

SFAX UNDER THE GERMAN OCCUPATION

(From Diaspora Sfaxienne 2005, p51)

It was November 8, 1942. The radio announced that the allied troops had disembarked in North Africa, more precisely in Morocco and in Algeria. In Tunisia they were feverishly awaited. But, unfortunately it is the reverse that occurs. The Germans precede them and occupy all the country of Tunisia.

After a few days, in Sfax we see German soldiers parading everywhere in the city. Then come the orders announced by posters, on the walls, concerning only the Jews: to provide to the authorities all means of transport, motor vehicles, bicycle, etc. It is then the turn of the radio equipment, etc.

A Jewish representation is sent up to the Germans: Doctor Sperber, Henri Cohen and Max Lumbroso. They meet with the Germans in a place known as the Halfon factory. The Germans requisition and expel several families from their houses, they plunder some stores. From the first days, the first allied air bombardments occur and a great part of the population takes refuge in the Arab gardens within a few kilometers of the city. There is in particular a center where several Jewish families are gathered, which became like a refugee camp; it is known as "camp of el graoua" and in particular Doctor Sperber. The Germans decide that carrying the yellow star for the Jewish population will enable them to make raids in the city streets and to take the Jews for work.

Thereafter that is done in a more organized way; they order the Jewish committee to mobilize a thousand young Jews for work and to repair the damage caused by the American bombardments in the port and the air bases.

During the whole time of the German occupation these young Jews, (of which I was one, with my brothers) worked hard under conditions which they had never known; sometimes without food and water. In parentheses, these bombardments caused many victims among the Jewish population. Additionally the Germans condemned the Jewish community to pay an indemnity of several millions, under the pretext that the Jews were the persons responsible for the war. Towards the end of March 1943, undoubtedly feeling the war lost for them, the Germans confiscated jewels and other goods from the rich Jewish families. That was the case of a family related (to me), the family Zana where, guided by a Jewish informer, Maurice N..... some German officers confiscated what they succeeded in finding.

At the beginning of April 1943, the German authorities ordered the gathering of all young Jews from 20 to 40 years at the Halfon factory, supplied with food, good shoes and cover. In the afternoon, the Germans had left, leaving us alone. It was for us a true miracle and we were returned to our camp in a truck of Italian soldiers, whom we bless until today.

We knew later that, this day, a German ship was to have taken us to Europe. Friday April 9 the Germans started to leave the area. Finally, the great day of deliverance came, Saturday April 10, 1943, which enabled us to celebrate in joy and abundance, a few days later, the feast of Pessah, as if by a miracle.

But since then and today we still cannot forget our brothers fallen during the German occupation of Sfax.

Moïse Bouhnik

POSTWAR MEMORIES AFTER THE GERMAN OCCUPATION

(From Diaspora Sfaxienne 2005, p53)

A few days after the release of Sfax, Saturdays April 10, 1943, all those who had evacuated the city because of the bombardments began to organize themselves to return to a normal life. For each one, as much as it was possible, returning to the life as before was a "dream"; a great part of the Jewish district had been destroyed, and therefore it was impossible to go back there. Many were those that left the remote refuges, "Graouas" and other gardens on the roads to Tunis, Teniour, El Aîné, Triaga, to pass temporarily in Arab houses, one or two kilometers from the city, such as the district called "Zanket Ben Saïde" or others.

For the many families which were with us in the gardens of the two brothers Mohamed and Hsouna Zribi, I do not know how they dispersed, managed, that is, in "Zenket Ben Saïd" in Picville, Moulinville, etc....

My father and our neighbor Isaac Naim, rented together an Arab house on the Tunis road; a place called "Majel El Bguer" Our dear mother then told us, that she knew this place well, having passed a part of her childhood, at her grandmother's house who had a garden there. In one Bordj together there were the families Albert and Rene Zana, who had been with us with garden Zribi. I remember that next to us there was a family Borg-Ouvier which had a radio, a rare thing, where also in the evening we went close to their *tabia* to listen to the news.

Separately from the dwelling, it is now necessary to think of work. My father's shop in the Arab city was plundered. Nothing at all remains of his facilities. This happened not at the time of the occupation, but after the arrival of the English, by an Arab employed in public works, a certain K..... However, I lodged a complaint with the police force, but without result...

Concerning myself, I renewed contact with M. (Lit: Maître, *lawyer*) Ganem who had reinstalled himself, with a table, two chairs and a typewriter, in a corner of Halfon factory, waiting for a better location.

A few days later, I had an infection in the right hand which gave me a strong fever; the arm was swollen to the shoulder and I was delirious without stop. I was saved thanks to the initiative of my dear brother who was able, with great difficulty, to get Sulphamide which at that time did not exist anywhere. I was told, later, that in my is delirium, curiously, I saw my pockets full with gold coins.

After my cure I returned to M. Ganem. During my lost hours, I was in liaison with a friend who told me that he bought some "Louis d'or" (gold sovereigns) from soldiers coming from Tripoli to resell them on the spot, with a very good profit.

I spoke about it the evening with our neighbor Naim, and in particular with their son Chouly, who was of my age, and the idea came us to both to travel in "Trempe" to Tripoli to buy some Louis there. We were able to find two military uniforms but my parents opposed my voyage.

Chouly was French and had the right to wear a military uniform, which was not my case. So Chouly takes all the money that he had from my father and takes the road.

Though he should return after two or three days, more than a week passes and no news of our Chouly; his parents start to worry... and then, after ten days see we him returning with a shaggy beard, the crumpled clothes but..... the pockets full of sovereigns. I go immediately with my friend who resells them with a good profit for each one.

There followed, later, a second expedition which paid much less, of course. The third was disappointing and we decided, Chouly and I, to go to Tunis to sell our gold there.

I do not remember any more how we travelled and how we sold. All that I remember it is that it was the day of the arrival of General de Gaulle and Joséphine Baker. Not having found hotel rooms, we spent the night in a tramcar. It was hot. We spent the second night with a Jewish family, I do not know more than that. Thereafter we took a room at the hotel "Ritz." After two or three days I see appearing my dear father who insisted that we both return to Sfax that evening.

Once again I do not know how we made it. We found a truck of goods for Sfax. We were perched, unbalanced, on the goods on the top of the truck. We left about the middle of the night, with a driver who appeared drunk. Towards daybreak we broke down in M'Saken, at the edge of a deserted road. For hours no car passed, only some asses and camels. It was Friday and it was necessary that we got to our property before the hour of Chabbat. And then, in the first hours of the morning, a ball from a rifle whistles past my ears and hits the truck; we realized that we were close to a military camp. It was a miracle that I was not touched. Finally, the other miracle came; a motor vehicle agreed to take to us to Sfax.

Time passes. I resumed work at the place of M. Ganem. We are now in an office in the *Ville Arabe*, in Place Barberousse (the old private clinic of Doctor Bismuth) As for my father, and my brothers, he regained a little order in the store in the Arab town; some shelves are recovered. At the start he orders perfumes from Tunis, work begins again.

Moïse Bouhnik

THE BOMBARDMENTS OF SFAX
from Saturday November 28, 1942 to Saturday April 10, 1943
(From Diaspora Sfaxienne 2005, pp54-56)

The first bombardment of Sfax by the Allied air forces took place on Saturday, November 28, 1942, at about midday. The city, the whole country, had been occupied by the Axis forces. That day, the target of the allied planes was the railway line, along with the old gendarmerie. We (our family) had two stores in this district and they were completely destroyed in this bombardment. Our dear father, instead of deploring the loss his goods, thanked God that it was Saturday, the day the stores were closed, or else there would have been many victims among us.

If I remember right, the second and the third bombardments on Sfax took place on Monday, December 14. I was at work, at the office of M. Ganem; around 11 a.m. we heard the siren of the alarm and, immediately afterwards, the explosions of the bombs which fell and the detonations of the anti-aircraft guns. We had sheltered in the staircases; all the building trembled under the jolts and a fine dust fell on us. At the end of the bombardment, I left to inquire, and I learned that there had been victims, particularly near the old gendarmerie.

My unfortunate brother Samy, who had come that morning to the site of our bombarded stores to try to remove some goods from the debris, was wounded in the head and accepted first aid. I see him with a bandage and I tell him to return straight away to the garden to pacify the family. I must stress that as of the first bombardment, my dear father, with other families, had decided to shelter away from the bombarded city and had rented a garden with a house a few kilometres from the city from a certain Hsouna Zribi (see in the D.S. 38 - 2004 – The Garden of Hsouna)

About midday, I went by my bicycle to the old gendarmerie to get news of our close relations who live there. Thank God, they were exhausted but unafraid. There was a large group gathered where each person told what happened in his own way. While there, a man approaches towards me, with the a little odd walk, and requested alms of me. I say to him that I do not have money and then he asks me for a cigarette and, I do not know how, he takes me by the hand and says to me literally: "You are protected and you will be saved!" I did not think any more of it.....

That same day, around 14:00 or 15:00 hours, I was at our house on Rue Barthélemy St Hilaire, number 16, preparing foodstuffs to bring them to the garden; I go down towards the Rue Flatters to seek a porter and a cart. Arriving at Rue Flatters, I hear the alarm siren: everyone stops suddenly and, without knowing how, I am at the entrance of the large Synagogue. We heard the American planes hum heavily above our heads and suddenly a

great repeated crash; it was the fall of four or five bombs. I learned thereafter that two young girls, who had come to draw water in the cistern of the Synagogue, had been crushed by these bombs which, by a chance, fell like stones and did not explode. For my part, upon the first bomb, I had fallen on my knees and found myself covered with a layer of white dust. I do not know how, in a few minutes, at one stroke, I arrived at the garden very upset, I did not have the strength to speak.

I was told, later, that this bombardment had created carnage; at the junction between Bab Djebli and the old gendarmerie, many carts with men and animals were pulverized. Personally, I remained several days as if traumatized, trembling at each loud noise.

There were several other bombardments thereafter, day or night. I remember a particularly violent bombardment, in the middle of the night, and we saw kinds of luminous lanterns descending from the sky, landing in our garden. I was frightened so much by the explosions that I felt my feet and arms tremble violently without me being able to retain them.

And still more bombardments. With time I regain my equilibrium. I have courage again to go down to the city, to our house, where I had not been since December 14.

And then, the terrible bombardment of December 31, 1942. I do not know what was the number of victims, but that was the signal for the last of the "courageous" who had not yet left the city to abandon it quickly. And thus in the middle of this night one saw several families, among whom that of Albert Zana and my aunt Henriette, to come to throw themselves, if I dare to say, to take refuge in our garden asking for a little place to sleep.

The following day, the Zana family, with many others, rented the garden close to ours, the one belonging to the brother of our owner. Until the liberation, April 10, 1943, there were again many bombardments which saw the destruction of all the Jewish district with all its Synagogues. It appears that the American pilots aimed at the Port installations, and the Jewish district which received the bombs (*).

Several Jews were killed under the bombardments and for the moment I do not remember all. Here names of some: Ghariani (brother of the hairdresser), Nahum (accountant at Caltagirone), Junes (son of the hairdresser) and at Rue Flatters: Lucien Hanoun, the father Haïm Chelly and a son Elie, one or two their nephews of the Bonan family from Tunis.

After the fear which had seized me at the time of the first bombardments, little by little I began to regain courage and went down more than one time to the city though everywhere there were still the Germans, without knowing that I risked being stopped and shot on the spot. These incursions, if imprudent, enabled me to visit, by curiosity, several houses and to see numbers of buildings bombarded with almost everywhere the whole sides close to collapsing. Also, in our Rue Barthelemy St Hilaire, I examine again the sections of wall, holding by a wire, buildings where the Berguig other families lived. Today, already more than

60 years have passed. A new city has come from the debris, but I remember much more of the districts of Sfax from before the war than that which was rebuilt.

Moïse Bouhnik

(*) And because, the Allied planes always released their bombs too early (according to my father). The bombs were released a little after the [way of the Brigands]. We clearly heard them "whistle" over our heads; we took refuge in the Lyon district (Cité Lyon) in Moulinville: "Do not be afraid, they are not aimed at us, they just released their bombs too early!" says my father in specifying that it is the port which was the target. Only once we believed our end had arrived. I still have this sinister whistle in the ears; one could say that the bomb passed the tip of the roof. My father took us in his arms while saying: "Lord, it is for us!..." This bomb had fallen on the Taverna villa. Mrs. Taverna found herself, appealing for assistance, almost naked on a pile of debris under which her husband, his daughter and his brother-in-law lay. There remained only one section of wall frontage with a window as testimony to the horrors of an unjust war and the death of innocents. It was, if my memory is good, April 7, or 8, 1943. It is also during this bombardment that the Damato family died, parents, and three children; only the elder one, Marcelle, wedged in a corner by a heap of rubble, was found alive.

Marguerite Axisa-Alabert

Let us add, for good measure that the Catholic Church and the [Protestant] Temple had the same fate, as well as the Theatre and the Girl's school (Collège de Jeunes Filles), etc... When we could return to Sfax all the area where our apartment had been was completely destroyed: you opened a door and you found yourself on nothingness and rubble... On the other hand the Post Office building was never touched. The bombardments being done blind from a high altitude presented the advantage of avoiding risks to the American crews (America first!) contrary to the practices of the English.

Michelle Constant-Jourdan