

## Summary of Oral Interview with Alain Chamak RG-50.647.0044

### Notes are by the translator.

Alain Chamak was born in Orléansville (named Chlef today, located between Algiers and Oran) on August 24, 1947.

### Parents

**Father:** Gabriel Chamak was born February 12, 1922 in the Department of Constantine in the city of Delma. The entire family is from Constantine (Bône). He was an apprentice in a hair salon. In 1940 Gabriel went into the army, serving in France in 1942, as well as in Italy and Germany. Through family contacts, he met and married Alain's mother.

**Mother:** Eugénie Ankaua was born in 1926 in Afroville, between Algiers and Orléansville. She didn't work but was a trained typist. After the war they lived in Orléansville, where his father opened a beauty salon. Both parents are deceased.

**Alain's childhood:** He doesn't remember much but what stands out is that he attended a Catholic school in Orléansville named *L'Ecole des Soeurs* before going to elementary school. Boys and girls attended together and while the majority was Christian, some were Jewish, with very few Moslem students. Then he went to public school where his uncle (his mother's brother) was a teacher for his preparatory courses (first grade). When he finished the *cours préparatoire* there was an earthquake in Orléansville. This was a well-known event, and very traumatic for him. Every night his mother would burn a light that lasted all night, consisting of a wick in oil lit by a match. She would put it on top of a wardrobe. The night of the earthquake the wardrobe shook and the light fell but there was no fire. His mother yelled for them to get out and they went into the street, where it was a chaotic scene. Although there was some damage, their house was not destroyed. They left Orléansville so repairs could be made. He didn't see crevices in his street at first, but a few days later he saw them in other streets and in his friends' yards. They went to Afroville, where his mother's brother lived and where he attended school. They stayed two years. Then they went back to Orléansville, where Alain went to elementary school and the *lycée Albert Camus*.

**Grandparents:** His paternal grandparents arrived in Algeria at a young age. According to his father, they came from an area around Iran, Iraq and Turkey. This is from the Chamak side, his father's grandfather. Regarding the family of his father's mother, Alain didn't know them and doesn't know their names. However, she came from an area around Macedonia. His maternal grandmother was born in Algeria but her parents came from Toledo, Spain. She came to Algeria at a young age and met Alain's grandfather there. Some family members came from Austria as well.

**Algerian Independence:** When he finished ninth grade, the Algerian war of independence occurred. This was a very painful period for him to discuss. His father was determined to stay in

Algeria. He thought life would be more difficult in France and there was no risk or danger in Algeria. His father had Moslem friends and thought it would be dangerous to go to France. He felt there was a lot of antisemitism there and in Europe generally. They remained and the big celebrations were on July 1 (1962), first day of Algerian independence. However, they stayed home that day.

The next day they went out. Alain became the victim of an arbitrary kidnapping when two unmasked men about 35-40 years old abducted him. He was fifteen years old at the time, was blindfolded and shoved into a van. His hands were not tied. One man drove as the other sat next to him. They arrived in a kind of hamlet where there was a barn. They removed his blindfold and he saw the hamlet. This was July 2. He was locked up by himself. Several hours later, the men returned and brought him soup. He wanted to go home and asked when he could leave. His abductors spoke very poor French and were rough with him. They intimidated him but also seemed nervous.

At the time there were different factions in Algeria, for example the *FLN* and others. (**Note:** The *Front de Libération National* was the National Liberation Front directing the Algerian War against France.) They kept him overnight — this was now July 3. They let him go outside briefly. His parents, of course, were alarmed since their oldest son had disappeared. No one had talked to them about it. His father contacted people he knew, notably someone in the Algerian administration who was French and had stayed on. This individual went into action to secure Alain's release. In the afternoon of July 3 he was able to go home, now escorted by different men.

On the morning of July 4 his family left by car to board a boat in Algiers. They took their car on the boat, crossing over to France via Marseille to Carpentras, where his mother's brother lived. They stayed there about a month and a half while his parents obtained necessary documents. They requested residency in a little village near Avignon named Le Pontet, where they stayed a year.

**Education:** He went to high school at the *lycée Frédéric Mistral d'Avignon*. The reactions of the students there were very mixed, including curiosity. It seemed odd to them that his family came from Algeria and spoke French. At the same time there was a lot of prejudice against them. They were regarded as colonists. Three or four people in his class were also from Algeria. It was thought they all profited from the Algerian population and had no right to have been there. They were made responsible for the French being there and it was a very difficult period. Mostly it was the students who felt this way — the professors were more discreet and didn't stigmatize them.

After a year he went to Carpentras and attended the *lycée Jean-Henri Fabre*, named after a biologist. He finished his last two years there. As for his father, he bought a hair salon. Alain then studied economics at Aix-en-Provence and earned a degree in that field. He also obtained a

*DES* degree (**Note:** *Diplôme d'études spécialisées*—specialized post-graduate degree) and started teaching, including at Aix-en-Provence. He became a CPA for the rest of his career.

**Discrimination based on Algerian origins:** The prejudice against him because he was from Algeria lasted about 4-5 years. He tells an anecdote: In 1967, he went to Aix-en-Provence with a friend, another student also from Algeria. They were having a good time. With other students, they started a theoretical discussion about having slaves. This was a fiction that never existed. Alain was asked how many slaves he had and he said 120. Other people who were there and heard this became very interested and surrounded them. This seemed mind-boggling to them. Within five minutes, seven or eight people joined them. Alain said he had 500 slaves in the Sahara. They were having fun with this but it demonstrates that interest in the topic was fueled by the prejudices of the other students. He told them it was a pure fiction, but they probably went to repeat the story to others.

### **Addendum: Jewish Education, Antisemitism**

Alain's parents were not very religious. From the age of 6 – 12, once a week on Sunday morning, he attended a Midrash with other children where they studied the Bible and learned to read Hebrew. While they learned to read, they didn't understand what they read. He had his Bar Mitzvah in Orléansville. There was no strong religious presence in his home—no Friday night or Shabbat observance. However, they celebrated Yom Kippur and Pesach. He was very aware that he was Jewish as a child. They didn't keep kosher, but while they ate pork products, these weren't kept in the house. Did things change in France? There was more of a distance from religion, for example, less ritual observance. But they still observed Yom Kippur. What about witnessing or being the object of antisemitism in Algeria or France? He was the object of antisemitism by students at his *lycée* but religion wasn't discussed in general. He didn't talk about his Judaism, but he was treated as a Jew. He went to dinner once with a group of students and two called him a “dirty Jew”. He didn't respond. Incidents like this only happened two or three times in his life.

Translated by Felicia Berger Sturzer  
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