go to Palestine. He almost went but didn't respond right away. It was an unknown land for him. He came back to France in 1940, just before the Crémieux Decree was revoked. (**Note:** The Crémieux Decree, October 1870, gave French citizenship to Algerian Jews but not Muslims. It was abolished in October 1940.) He found out his brother was killed at Dunkirk, which greatly upset him.

Effect of the revocation of the Crémieux Decree on Maurice Taouss: He had taken the Decree for granted before—it didn't exist for him. The revocation didn't change anything for him or his parents. His father continued to work, but a census of all the Jews was required. His father now had a carpentry factory and was no longer a maritime worker. His mother didn't need to work. Leaders of the Algerian Jewish community maintained their status of Jewish citizens in Algeria and didn't create drama when the Crémieux Decree was revoked. They became indigenous subjects, which created inconveniences for them. They didn't accept being considered indigenous subjects, a status they found insulting.

Wartime experiences: Friendship with Moslems: He had many Moslem friends at school and tells how the Arabs saved them. Jews were ready to hide women and children so they wouldn't be counted in the census. Trucks were provided by the garage Lavesse & Bonfils so they could be transported out of the area. He was in a hospital when he heard De Gaulle was coming to Algeria. All the other patients in his ward heard it on the radio as well. He was saved by a young doctor (Dr. Cluzel?) from Clermont-Ferrand, who knew he was Jewish. A priest told him to pretend he was Catholic, act as if he was taking communion, answer his questions, and say nothing about being Jewish. This was to obtain signed papers from the Germans allowing him to go home. French soldiers who weren't able to work were to be repatriated. The priest told the doctor to wrap him in even more bandages so he could be approved for discharge from the hospital. He was twenty-one years old and grateful for what happened. He later tried to find the doctor but couldn't, and the priest died.

He was arrested secretly right after November 8, at 5 a.m. because he had recruited Jews to leave the French army and this was known. Jews were in work camps. The son of the proprietor of his parents' building denounced him and he was accused of plotting against the State. He was at his parent's house for the first time since serving in the Free French Forces. After being taken into custody, he was paraded around the city as an example and secretly taken to a cell with two Vichy sympathizers who had been condemned to death for helping the German bombers. Maurice Taouss was anti-Vichy and stayed in jail for forty-eight hours. Giraud was in charge of everything at the time. His captain, however, was a Gaullist and called the director of the prison demanding that Taouss be released immediately or he'd attack the prison with canon. They released him ten minutes later and he went back to his regiment, re-enlisting in the First Division of Free French Forces for De Gaulle for the remainder of the war. Asked whether he knew of a chalet in the desert where forces were trained before November 8, he said he heard about it but didn't know who trained there. This was in 1943. He used a truck to get around with other recruits and went to Kairouan, Tunisia where he signed up for the duration of the war.

He subsequently went to Libya, Tripoli, Tripolitaine, among other places, describing his experiences during the war. He almost died of dysentery in Tripoli but was saved by a new medication, although many soldiers died. He received permission to go home and rest, and went to his parents' house in Algiers. This is when the son of the proprietor of his parent's building denounced him and he spent three days and nights in a cell. When they found out he's a Gaullist

he was able to rejoin his regiment. He went to Zurawah in Tripolitaine, and then was sent to rest in Rades, Tunisia near the sea, as they waited for the Allied debarkation in Provence. He tells about his travels to Naples, Cassino, Rome, and Lake de Bolsena. They had about ten days of rest and recuperation, circling the lakes waiting for the debarkation in France. He noted that he signed up to serve even though he shouldn't have, since he had already been wounded and was a veteran. Taouss and his brother received awards for their participation in the Free French Forces and the November 8 Operation. Maurice was a *combatant volontaire de la Resistance* (voluntary Resistance fighter) and his story became well known. The Deputy Mayor gave him the Order of the Legion of Honor in the company of his son and wife. He was very proud. His son didn't know his story at first—he was about eighteen years old when it was revealed at a champagne reception in the Town Hall. His son, who had always respected him, was even more proud of him. He had asked who are they talking about, and his wife said “it's your father”.

Part III

Asked whether the participants met after November 8, Taouss said they would get together privately for birthdays, celebrations, etc. The metropolitan police stopped them once but they got away since they knew all the streets.

The interviewer asks questions prepared by an Israeli historian: Is he proud of his accomplishments as a Jew or a Frenchman? Answer: As a Frenchman, he's proud to have proven their tenacity to De Gaulle, who took a year to reinstate the status of Jews as French citizens. France was his country and they proved the value of the Crémieux Decree by their actions. At the time, he was very angry.

There is a debate about the Jewish nature of the November 8 operation—was it primarily Jewish or not? Taouss replies: Before the debarkation, leaders of their movement contacted the *Chantiers de la Jeunesse* which was a non-military youth group authorized by the Germans to maintain order. He tells of their contacts with the group. (**Note:** The *Chantiers* group was a substitute for obligatory military service in the Free Zone and North Africa, with activities similar to the Scouts). At first Taouss and his group weren't taken seriously but then the captain of the *Chantiers* promised to come with his section and help the resistance. The captain was married to a cousin of Taouss. However, the help never came, which left the resistance fighters with only about 180 men who were Jewish. The next day General Juin was arrested in his apartment and said he was proud of the role the French resistance played in arresting him but was sorry they were Jews. (**Note:** Alphonse Pierre Juin commanded French forces in North Africa). He would have preferred Frenchmen who were Christians. Taouss talks about d'Astier La Vigerie who had come from France with Capt. Pillafort. (**Note:** François d'Astier de La Vigerie was a French military leader in Algeria). La Vigerie initially contacted the *Chantiers de la Jeunesse*. Since Taouss and his group of Jews couldn't do it, they had to use intermediaries. A soldier shot Capt. Alfred Pillafort. (**Note:** Pillafort had helped organize the resistance). Taouss talks about his cousin (Poulette Azera?) married to the captain who reneged on his word. He told

the captain he never wanted to see him again. The cousin moved to Nice, divorced the captain, and died there.

Establishment of State of Israel in 1948: He has been to Israel but doesn't regret not living there. He was, however, interested in the events there. He would find it difficult to settle in Israel. He's Jewish and would defend any insult to a Jew, but Jews all have the same temperament and it would be difficult for everyone to get along.

He reiterates that the captain from the *Chantiers de la Jeunesse* who betrayed them was supposed to have come with about 100 recruits to help but didn't do it. Taouss doesn't remember his name.

He tells the story regarding the niece of an important businessman in Algiers who was the mistress of a German officer and was caught. She was paraded around the city in an open truck. Jews didn't have contact with German women. It wasn't the Jews who stopped it but the Germans, who were staying at the Hotel d'Angleterre. Officers from different countries were staying at hotels throughout the city.

He talks about a period when he could have killed someone but it passed with age, reason, and time. If forced to defend a person he loved, he could still do it today. It depends on his state of mind. He emphasizes that the real heroes are the young Jews who fought for the State of Israel rather than the Jews and Frenchmen with whom he fought. He participated for self-interest and as a debt to France. He's proud of the Israeli soldiers who gave back to the Jews their title of nobility. He considers himself a good fighter who respected discipline and did what he was supposed to do when it had to be done. He feels small compared to the Israeli fighters.

Does he feel Jewish, French or African? Taouss responds he's from North Africa and French because France administered Algeria, not because he was born in France. Arabs in France from North Africa are more French than him. He's a *pied noir* first and then French. (**Note:** *Pied noir* is a person from Europe who lived in Algeria during French occupation and then went to Europe or France after Algerian independence). For him, Judaism is a religion like another. He goes to synagogue once a year. He's not religious, but his father-in-law was, and so he had a Bar-Mitzvah before getting married. However, he's a soldier for his religion and respects it. An incident in a bistro is an example. He was outraged by an anti-Semitic comment a man made. He grabbed him by the throat and was promptly escorted out. Jews have been too persecuted and unhappy throughout history, and he reacted as a Jew. Would he react that way to racist comments about other groups? No, he wouldn't because they have their own defenders, but he is not racist.

He recounts a bad incident in his life that he wishes had not happened. He found himself in the Pigalle district after having escaped from a prisoner of war camp. He had a cousin and they went to get coffee in a bistro. Two women at the counter were talking to the waiter and one of them said a lot of Jews were killed, but there are still a lot left. Taouss became violent. He slapped her

and she fell down. His cousin grabbed him, pushed him out the door, shoved him into his house, and closed the door. The cousin knew the waiter would get help. Taouss regrets having done this. At that age, he did things without thinking. It wasn't heroism or courage, but the lack of awareness and the impulsiveness of his youth.

He was never in a camp in Algeria, but almost went there when he was arrested. However, the captain of his division saved him. At a point in his life, he could have killed without taking into account the consequences.

He concludes the interview by reading from a document that honors him and his brothers for service during the Resistance in North Africa and WWII. The numerous awards and military metals he mentions are for Jacques, Sauveur, (died at Dunkirk, June 3, 1940) and himself. He is proud to have done this for France.

Translated and summarized by: Felicia Berger Sturzer
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