

YOUNG FRENCH JEWS OF 1968: ORAL HISTORIES

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This article showcases the oral histories of four French Jews who participated in the tumultuous social protests of the late 1960s. The full texts of these interviews appear in *An Uncertain Future: Voices of a French Jewish Community, 1940–2012*, a compilation of oral histories edited by myself and Richard E. Sharpless.¹ In order to contextualize their illuminating recollections, I have introduced this material with a general description of French Jewry during this turbulent time and the important events that shaped my interlocutors' opinions and actions during the late 1960s and beyond. I have selected narratives that provide us with important clues as to how young Jews navigated the French environment during the 1960s and early 1970s, and how they understood the defining moments of the period, such as the 1967 Six-Day War and the 1968 student rebellions.

The young Jews living in France in the late 1960s were hardly a homogenous group. During this time, the French-Jewish population was comprised of five hundred thousand souls, roughly divided in half between Jews of European descent and Jews of North African background. Throughout this period, most of the French Jewish leadership was made up of Ashkenazic Jews, most of whom were quite acculturated to French ways. Jewish immigrants from Tunisia, Morocco, and Algeria settled in France more recently than their European coreligionists; generally between the mid-1950s and the early 1970s. During this period of youth revolt, the newly arrived, and generally more ethno-traditional, North African Jews were also grappling with the disruptive process of adaptation and integration, and struggling with changes in their social and economic status.

The distinct backgrounds of young, French Jews influenced the ways in which they understood the events of 1967 and 1968. For the many Ashkenazic French Jews whose families had direct experience with the Holocaust, the history of the Jewish genocide in Europe, and their knowledge of the shameful collaboration of France's Vichy regime with the Nazis, served as a foundational lens through which they viewed the youth revolt of the late 1960s.² This did not necessarily play out in the same way for young French Jews of Middle Eastern descent, for whom the decolonization and emigration experience from North Africa had greater salience.

Generally, Ashkenazic Jews were raised with a more left-leaning orientation than Jews of Middle Eastern backgrounds, owing to the socialist and

unionist traditions of Eastern European Jews and the history of leftwing resistance to Nazism. In contrast, although some Maghreban Jews sympathized with the revolutionary nationalist decolonization movements, most realized that greater security lie with French control over North Africa and thus were pushed rightward.³ Young French Jews, therefore, wrestled with a variety of political legacies as they negotiated the youth revolts of the late 1960s and 1970s.

The repercussions of the Six-Day War tended to separate even many leftist Ashkenazic Jews from their non-Jewish, New-Left counterparts, many of whom began to view Israel as one of the many European colonialist enterprises that they objected to throughout the world. This, combined with President Charles de Gaulle's infamous 1967 charge that Jews were "an elitist people, sure of themselves and domineering," made many young Jews feel insecure about their position in French society.⁴

The following oral histories recall the experiences of three Ashkenazic Jews and one North African Jew, all of whom came of age during the late 1960s and lived through the student rebellions of the spring of 1968. The French student riots in May and June 1968 were part of a worldwide phenomenon, but were conditioned by particular French historical and cultural precedents, as well as by the horribly crowded, bureaucratic, and authoritarian French higher education system. These riots, which quickly gained extensive working-class and middle-class support, shook the waning de Gaulle presidency to its core and played a considerable role in the president's resignation one year later, under the cover of a failed referendum.⁵ Indeed, the events of 1968 transformed French attitudes toward authority, youth culture, gender relations, and identity politics, and this was equally true within the French Jewish community as well.

Alain Grynberg

Born 1950, Paris

Interviewed Spring 1993

My life in Paris had two important aspects: my studies and my life as a Jew. My first approach to Judaism started when I was six years old. We did not get very involved at home because my father erased Judaism from his life after World War II. But he still thought that his son should know about his religion.

I was born in 1950, a member of the postwar generation, the generation they thirsted for during the years they spent in the concentration camps. They were not a common generation: they had strength and a special attachment to life.

But let me go back for a moment and talk about my family background and something of my political beliefs. My father came from Poland; my mother was born in Paris. Her father was Russian and her mother was from Romania. My father came to Paris in 1929 during the economic crisis. At the time he was 20, although he had left home at the age of 15 to work in Warsaw. Like many others, he was a tailor. He lived with his employer who paid him two kopeks

a week. When he came to Paris, he stayed with his brother who was a rabbi there. The brother was five years older. Unfortunately, he died in 1934.

I started attending summer camps for Jews. This was in 1956, before the arrival of Sephardim in France. I went to a camp called Foyer Ouvrier Juif [Jewish Workers' Association], an organization that helped orphans of the war and bought two castles to shelter them. It was like a summer camp that brought together Jewish kids who did not come from wealthy families. I started there and stayed until 1975, becoming a director. I virtually lived in that environment for 20 years. To this day, I have very good friends from there.

The Lycée Voltaire in Paris was my school. It was a big school with 3,500 students. Almost 50 per cent of the kids were Jewish. It was difficult at the time of the Algerian War (1954–1962). Every time there was a bomb alert, we would not go to school.

In 1960, something different happened: the Sephardim. We experienced the same sort of things as the Israelis: the arrival of half a million people [an exaggeration] from another culture [Algeria] without jobs. They were poor. Of course, some of them had money, but not many. The Jews from Tunisia and Morocco were a little different. They did not all come at the same time.

May 1968 opened the doors of politics, and for a while we lost interest in the youth movement. There also was the problem of the Six Day War, the difficulty of explaining it politically, the problems of the occupied territories [i.e., the Golan Heights, the West Bank territories, East Jerusalem, and the Sinai peninsula, including Gaza.] After 1968, I was at the University of Paris, studying science.

My father told me that life in Paris for the Jews and non-Jews in the 1930s was fabulous. The Jews had a different attitude towards each other during those years. My father and my grandmother told me that they would support each other, give each other jobs. There was a purpose, a Jewish community I think that today things are different; there is a hierarchy and different classes, and this is starting in Israel too, unfortunately. It is very sad because it represents the beginning of the end of the Jewish community. Once you start getting closer to a Gentile, because he has the same job you have, rather than closer to a Jew, this is the end. Everyone lived together, and we talked Yiddish in the house. And I might add that I never had any formal education in Hebrew when I was young. My father did not want me to learn it. It had to do with politics. He had been a Communist, part of the Jewish International. After World War II, he abandoned his political ideas and, soon after, his religious beliefs.

I learned only a few things about my family during the Shoah. My parents had been married to others before the war. For both of them, it was a second marriage. My father's first wife died during the war. My mother's first husband died at the very beginning of the war. Most of my father's family died in Auschwitz.

My father does not feel very comfortable talking about the Holocaust. The French turned him in. It changed his vision of France. When he got his French

citizenship after the war, I think that it was almost like an apology note. Of course, this had an impact on his identity as French. After he was deported, he spent four years in Auschwitz, from March 1941 to May 1945

Israel was not important for my parents, even though it was for me. Don't forget that at the age of six I was singing Hebrew songs at the summer camp. The only idea I had about Israel was the vision of a golden temple. I did not know about politics yet. I believed in Zionism and I was happy.

The wars changed everything. I "lived" the Six Day War. I was 17, and it is ironic that the war started the same day we had our big party at the youth movement I do not think we slept on any of the six days. We listened to the radio all the time. About 60 of us had planned to go to Israel in July 1967 but we went after the war. In 1968 I was in Paris at the university. I was, of course, a Leftist like everyone, though a Leftist and a Zionist, as well. I considered myself a hard leftist, a Trotskyite. At that age—18 or 20 years—we wanted to fight against injustice.

People from my generation, the Jews from my generation, have this in their blood. Today, I have a different role in politics, but if I had the means, I would pursue the ideals I had at the time. I changed my views on Trotsky because they do not correspond to the reality we live in. It still represents something though. Back at the time, we had foreseen what would happen. We said it, but no one listened. For example, what happened here in Dijon? Factories shut down. The Hoover factory shut down. Salaries were cut by 30 per cent . . . and everything was transferred to England, a major sore spot in 1993.

Today, I am more concerned with giving political power back to the citizens. Many of my leftist ideas died. In France, Mitterrand was elected based on ideas from the Left. Then, he followed the politics of the Right. This is proof that is very hard to follow leftist ideas in a European country. Now, in today's elections, there are no candidates for me.⁶ (Brackets in original.)

Annie Edelman and Maurice "Gislain" Bensoussan

Born 1946, Lyon, France and 1946, Algeria, respectively

Interviewed Spring 1993

ANNIE: My "Jewish life" began when I was 14. The turning point came when I saw the movie, *Mein Kampf*.⁷ Thanks to the film, I began thinking about Judaism. I asked my mother what it meant to be a Jew. She did not have an answer. Or, rather, the answer she had was that it meant "the ovens." I decided to investigate for myself. We were living in Lyon at the time so I contacted the rabbi there, who turned out to be very impressive. Then I met some young people in the city who had a community house where classes were held. They were mostly boys, though occasionally a girl would attend. One day, young people of the Ha Shomer Ha-Tsair [a left-wing, Zionist Youth Movement] came and convinced me to participate in their activities. So you see, it started little by little and eventually became an important part of my life.

I did my first college year at the Catholic University of Lyon, then transferred to the university in Dijon. There I continued to learn more about Judaism. For a long time, I had worn a “Magen David” [Star of David] in gold, and one day at the university’s cafeteria a guy noticed it and asked me if I was Jewish. I replied that I was, and he told me that there was a synagogue in Dijon, with people of our age, and was I interested? That is how I came into contact with the community of Dijon. It turned out to be easy to integrate into it because it was then rather small.

Still, there were difficulties. I had gotten married to a Catholic and already had a child. My integration was hard and was so until the day I met Gislain, my second husband, an Algerian Jew. Then, problems of that kind came to an end.

I had never been involved in politics. Even in May 1968, when there were student and workers uprisings in Paris that nearly toppled de Gaulle and helped lead to his retirement a year later, I didn’t participate but only observed. Then came the Six Day War [a year before, actually], in which Israel defeated Egypt, Syria, and Jordan, who were supported by several other Arab states; at first, Jews worldwide feared another Holocaust, provoking widespread support for Israel and other Jewish causes. I was concerned and followed the news. Here in Dijon we held a meeting at the synagogue to collect money. I remember really well, for example, photographs of Israeli soldiers in front of the Kotel. Those images were really strong.

I do, of course, remember de Gaulle’s attitude [about Israel and the Jews], the embargo [of French weapons to Israel], all the politics, and, afterwards, Georges Pompidou, whom I remember even better. As the years passed, I became more and more concerned.

GISLAIN: Like Annie, I was born in 1946, but in Algeria, in the city of Mostaganem, located on the coast near Oran. It was a city of perhaps 50,000 inhabitants. I had a flawless childhood. There was a small Jewish community with a fine social life, like all the Jewish communities in Algeria. We had many “traditionalists,” but not many real Orthodox folks.

We did not leave Algeria because of problems with the Muslims. We had Muslim and Catholic friends, although we all lived in different parts of the city. Things began to change when I was in high school and my brother was in elementary school. He had to learn Arabic, which showed the ending of French rule.

It was not really hard when my family moved to France. My father made money; he worked with wood as a cabinet and furniture maker. Between 1952 and 1956, he worked in a Simca automobile factory. But we spent what we earned.

When we came to Marseille, I found that there were Jews in my school. But we did not have a community life except for the holidays. I saw the movie *Mein Kampf* at school and understood the relationship between the war and

the Jews. But I had relatively little contact with Jewish problems until the Six Day War. It was at the start of my second year in university. There was a poster in the cafeteria announcing that the Union of Jewish Students of France was organizing a general meeting, so I went. I became a member and stayed until 1973 when I finished my studies.

During those years, I had a chance to talk with Jews about Israel and other things. I learned the history of Israel, the actions of the Labor Party, the role of the state, the political categories. I tended to be on the Left although I never joined a political party—mostly because of Israel. But of course in Marseille the Union of Jewish Students was always on the Left. I did have friends who were in movements like the Communist League. But when the biggest student organization in France of which we all were members joined with other leftist parties in criticizing Israel and siding with the Palestinians, we sent in our membership cards saying, “This is the end!”

I was in the Faculty of Sciences. The majority of the people there were on the Left. We sometimes had discussions with Arabs; there were Arab groups at the university from Morocco and Algeria. They were against Israel and they supported the Palestinians.

ANNIE: [Here in Dijon] I was angry because no one was concerned about the Jews in the Soviet Union. I had first become involved with the LICRA [Ligue Internationale Contre le racisme et l’anti-semitisme].⁸ I started as a result of racism, not politics. I can’t remember the year, perhaps 1970. With LICRA, I met Jews who were members of the community and Jews who were not. I got involved in order to preserve human rights, not for political reasons. I participated in political demonstrations because I was concerned about Israel and the fact that France has always been more on the Arab side. But the LICRA is not involved in politics. It deals with racism, anti-Semitism.

It is important for a Jew involved with the LICRA to deal with the worst kind of racism in France, that against Arabs. Arabs have been here for a long time, and they have nothing to do with the problems in the Middle East. They are workers who live in difficult conditions and we protect them, of course. Israel is another thing. The LICRA also shows to the Arabs that Jews are not always hard on Arabs. There are some Muslim members of the LICRA in Dijon. It is really integrated. In the rest of France, it is mostly Jews.⁹ (Brackets in original.)

Françoise Tenenbaum

Born 1950, Paris

Interviewed Spring 1993 and June 2005

Victor Hugo was an all-girls’ public high school [in Paris]. The students were the daughters of people who worked in the textile industry, for which the Marais was well-known. And yes, I realized there I was a Jew. I remember, in particular, one episode. My parents had suffered a lot from the war but still celebrated the holidays, since my mother was religious. Every year I would take off from school for Rosh Hashanah, Yom Kippur. The year I was in sixth

grade, I missed school for Rosh Hashanah, and my mother wrote an excuse saying that I had to go to a wedding. I turned in the note at eight o'clock, and at ten they called me back and asked me to bring my mother. When my mother arrived at the office, they told her, "We know why your daughter missed school, you suffered enough and you should not lie." And after that we always wrote the truth. We were afraid to say that we were Jewish. In fact, the word "Jew" did not even exist for us; we would instead say "Israélite" [polite non ethnic term used by assimilated Jews before the 1970s].

During those years we never talked about the war, I asked my father about it; he never spoke of it because he did not want us to feel like Jews did not do enough. I think they just wanted to forget about it and start a new life.

I did receive a religious education. Every Sunday I would go to the Talmud Torah. I also did my bat mitzvah in the first group of girls who did it. That was at La Victoire Synagogue, one of Europe's biggest synagogues built at the time of Napoleon III on La Victoire Street in Paris.

I was 17 during the Six Day War in 1967. It was my dream to go to Israel even though I did not speak Hebrew. We knew what was going on because we would bring radios to school. It was not allowed, but we nevertheless did it.

The following year, spring 1968, because of the students' and workers' rebellion, we did not have class for a long while. It was just impossible to take the written exams. Instead there were only oral exams, and we were not prepared for them. I remember that the day I took them was very hot, the exams were hard, and the professors were not focused. There was a demonstration against de Gaulle's government of almost 7,000 or 8,000 people marching from the Place de la Nation to the Hôtel de Ville. There was also another demonstration, this time in favor of de Gaulle on the Champs-Élysées with a lot of people. My father was singing the Internationale. He was a liberal although not enrolled in any party. He believed that liberals are more open-minded, take more care of human rights, and are kinder to the Jewish community, not only to the Jews of France, but in general. As for Israel, my father was sympathetic but he never felt he had to settle there. He and my mother did go there in 1967 at the time of the Wall's liberation. I went for the first time in 1970 with a group of young Jews.

In May 1968, I saw demonstrations and attended some of them. I went to the Sorbonne meeting in the grand amphitheatre, and we held some meetings in my school. It was amazing. I really felt that we were doing something good. People were full of ideas. It was serious, too. We had hope; we were accomplishing things. But there were hard times as well. Once when I was taking an environmental class, the young woman professor came to class in tears. Her car had been burnt during a demonstration with her handwritten thesis in it; she had no copy.

At this time it is impossible to say that the Shoah was present in our thinking. [Neither was] Israel, but we were more positive about that. We knew that anti-Semitism existed in France, even though perhaps we had not experienced

it. Yes, and Vichy was a taboo subject. We are Jewish, and we have always been proud of it.

I remember that when I was in high school, some people were organizing a demonstration for Vietnamese children. Of course, I was interested, so I went to the meeting, which took place in a café in the Marais area. They had drinks, and when I asked for a Coke they said that I could only have a Pepsi because Coke was American. I left [because Pepsi would not sell its products in Israel, while Coke did sell its products there].

During that time when I was at the university, I did my first two years of pharmacology, and then I did environmental studies in the Science Department at Jussieu University in Paris and also in cartography at the National Geographic Institute. The people at Jussieu supported the Arab cause, as they called it. I would take down posters that were against Israel. They knew that I was Jewish, but I was not involved in any organizations. I knew Jews who were part of various leftist groups, but I did not have time for those things.

Years later when [my husband and I] returned from my husband's residency at Brown University we came back [to Dijon], I applied for a teaching position at the university, but nobody knew me in the Department of Geography because I hadn't studied there. They told me to go instead to the regional headquarters of the social security [service] because they needed somebody for hospital planning. Social Security hired me, and I started working in May 1983.

At this time the Jewish community was changing. Before our departure to the United States no other structure or service existed beside the synagogue and the [kosher] butchers. I think that it really changed with the creation of B'nai B'rith.¹⁰ It was something different. The intellectual work was interesting and gave us a chance to meet a lot of people in a bigger organization. We really wanted to do something. We wanted structure. We wanted to fight anti-Semitism and to improve [economic relations] with Israel.

I think that it's important to be heard as a Jew. We are what we are, and we have to present ourselves accordingly. We did not do that before. I come from a family who suffered from World War II. We did not hide ourselves, but we did not live in an open way. It is like hooking the mezuzah on the door. Many people do not put it on the outside but rather on the inside. It was like that in my parents' house. They told me, "We do not want to disturb people outside." They did not want to be questioned. They did not want to deal with these things.

Now politicians are invited to talk to us as Jews. They have to respect us for what we are. It is our right. We are French. But for many people we are still a mystery, hard to understand. Although fewer and fewer people believe that "the Jews killed Jesus," they do not understand how we live, and, on top of it, it's impossible for them to think that we do not celebrate Christmas.¹¹ (Brackets in original.)

Endnotes

- 1 Robert I. Weiner and Richard E. Sharpless, *An Uncertain Future: Voices of a French Jewish Community, 1940–2012* (Toronto: University of Toronto Press, 2012). Portions of the chapters “Alain Grynberg,” (176–185) “Annie Edelman and Maurice ‘Gislain’ Bensoussan,” (153–175) and “Françoise Tenenbaum,” (62–83) are reprinted here with permission of the publisher, the University of Toronto Press. Copyright © University of Toronto Press Incorporated 2012, Higher Education Division. All rights reserved. The use of any part of this publication reproduced, transmitted in any form or by any means, electronic, mechanical, photocopying, recording or otherwise, or stored in a retrieval systems, without the prior written consent of the publisher—or in the case of photocopying, a license from Access Copyright (Canadian Copyright Licensing Agency), One Yonge Street, Suite 1900, Toronto, Ontario M5E 1E5—is an infringement of the copyright law.
- 2 Some 25 percent of all Jews living in France in 1940 (then approximately 325,000) were murdered during the Holocaust, with the collaboration of the French government, known as the Vichy Regime. See Renée Poznanski, *Jews in France During World War II*, trans. Nathan Bracher (Hanover, N.H.: University Press of New England in association with the United States Holocaust Memorial Museum, 2001); Michael Marrus and Robert Paxton, *Vichy France and the Jews* (New York: Schocken Books, 1983); and Annette Wiewiorka, “Les années noires,” in *Les juifs de France : de la Révolution française à nos jours*, ed. Jean Jacques Becker and Annette Wiewiorka (Paris: Liana Levi, 1998); Robert I. Weiner, “The Evolution of French Jewry since World War II: An Analysis,” *Proceedings of the Ninth Annual Meeting of the Western Society for French History*, 1982: 402–13.
- 3 See for example, see Weiner and Sharpless, 24–25; Paula Hyman, *The Jews of Modern France* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1998), Chapter 10; and Michel Abitbol, “The Integration of North African Jews in France,” *Yale French Studies* 85 (1994). Additional material with respect to Jewish responses during the decolonization era in the Maghreb, and especially in Algeria, is presented by Michael M. Laskier, “The Emigration of the Jews from the Arab World,” in Abdelwahab Meddeb and Benjamin Stora, eds., *A History of Jewish Muslim Relations, from the Origins to the Present Day* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 2013), 417–27; see also Monique Ayounand and Jean-Pierre Stora, eds., *Mon Algérie: 65 Personnalités Témoignent* (Paris: Éditions Hugo et Cie, 2012).
- 4 Raymond Aron, *De Gaulle, Israel and the Jews* (New Brunswick: Transaction Publishers, 2004); Hyman, *The Jews of Modern France*, 201 Weiner and Sharpless, *An Uncertain Future*, 108.
- 5 Jean Vigreux, *Croissance et contestations : 1958–1981: Histoire de la France contemporain* (Paris: éd. du Seuil, 2014), 165–79 Weiner and Sharpless, *An Uncertain Future*, 24.
- 6 Weiner and Sharpless, *An Uncertain Future*, 176–85.
- 7 *Mein Kampf*, a Swedish film, directed by Erwin Leiser and released in 1960, follows the rise and fall of Hitler from his life as a failed artist to his rise to power and eventual suicide after Germany’s defeat in 1945.
- 8 The International League against Racism and Anti-Semitism (LICRA) was founded in the late 1930s by Bernard Lacache, a Frenchman and Jewish activist, in the wake of growing French and European antisemitism. Following World War II, it expanded its struggle against other forms of racism as well, both in France and elsewhere. See Emmanuel Debono, *Aux origines de l’antiracisme: la LICA, 1927–1940* (Paris: CNRS éditions, 2012).
- 9 Weiner and Sharpless, *An Uncertain Future*, 153–75.
- 10 B’nai B’rith, the largest international Jewish fraternal organization, was founded in 1843 by German Jews in the United States. In recent decades its branches have spread quickly throughout French urban areas, where it also supports the B’nai B’rith Youth Organization, a global non-denominational Jewish Youth group. See David Malkam, *La fantastique histoire du B’nai B’rith: la plus importante organisation humanitaire juive mondiale* (Paris: Montorgueil, 1993).
- 11 Weiner and Sharpless, *An Uncertain Future*, 62–83.