

## Summary of Interview with Colette and Nicolas Clément Atlan RG-50.647.0015

**Recorded May 13, 2004**  
**Notes are by Translator**

(Two interviewers are involved.)

**Residence:** Batya, Israel

**Name:** Clément Nicolas Atlan, Hebrew name: Shlomo

**Place and date of birth:** Constantine, Algeria, March 13, 1926

**Wife:** Colette Esther; maiden name Zaraguez(?)

**Place and date of birth:** Constantine, Algeria, August 30, 1930

**Nicolas:** When he was in school, he got along well with the Muslim students. However, there were riots on August 15, 1934 (**Note:** this was an anti-Jewish riot in Constantine). They realized the relationship with Muslims was deteriorating and not long after that there was a chain of events that impacted Jews.

**Family history:** Atlan's father was the postmaster at the post office. His brothers were in the army, and one sister was in medicine. He grew up peacefully, nicely. His father, Charles Salun(?), was born in Batna on June 21. He doesn't remember the year. His mother was Rachel Lelouche. He was very complimentary on how she raised her six children—three girls, and three boys. Atlan was the last of the boys.

**Early years:** In nursery school Mme Mercier took care of them. His schooling continued until he attended technical school. His elementary school memories are vague, but he was a good student and stayed in technical school four years. He studied mechanics, among other subjects. After receiving a technical certificate he joined the army. His school was the *Ecole Pratique d'Industrie* in the El Kantara region of Constantine. He was part of a group of friends. From his house, there were 350 stairs to the school and they would climb all the way up and then come down. He had Jewish and non-Jewish friends who didn't know he was Jewish and invited him for Christmas and to church. He went just to be present. He also had Muslim friends and neighbors and got along well with them. Their house was next to the synagogue. One neighbor, Ben Jeloul was Muslim. He would get a chair during Jewish holidays and sit and listen to the hymns. Nicolas doesn't know why, perhaps he was religious. He was always welcomed by the Rabbi and others who offered him coffee. Ben Jeloul never took any and only wanted to listen. He was everyone's friend and had children who went to school and played with Nicolas. The proportion of Jews to Arabs: There were eighty Jewish families in their village, ten Muslim families and three or four Christian families. The school was 80% Jewish. The village was 7 kilometers from Constantine—like a suburb. It was a very well-situated village with a forest they called the *Forest of the Legion of Honor Cross* due to its shape. Saturdays they would go into the forest to have fun. There was a synagogue with a Rabbi in the village 50 meters from the house. Atlan studied Talmud-Torah until he got sick with typhus at age nine or ten. When he recovered he didn't want to continue his studies. He had a Bar Mitzvah when his brother got married. He was thirteen, his father came to synagogue with him, helped him put on *tefillin* and then went back to the house to celebrate his brother's wedding!

**Colette Atlan:** Her life was turned upside down. She was in school and ten years old. It was war time, the Germans came and said Jewish children must leave school. Her village was small, ten kilometers from Constantine. A German delegation came to the village and declared Jews must not be admitted. Her mother then dispersed her daughters among their aunts: two of them, Nellie and herself, went to an aunt in Constantine. Her name was Simone. Colette's father had a saddlery workshop(?) in a village near Constantine. He was born in Spain. The Spanish had made them leave. His name was Prosper and he was born June 11, 1904. There were six children in her family—four girls and two boys. The boys stayed at home but the girls were dispersed among Colette's aunts. One aunt, Perlette, lived in Constantine. Two

girls were with one aunt and two with another. The other aunt was Simone. She stayed with her aunt for the duration of the war. They went to Jewish schools taught by Jewish teachers and Rabbis. They studied until they got a certificate at the age of twelve or thirteen. The curriculum was limited—there was no math and she mostly learned prayers and studied Jewish subjects. They weren't very observant and her father worked on Shabbat. He wasn't particularly religious but had mezuzzahs on the doors. They ate cookies from a factory in Constantine called *Usine Zarca*. Her mother made everything kosher. To buy meat, they had to go to the kosher butcher 20 km from the house. However, they didn't separate meat from dairy. The interviewer wonders if there was anyone who did separate it. The Atlans respond that certain Rabbis separated dairy from meat. Her father only said blessings Friday night, Saturday and on holidays. However, Nicolas says his father was very religious and he was lucky not to have been expelled from school because his father was a lieutenant in the army during WWI.

Colette stayed in school until the age of thirteen and then worked as a seamstress for Clemence Alimi. She had a Singer sewing machine with a pedal. There were four Jewish families in the village. The seamstresses sewed communion dresses for the Europeans. She earned some money doing this, not much, but learned the trade. Her father had a hotel in Constantine, and they left the village of El Khroub and went back to Constantine. When Clemence went to Paris there was no more work in Khroub. In Paris, Clemence opened a restaurant and everyone went their separate ways. At age twenty, Colette got married in Constantine. Before she met her husband she worked as a seamstress in a woman's shop that gave her material to cut since she had learned her trade well. They would take strolls on a certain street in Constantine and that's how she met her husband. He was a counselor in a career counselling center when they met and then got married. They have four daughters: Flavienne (the eldest, who is at the interview and occasionally intervenes), Florence, Francette, and Brigitte.

**Nicolas:** He finished technical school but didn't get his degree. He joined the army for six years in Blida, Algeria and then went to pilot school. He was in the air force and wanted to be a pilot. He stayed at school six weeks, was sent to the front lines, and subsequently went to Germany, England, Italy, and Cassino, among other places. He couldn't go where he wanted to go, such as St. Tropez. In France he first arrived in Marseille and was then sent to Toulon, Bordeaux and then Salon in Provence. He subsequently left again for the front. He wanted to land in St. Tropez to liberate France in 1944, but they landed elsewhere. They went by submarine from Algiers to Corsica although he was in the air force. It was a very hot, uncomfortable trip that took a day and a half. He stayed in the army from 1943 to 1949 and participated in the liberation of France, the war of Italy, and then Cassino. He wasn't wounded and was asked to stay in the army after the war but didn't want to do that. He went back home.

Work was difficult to get. He became a dental technician in a lab in Constantine, where he worked for eight to ten years. It was at his uncle Gaston Atlan's lab. He met his wife and got married at age twenty-six. He then entered the police force and worked there until he left Algeria in 1963. He continued working three years (?) after the independence of Algeria as a policeman under the Arabs. They took away his weapons but paid him. Then he went back to Constantine where he was living alone and subsequently went to France to join his family.

**(Note:** There has been some discussion among the speakers regarding the dates of events. This creates occasional discrepancies in the chronology that follows.)

In France, they couldn't normalize their status because they didn't have the right to be there. Their daughter Flavienne interjects: She was born in 1953 and left in 1961 with her mother and siblings. In summary, Nicolas went back to Algeria to continue the war with the French and Arabs, finally leaving for France on September 3, 1963. Between 1962 and 1963, he was still on the police force and alone in Constantine. When he joined his family in France, they lived in Marseille.

**Colette:** In Constantine, she didn't work but took care of the children and the house. The interviewer asks why girls were expelled from school and not the boys when Colette was sent to live with her aunt. Nicolas answers that when the Germans came, the administrators took away all the goods Jews owned. There were some wealthy Jews in Constantine. The children were sent to other family members in Constantine since schools in Khroub were closed.

**Nicolas:** He worked for the police from 1955 to 1963, and then left Algeria. Asked whether he had the possibility of rising through the ranks on the police force he said that when he started, it was on a contractual basis. Then he became a policeman but didn't rise through the ranks due to his situation, so he remained a policeman. In Marseille, he tried to get reclassified for two years. He was paid while waiting for an adjustment/reclassification until one day he was called in and forced to retire. He couldn't become an inspector. He could have taken an exam but there was too much antisemitism at the time. Their daughter adds that it was awful in Marseille. The teachers didn't accept them and they couldn't progress. She attended a public school where they were poorly received. The teachers were not welcoming and they were called *pieds noirs*. (**Note:** *Pieds noirs* - people of French and European descent born in Algeria during French rule and who came to France after the Algerian war in 1962.) This lasted twelve years. The name of the school was the *Ecole Lapin Blanc*. Later she went to a private Jewish school and an *ORT* school for three years. It was in the area of *La Pointe Rouge* in Marseille. (**Note:** *ORT* is the Society for Trades and Agricultural Labor—A Jewish organization that provides educational and vocational training). By then, they were more acclimated to their life there.

**Algerian War:** Nicolas was a police officer when the Algerian war broke out in 1954. The situation was very bad. They couldn't rest and had to go to bed when they came home. It was terrible. There were clashes with young Muslims and the French who were in Algeria, with bombings everywhere. They were supposed to keep the peace. They fought with knives—some went to the hospital, some died. If a group of Muslims who started a confrontation were stopped, there were grenades everywhere the next day. Toward the end, a French group formed, the *OAS*. They were in a no-win situation. (**Note:** *OAS*— *Organisation armée secrète* was the Secret Armed Organization that carried out attacks to prevent Algerian independence from France.) They couldn't stop or arrest anyone. The Atlan family and the police were *OAS* members. They left when they saw it wasn't possible to keep the French in Algeria.

In Constantine, there was a Jewish section on Rue de France. They patrolled all day, including there. All the streets were patrolled using a van. Nicolas was the driver. Ten policemen were with him, plus the chief. There were patrols 24/7, day and night. They patrolled Arab quarters as well but weren't attacked. However, one day he was on duty in the center of the city with another policeman at around 8:00 a.m. A car speeding toward them shot. Nicolas had two holes in his clothing, the insignia on his hat was broken, as well as his belt, but he didn't have a scratch on his body! He was transported to a hospital and checked over. He was fine and returned to work, where he was congratulated. He had been scared and released a burst of machine gun fire in the direction of the passing car.

In 1956, it wasn't calm—there were tensions, but it wasn't terrible yet. In May 1956, there were Arab uprisings. They had to beat protesters, fight them, etc. It took three days to establish order. Then there were more terrorist bombings in movies, theaters, markets, everywhere. French people were shot by Arabs. Police and civilians were targeted. A fabric store owner was killed as well as others. The interviewer mentions that Arabs threw a grenade into a Jewish Café in 1956. There was a response by young Jews, along with young Christians, who wanted to revolt. The police couldn't do anything. There were fewer of them than Arabs. There is a discussion about an incident in Constantine when a famous singer, Raymond, was killed, presumably by mistake, as the Arabs claimed. This was very serious for Atlan and the others. Dozens of police were killed, including military members and civilians—hundreds were killed. Until about 1960, the French thought things would quiet down. When DeGaulle came in 1958, they thought the situation would be normalized. Everything was clean and calm that day and

DeGaulle said he understands them. Atlan questions what was meant by that. DeGaulle claimed he'd hold on until France stays in Algeria. That didn't happen when DeGaulle returned to France.

Atlan's superiors on the police force left, with the French leaving first. There were many Corsicans who left as well. This hurt his morale. Afterwards they were led by a policeman who worked with him. The Muslims took charge and were loyal to their own. His hands were tied. The others couldn't do anything. They took away all his weapons and wanted Nicolas to do his work without them. This happened just after Algerian independence. The Muslims started to destroy all the statues that were around the city. Nicolas held on until 1963 and then went to France.

**Colette and Nicolas:** Colette's life in Constantine as a content young mother included taking care of her children. They lived in Sidi at her in-laws' villa and she had a good life. Their brothers and sisters were there until they married. Nicolas stayed — he was the darling of the family. They got along well, their children were born there. Nicolas's parents preceded them to France. Then he sent his wife and children to France and three years later, Nicolas left as well. During the revolts, they were alone in the villa with their children.

**Life before the uprisings:** Atlan's sister worked in another town as a midwife and had her own practice. Nicolas worked in Constantine, lived in Sidi Mabrouk and drove back and forth. Nicolas describes his everyday life as initially pleasant. Everybody had their job to do and they met at dinner, holidays, on Shabbat, etc. His older brother was a commander in the army who came home from time to time and then left for the colonies. His younger brother worked at the post office. When they were off, they worked in the garden. Some of their children lived in the villa, but not all of them. Their daughter Flavienne says she went to a school that had many Arabs, with a few Christians and Jews. She had an Arab friend. Before the uprisings, the population of Sidi Mabrouk was 80% Jewish. Later, that decreased. The dynamics changed—first there were more Jews, and then Arabs outnumbered Jews. By 1963 there were only three Jewish families left. The last to leave was Henri Chapelier. The French and the Jews left. Poor Jews who didn't have money to leave for France were helped with their move.

**Family life in the villa:** There were large rooms, large dining rooms, everyone was together. Those in the military couldn't join them. Nicolas's mother was head of the household and prepared all the holidays. Colette says they had a maid who helped in the house. She did the dishes, the floors, etc. Colette cooked, while her mother-in-law bought the food. The maid knew the Jewish holidays and was part of the household. She was six years old when she came to live with them and grew up in their house. She spoke French and Arabic. Her own family also lived in the village. The Atlans met her needs and gave her money. Atlan's mother treated the young girl like her own child, bought her clothes, took her on errands, etc. They were on good terms with the Muslims when Nicolas was growing up. The Muslim families sent them food or gifts for the holidays. In return, the Atlans gave them money to buy lamb. Their Muslim neighbors didn't send them meat because they knew they were kosher, but the Muslims ate the Atlan's meat. Asked if there was more of a community among Jews and Muslims than with Christians regarding religion, Atlan says they were young and didn't think of those things. At school, everyone was together. Asked if they bought Christmas trees for Christians, Nicolas says no, but maybe there were some Jews who did. They were all neighbors and friends, but that's all. Did Christians give Muslims money to buy lamb? Maybe, but Atlan doesn't know of any. But Jews participated in certain ways. Before the Muslim holidays, the Arabs would go around with instruments to all the families who gave them money, which was placed into a large container.

Colette baked bread for Shabbat and all the holidays, as well as cakes. Purim is mentioned. They used an oven owned by a Jewish family. They also made *dafina* on a small gas burner and let it cook all night. (**Note:** This is a North African version of *cholent*). In a large covered pot, it cooked all night. Colette says it turned into a jam from cooking so long. Ingredients depended on the type you made. They made it with

spinach — a skin was stuffed with meat and she describes the various ingredients it included, such as chick peas and beans. Atlan's mother used onions, chestnuts, meat, red wine, and couscous. One of the interviewers says the same dish was made in Morocco, but it had a different name. They discuss variations in preparing this meal. In Constantine, the couscous contained cardoons. At 5:00 p.m. they drank coffee with cake. Their maid ate some cake as well. Among the cakes/pastries mentioned are macaroons and sponge cake. There were no blenders, so everything was hand beaten for hours. While things are much easier now, they miss the old days. The times were good but it didn't last long because everything changed.

**Consequences of the Algerian War:** The war changed their situation. Colette's parents came to Israel in 1961. Nicolas's parents went to France in 1961/62 and died there. He claims the entire Muslim population in Algeria identified with the *FLN*. (**Note:** The *Front de Libération National* was the National Liberation Front directing the Algerian War against France.) Communication stopped. Nicolas agrees that perhaps the Muslims were afraid of the *FLN*. He remembers an afternoon when he was at his brother's house with his wife and children. Someone knocked at the door and two armed Arabs started asking questions. His brother spoke Arabic and told Nicolas to do nothing even though he had a gun because he was a policeman. His brother gave the Arabs something to drink and offered them some money. They drank, took the money, and told them no one would touch them. When Nicolas went downstairs he saw there were six more armed men who could have killed all of them. They had probably come to kill them. But since his brother spoke Arabic and they had eaten at their house, they were saved. Their daughter, who was a young child at the time, was present as well. She says the seriousness of the situation affected her. They were told to leave Algeria in three days or they would be killed. Everyone left but Nicolas stayed due to his job. He doesn't know the names of the two men who came to the house, but they were soldiers from the liberation army. Nicolas felt very bad because now he was a stranger in his own country. They had no defense, had to give in, and couldn't think about the future.

When they went to France, they were not welcomed in Marseille and hadn't anticipated that would be the case. Flavienne says she doesn't understand why her father didn't leave directly for Israel and Nicolas replies because he was still part of the police force. One of the interviewers adds that it wasn't so easy to leave and things were not that simple. She points out that since the Atlans felt French it made sense to go to France, not knowing they would be unwelcome. All the Jews in Algeria were French — it was a French province, not a colony. So it made sense for them to go to France, rather than Spain or Italy. Nicolas did think of going to Israel when he was young and before he married.

Atlan tells what happened when he tried to go to Israel when he was younger. He had just left the military and had friends who were in a Jewish scout group whose name he doesn't remember. He was invited to a meeting to form a group headed for Israel. He agreed—it was a secret. One day an American transport plane came and circled not far from where his wife lived. They were supposed to prepare for departure. They looked over the plane and everything seemed in order as they were ready to leave. When they were about to take off, they were surrounded by police with guns. They couldn't leave and Nicolas spent three days and nights in jail. After that he had no desire to try again. They had done it because they felt Jewish.

Summary: Atlan arrived in France in 1963 and in Israel in 1971. It took about eleven years to make *Aliyah*. During this time he was in reclassification proceedings until he was told not to count on it, and at that point he took the bull by the horns and they decided to go to Israel. Friends of his father-in-law by the name of Zannah(?) helped him get papers and make contacts. His daughter says she was thirteen at the time and encouraged them to leave. She was in *ORT*, exposed to Zionism, and was enthusiastic. She saw no future for them in Marseille and wanted to leave. Nicolas's in-laws were already in Israel. The Arabs had started telling them to leave and they were afraid to be in the streets. Their daughter said she'd leave herself if they didn't go. But Nicolas wanted to get reclassified since he felt he was part of the French administration. He was there two years being paid but not working. One day he was called in and told he

was fired. Then he worked as a chauffeur, the secret police in Marseille for a year, and had other jobs to earn money. He always held out hope he could stay with the police until retirement. When he saw all avenues were closed, he went to Israel in 1971.

They didn't have an apartment for three months and Nicolas tells how they obtained their current apartment. It wasn't finished yet but they wanted it and insisted on staying. He worked at his brother-in-law's restaurant, which had belonged to Colette's parents before ownership was transferred to his brother-in-law. Eventually he realized staying there wouldn't work out and so he was out of a job. Then he met one of his sister's nephews, who introduced him to his boss and got him a job making airplane components. He worked there for fifteen years until he retired.

An interviewer asks if he's connected to the Mironi(?) family. Nicolas knows them and is perhaps distantly related, but the discussion is not continued. He loved his job, the company was well-organized and everyone got along well. But life was hard because he started as a manual laborer and gradually worked his way up, made more money, until he could buy their apartment. Did they have difficulties adjusting? Their daughter says they felt different and had to learn the language. Culturally it was a change — there was a lack of respect, violence, etc. — different from what they had been used to. Nothing was done on purpose but rather involved cultural differences.

Nevertheless, Nicolas was very happy at work. He accepted the hardships of life because he was home in Israel. It was easier finding a job there than it had been in Marseille and even in Algeria. If he had to do it over again, would he have lived his life differently, especially regarding Israel? No, because he wasn't a professional but a manual laborer, which was a handicap. He could only have worked in a lab or a factory. Hebrew was a problem and remains one for him but it didn't bother him much since he speaks a little English. He is content and they are happy to be at peace and not have the continual bombings. They adjusted to a different life. The restaurant is still in the family. His wife's family is there and they get together at each other's homes. His mother-in-law accepted him like her own son. Regarding problems in Israel, they had heard about them before coming but he says it's peaceful at the time of the interview (2004).

Translated by Felicia Berger Sturzer  
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