

## Maurice Asa

Hidden by a Christian Family and was Active in the French Resistance

I was born in Paris, France in 1924 to a Jewish, Sephardic family. My father David Asa was born in Edirne a border town between Bulgaria and the Ottoman Empire in 1897 and my mother in Istanbul in 1900. Both attended the schools of the Alliance Israélite Universelle from first grade to twelfth grade in Istanbul before WWI. They both spoke and wrote French fluently. My parents emigrated to France from Istanbul just after WWI around 1921.

They met in Paris and were married in 1923. I was born a year later and my sister Ginette five years later. We lived in the XI<sup>th</sup> arrondissement in Paris, the center of the Sephardic community. My mother had one brother and one sister. My father had two brothers and one sister. In addition my mother had ten first cousins. Therefore we had a very large extended family. My parents' social life revolved around our extended family. We, children, had a good time with all our young cousins when the whole extended family met for picnics in summers or for potluck dinners in winter. When I was 6, my mother enrolled me in the elementary school located 22 rue St.Maur in Paris, not far from our apartment. There I attended school from first grade through sixth grade. I still have fond memories of the years I spent in that school. The teaching was quite demanding but I learned a lot. Only once did I experience a mild form of antisemitism. Our 2<sup>nd</sup> grade teacher, a disabled veteran of WWI, a Monsieur Plein ( I still remember his name ) set up an important test for the children in his class on the day of Yom Kippur. I did not attend class on that day and got the equivalent of an F. My mother went to see the school principal and complained strongly. As a result I was given the test and passed it. Otherwise I do not remember being singled out as a Jew. At age 12, in 1936 when I finished elementary school, I attended the Lycée Voltaire with the goal to get my baccalaureat to pursue higher education. My parents wanted me to become a doctor or a lawyer as all good Jewish parents do. My parents were modestly well off. We lived in apartment located not far from the famous Père La Chaise cemetery. Our apartment had a dining room, a living room, a kitchen, two bedrooms and a full bathroom, a real luxury in Paris in these pre-war days. My father had his own business of wholesale hardware which he sold to building contractors. My mother helped him with his business and kept the books. My father traveled extensively throughout France to call on his customers.

In September 1939, when France and England declared war on Germany, the French government recommended that children be evacuated from Paris for fear of German bombardments. My father happened to have a brother who lived in Vichy with his wife and his two children. My father asked his brother if he could take care of us. His brother's house was too small to accommodate two more children. So my parents contacted a French family named Desrutin residing in Cusset, a very small town adjacent to Vichy. The Desrutins agreed to take in my sister and me as boarders. They were very nice people. Then came May 10, 1940. The Germans invaded France. My parents fleeing the German invasion, left Paris in a hurry bringing with them whatever they could save and joined us in Cusset. There we stayed until 1941. My sister and I continued our schooling .My Parents, as Jewish refugees, could not work as the

Vichy government had already passed antisemitic laws, way before the Germans had made such request. My father had abandoned his business in Paris and as a Jew, he feared to go back to Paris. In June 1941 the Vichy government passed anti-Semitic laws prohibiting Jews from residing near the capital of non-occupied France lest they pollute the French national identity. My parents decided to take refuge in Nice, at that time occupied by the Italians. Let it be known that the Italians were much less anti-Semitic than the Germans or the French. Italy had annexed the French Riviera after the French defeat in June 1940 .Under Italian control, life for the Jews was not too threatening. All went comparatively well until September 1943, when Italy asked for an armistice and joined the Allied forces. The German forces invaded Nice to reach Northern Italy. My parents felt trapped and hopeless. Our maternal grandmother Strea Tcherassi, an eighty year old woman who did not speak a word of French, was living with us. She could not survive by herself. My mother did not want to abandon her mother and my father did not want to abandon his wife, our mother. So they stayed in Nice. However they decided to send us, their children, away. My sister Ginette, accompanied by a Christian friend, was sent to some relatives who lived in a small village in Provence. Then my parents contacted the Desrutins with whom my sister and I had stayed as boarders from 1939 to May 1940. They agreed to shelter me for a while. In September 1943, my sister who was only 14, was comparatively safe. I was in great danger. I was a young man of 19, not only a Jew, but also a “ refusenik “ one who had refused to go to Germany and work in German factories as prescribed by the 1942 French laws. If I had been caught by the Vichy police, I would have been handed over to the Germans and sent to a concentration camp. It is a long way from Nice to the small village in the center of France where the Desrutins resided at that time. Finally after evading many German roadblocks, I reached the Desrutin family farm. A few days after I had arrived, a letter written by my mother and smuggled out of Drancy, the holding camp near Paris for arrested Jews, arrived at the Desrutins’. My mother was advising the Desrutins that she, my father and my grandmother had been arrested by the French police in Nice and sent to Drancy. She did not know what their fate would be. She asked my sister and me to be courageous. God willing, she wrote, we would see each other again. Her letter was a model of courage, hope and love for us, her children. I still have this letter with me. My parents and my maternal grandmother were deported with convoy 66 which left Drancy on January 20<sup>th</sup> 1944 and arrived at Auschwitz Jan 23<sup>rd</sup> 1944. They never came back. The Germans knew that my parents had children and they were looking for us. I stayed for a awhile with the Desrutins. When it became too dangerous for me to stay with them any longer, because of potential denunciation by French who sympathized with the German occupiers and there were plenty of them, I had to leave the Desrutin family. After evading many German road traps, I eventually reached the home of an uncle who lived near Lyon. There again when it became too dangerous to stay, I left heading south to the mountains of Provence. On and off, I was sheltered by French farmers. Eventually I joined the FTP (Francs Tireurs & Partisans Français ), an underground guerilla group in the department of La Drôme near Montellimar. The group was made up mostly of the sons of the local farmers who had refused to go to Germany to work for the German war machinery and were hiding in the maquis, as these armed groups were called. We received arms dropped by air, mostly by the British. We got food provided by the local farmers sympathetic to our cause, i.e. the liberation of France. There were only three Jews in our group and I was one of them. On August 15<sup>th</sup>, 1944 the Allies landed in the south of France, near Frejus on the French Riviera.

Towards the 20<sup>th</sup> of August, my FTP group joined for a while with the 36<sup>th</sup> Texas division. I briefly served as an interpreter with the Butler company of the 36<sup>th</sup> Texas division. While on patrol with some GI 's I was wounded in action and taken care of, in a US Army field hospital. Eventually our maquis group was integrated in the French army. I was discharged in spring 1945. And that's how I survived the war. I was young, fairly strong and God was on my side.

In early spring 1944 while France was still occupied, the relatives who had taken in my sister in, just before our parents were arrested and deported, could no longer safely shelter her. One of the Desrutins older daughters picked up my sister and brought her home with her at the risk of her life. It should be remembered that during the German occupation of France, any Christian family who sheltered Jewish persons ran the risk of being deported, if found out by the Vichy government police or the German Gestapo.

After the war from 1945 to 1951, I lived in Paris with my sister. When my sister became old enough to live independently, I decided to emigrate from France, for two reasons : too many sad memories and no prospect for a decent future. At that time, Australia needed immigrants. I answered their call. I spent 2 years in Melbourne. The country did not live up to my expectations. I left Australia in 1953 and arrived in California in 1954 where I have resided ever since. In 1957, I married my wife, Barbara. We have two children and six grandchildren. In some ways, my children and my grandchildren as well as the children and grandchildren of my sister, are the spiritual descendents of the Desrutin family who helped me stay alive a long, long time ago. The US has been good to me. I feel that California is my true home.

On March 9th 1999, The French Committee for Yad Vashem awarded posthumously to Jean and Marthe Desrutin the Righteous Gentile medal, a well deserved award for bravery in saving two young Jews some fifty five years ago.

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#### **Additional information added by his family**

Au printemps 1944, je joins le maquis FTP dont le centre était à Buis-les-Baronnies dans la Drôme. A l' époque j' avais 19 ans. J' en ai maintenant 80 passé, donc les souvenirs de ce passé lointain s'estompent dans ma mémoire. Je me souviens que le centre du commandement était sur une place rectangulaire avec des cafés sur les trottoirs et de beaux arbres. Je suis resté dans votre région avec tous mes camarades du 1er Régiment FTP de la Drôme pendant le printemps et été 1944 .Je participai à quelques barouds sérieux à Laragne et Sisteron. Comme vous le savez, les Alliés débarquèrent le 15 Août 44 près de Fréjus et remontèrent la National 7. Vers le 20 Août notre groupement pris contact avec la 32nd Texas division. Comme je baragouinais quelques mots d' anglais appris au lycée, je servis pendant quelques jours d' interprète auprès de la " Robert Company". La route entre Valance et Montélimar était jonchée de chars et de camions allemands détruits par l' aviation américaine. Beaucoup de soldats ennemis avaient abandonné leur equipment et s'étaient réfugiés dans les collines avoisinantes. Beaucoup de ces soldats n'étaient pas de nationalité allemande. C' était des Mongols, des Asiatiques de la

Sibérie. Ils s'étaient portés volontaires pour servir dans la Wehrmacht. Certains d'entre eux tout en pourchassant les maquisards commirent des atrocités horribles contre les fermiers du pays et les jeunes qui se cachaient dans l'arrière pays, fuyant les Allemands et l'infame Milice. Les Américains essayaient de leur donner la chasse quand des fermiers venaient dire aux soldats américains où ils pensaient avoir vu des fuyards. Comme les Américains n'étaient pas familiers avec les chemins de campagne, je les accompagnais dans leur jeeps pour les guider. Durant une de ces reconnaissances, notre jeep fut bombardée par deux Messerschmitts. Nous nous retrouvâmes tous dans le fossé, moi avec une blessure pas trop sérieuse au bras, les deux autres soldats américains furent plus sérieusement blessés. Heureusement la radio de la jeep marchait encore. Un soldat appela une ambulance et c'est comme cela que je me suis retrouvé dans une tente américaine où un soldat infirmier me soigna. Plus tard je fus intégré dans l'armée française jusqu'à la fin de la guerre.