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Summary of Interview with Jean-Pierre Benisti

Born: Algiers, Jan. 11, 1943 at the hospital “Clinique de l’Oriental” on Oriental Street, which now has a different name.

Father: Louis Benisti, born May 15, 1903 near Algiers. Louis’ father, Joseph (born Jan. 11, 1869) was a lawyer, his mother a housewife. His older brother died when he was two; another brother was born, followed by the death of Joseph in 1908. Jean-Pierre Joseph was named after him. The two children in the family were thus Louis, born in 1903, and Lucien, born in 1906.

Louis Benisti was not a good student but had a talent for drawing. He didn’t complete his baccalaureate degree so his uncle sent him as an apprentice to a jeweler in Paris, where he remained for two years, and then continued the business in Algeria. Subsequently he attended an art academy to pursue his interest. After two years, he closed the jewelry store because he was losing money, but continued drawing. The academy director was the Spanish painter Alfred Figarasse (Figueras). Louis met many young artists and writers, including Jean de Maisonseul and Max-Pol Fouchet, as well as the writer Albert Camus and Louis Miguel. The friends formed a close-knit circle. Louis became a sculptor in 1935 and received the Casa Velasquez prize. He went to Madrid for 6 months, came back to Algiers and met with Camus. Albert Camus recruited him for his theater troupe, the *Théâtre du travail*, later the *Théâtre de l’Equipe*. Louis left for Paris in 1938, came back to Algiers in 1941, and married in 1942.

1938 – 1941: Louis was mobilized when war was declared, but was soon demobilized and returned to his family in Algiers. He married his sister-in-law’s sister— two brothers married two sisters. His wife, Solange Sarfati, was a medical student but couldn’t continue her studies because of the Vichy anti-Semitic laws. She took a forced vacation. Her sister studied archaeology. Louis frequented the milieu of the resistance but wasn’t an active participant, though he sympathized with them. On the eve of November 8, 1942, Lucien, his brother, told his parents to stay home and not go out. During the night it was very noisy and they realized the Americans had landed.

Jean-Pierre was born in 1942 and his mother took up her studies again in 1943, while his father started painting. As for politics in France, his parents were on the left. The theater work and contact with Camus stopped since Camus had left due to his tuberculosis. His father was hired by the army sector in charge of mapmaking and left for Paris in autumn 1944. Louis Benisti corresponded with Camus, who had left for Paris, and received news through mutual friends. Louis and Camus saw each other again in 1956 in Algiers. While they had contact with each other, they didn’t meet. Louis met with others in the group, including Louis Miguel the architect.

Jean-Pierre’s mother didn’t go to Paris but opened a general medical practice. His father came back beginning in 1945 and got a job teaching painting at the *Maison Carrée*. His parents lived in Algiers until 1972, including the difficult period at the beginning of independence.

1960-62: Jean-Pierre Benisti views the Algerian War years as periods alternating between a lull, terrorist attacks, and insecurity. They were liberals and against the terrorism on both sides. They stayed in Algeria since his mother was a doctor who treated both *FLN* and *OAS* fighters. (**Note:** *OAS--Organisation armée secrète* = Secret Armed Organization that carried out attacks to stop Algerian independence from France; *FLN-- Front de Libération National* was the National Liberation Front directing the Algerian War against France). They stayed until after independence. His father continued teaching and his mother reopened her medical practice in September 1962. Louis taught at the *Lycée français*, later the college *Pasteur*. Jean-Pierre's parents didn't speak Arabic, and his grandparents spoke it poorly. One grandfather, however, a lawyer, spoke it well. The grandmothers were able to talk to their friends but couldn't write Arabic. He discusses the group of friends his father frequented, including the family doctor. He also talks about his father's political involvement. Louis had an aversion for Americans who tried to come to terms with Darlan. He considered Fernand Bonnier de la Chapelle, Darlan's assassin, a servant of the state and was against his execution. (**Note:** Admiral Francois Darlan was a French Admiral during the Vichy government who was in Algeria when the Allies invaded on November 8, 1942. He was assassinated in December 1942). Louis stayed in independent Algeria for six months.

Anecdotes regarding this period: During the November 8 landing, his mother was a histology student under professor Beaudoin. He studied the effects of light on the sexual glands of birds. On the balcony, Beaudoin had a chicken coop/bird house where every ten minutes a system turned on lights that shone on the bird house. Several evenings before November 8, the police thought he was sending coded messages by using these lights. Another anecdote tells of his father and his friends on a beach using torches at midnight and the police showing up the next day to investigate. This was in summer, 1942.

In 1972, they left Algeria and went to Aix-en-Provence. His father retired but not his mother. The tax system in Algeria was very corrupt and she couldn't make much money. She continued to practice in France.

Louis Benisti began painting and then turned to sculpture, which didn't sell well, so he went back to painting, returning to sculpture toward the end of his life in the 1970's. He died in 1995, his wife in 1990.

Jean-Pierre's background: He names the schools he attended in Algiers, where he also began his medical studies in 1963. These were conducted in French. In 1966 he went to Grenoble to complete his studies. He names the French and Algerian professors with whom he studied. Starting in 1966, there were reforms that affected medical studies in Algiers that weren't recognized by France, so he left as the situation worsened until the 1980s. He received his degree in pediatrics, went to Lyon and worked as a doctor in the section for the protection of mothers and infants. In 2008 he retired but continued doing some work until 2014.

Life in independent Algeria 1962-66: He was on the side of independence, and liked the enthusiasm of the young people, even though he didn't like other aspects. Things were fine until the *coup d'état* on June 19, 1965, which he didn't like. However, he had French and

Algerian friends and his life was fine—they were living through history. He left in 1966 and his parents in 1972.

Background on interview: The group, *L'Ecole d'Alger*, had put the interviewer in contact with Jean-Pierre Benisti regarding his father, since his father had stayed in contact with Edmond Charlot of the *Ecole d'Alger*. In 1947-48, Charlot came back to Algiers and opened a bookstore and art gallery where Louis Benisti exhibited his paintings. He was also in contact with writers in the group, such as Emmanuel Robles. His father had met Charlot around 1935, saw him frequently, and talked about him.

Publications on Louis Benisti: Jean-Pierre wrote a few articles about his father and painting in Algeria. Louis wrote his memoirs, that Jean-Pierre assembled and published in the form of a book: *On ne choisit pas sa mère*. Louis didn't publish books but did publish some articles. He started writing later in life as a result of a conference on poetry and articles he wrote about poets in a regional magazine. This resulted in the memoirs project, where he writes about his childhood and Camus. His other published book, *Au Soleil sans chapeau*, was published posthumously, as was the first one. He writes about Charlot and his small bookstore and gallery. Charlot was the editor of the journal for the resistance movement outside of France.

Conclusion: The interview ends with examples of his father's work in Jean-Pierre's house: sculptures such as a bust of a young boy, Said, from the 1930's, who became his father's friend; René-Jean-Clot, a painter in Camus' group; a bust of Georgette, a friend; a bather; a bust from 1975 from Aix-en-Provence, and of Mainsonseul, his friend, are displayed. He then shows several of his father's paintings: a portrait; a landscape from 1945; a still life from 1953 and 1960; a landscape in Provence from 1962, and the Port of Algiers, 1970. His father continued painting until it was interrupted by his return to sculpture and writing. There is another painting from 1988 during a period when he used a *guache* technique, and another one from 1995, just before his death. Included is a picture of Jean-Pierre as a toddler (1945), ending with a reproduction of the stele in honor of Camus. It was erected by his friends after his death, and includes the inscription his father chiseled into the stone. The inscription on the Roman stone is a phrase from Camus' wedding: "I understand here what glory is, the right to love without measure". Camus borrowed this phrase from St. Augustine. It's an homage to both Camus and St. Augustine, who was born in Thagaste, Algeria.

Translated by: Felicia Berger Sturzer