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Summary of Oral history interview with Ruth Laurette Shahar

Ruth Shahar was born in Algiers on April 27, 1925. Her father, Maurice, was born in 1896, her mother, Rachel, in 1898. She became more consciousness of her Jewish identity when the Crémieux Decree, which gave Algerian Jews French citizenship, was abolished by the Vichy Regime in 1940. This loss of French citizenship was a tremendous shock and occurred when she was 15 years old. Her family was not observant, but attended synagogue occasionally. Nevertheless, they identified strongly as French Jews. She remarked that Algerians were anti-Semitic even before the abolishment of the Crémieux Decree. This event led Ruth Shahar to confront what "being Jewish" meant to her. After French students and teachers were expelled from schools and universities, she wanted to attend a Jewish high school. Her family had almost no contact with the local Arab population, but employed Arab and Spanish maids. Jews and Arabs lived in separate parts of the city.

Ruth's attempt to reconcile the contradiction between her identity as both "French" and "Jewish" is a recurring theme of the interview. This relates to the French concept of "secularism". She became aware of Zionism and the idea of a Jewish state when the Crémieux Decree was abolished. At the Jewish library, she began reading books on Judaism, Palestine, and Zionism, including a book by Theodore Hertzl. Developing a strong desire to go to Palestine, she began encouraging others to join her, but didn't get any support. Her parents opposed the idea. After the defeat of the Germans at Tunis, she met three students who encouraged her to join them in Palestine and work on a kibbutz. Ruth describes the difficulty she had getting a passport because her father wouldn't sign for it. Her cousin finally signed but she had to promise to get married.

Ruth left for Haifa in 1945, when she was 20 years old. French was a universal language, so she was able to communicate. She talks about events between1940-1945. She describes the Portuguese boat she boarded, carrying Jews who had survived the Holocaust. Their condition was terrible — they still had their concentration camp numbers tattooed on their arms. She mentions her grandmother's story about the anti-Semitism in Algeria during the Dreyfus affair, spurred on by the editor of the anti-Semitic paper *La Libre Parole*. These stories further fortified her desire to be with other Jews. Eventually, her entire family joined various aspects of the Zionist cause, between 1945-1947. A brother, while in high school, joined a Jewish self-defense group to confront anti-Semites. Her brother Paul joined the army, fought the Germans, was wounded, but survived.

In Palestine, she had to learn Hebrew. Within three months, she was able to communicate, thus adapting to a new culture.

When Charles De gaulle came to power, things improved in Algiers in 1948. After the liberation, her father tried to salvage his business. Jews became more assertive about their Jewishness, resisting intimidation and gaining respect.

Ruth Shahar is nostalgic when describing her youth in Algeria, and still reads more in French than Hebrew. She compares the differences between Jewish life in Algeria and Israel, and is saddened by the wave of anti-Semitism in France.

Summary by: Felicia Berger Sturzer