

*Despite the
importance of
the experience
in their lives,
most of them
tell their story*

for the first time. Perhaps someday some of these women will write their memoirs, but these will be more elaborate, literary texts, without the immediate emotion aroused by the shock of a memory rising to the surface during a discussion between sisters in struggle.

Isa Benzekri

Isa Benzekri was born in Algiers in 1928. She was in one of the first underground cells of the Algerian People's Party (Parti du Peuple Algérien, PPA), the first Algerian nationalist party, and was one of the founders in 1947 of the Association of Algerian Muslim Women.

Djamila AMRANE

Algerian Women Talk

about the War

Translated from French

by Hannah DAVIS

Involved since 1955 in the war of national liberation, she was almost entirely responsible for all the secretarial work of the Central Executive Committee and worked directly with Abane Ramdane (who was born in 1920, joined the PPA in 1945, was imprisoned from 1950-1955, and was a member of the CCE and the CNRA, Conseil National de la Révolution Algérienne). Benzekri and Ramdane were married in 1956, in Algiers, while they were both in the underground. In January 1957, Isa had a baby, Hassen. The next month, Abane left for Tunisia. She never saw him again. He was assassinated by "brothers in the struggle" in Morocco in December of the same year. Remarried to Sadek Déhilès (colonel of the Wilaya IV), Isa has five children, and has not engaged in any further professional or political activities.

...In 1947, I joined the Association of Algerian Muslim Women which had just been created... I managed to organize a few women in my neighborhood... But in 1949, I fell ill. My brother was in the French navy, he could take care of me, and I spent a year in a sanatorium in France. When I got back, the Association had practically gone out of existence, due to factionalism...

In the sanatorium, I learned typing and shorthand. I enjoyed studying. When I got back to Algiers, I enrolled in the Pigier school in 1951. I was the only veiled student, my mother forced me to wear the veil. I got my diploma, and then decided to work and take off the veil. In France, I had found it humiliating to have to wear the veil. At first when I took off the veil, it was upsetting, as if I were walking down the street in a bathing suit.

...I started political work again in August 1955... I made contact with Abane Ramdane and Rachid Amara. The first thing Abane asked me was if I knew how to type and how to drive. I knew how to type and I had learned how to drive. I worked at a lawyer's office and I managed to type out stencils for pamphlets, "The Call to Intellectuals," for example. This went on until Amara's arrest. A resistance fighter... warned me about the arrest of Lounis and Amara. I went to tell Nassima, and when I got there they were arresting her, she was handcuffed, I could hardly believe it! I had pamphlets and a letter

for Abane in my briefcase. I told them my mother had sent me with an invitation for Nassima's mother. They were interrogating Nassima, they asked me to identify myself and then let me go. I was sure that they were going to follow me. I thought quickly. I took the street car... I saw a grey deux-chevaux following me and a policeman in the bus. When I got home I tore up all the documents I had. My mother said, "Oh, now you're scared!" "No, I'm being careful." Then I asked her to go to the university and wait for Hafsa to tell her about Nassima's arrest.

For two weeks I lost contact. I controlled myself, I worked. When I left the office "they" (the policemen) were waiting with their hats and their overcoats. I went window-shopping, acted like a good little girl, and "they" followed me.

On December 24, 1955, Mohamed Ben Yahia came to see me at work and told me that Abane wanted to see me. I found him in his hide-out with Ouamrane. He asked me to take to the maquis without telling my family, but I wanted to tell my mother, I insisted. Ouamrane said to let me go. I left a note in the bread box for my mother: "Don't expect me back, I've left for the maquis. Kisses."

I went back to the hide-out and insisted on leaving for the maquis. Abane said, "What do you want to do there? You'll catch fleas!"

Finally in January I was sent to Oran... to learn some first-aid. But I didn't get to go to the maquis; after a month, Abane called me back and I went to Algiers where I lived in his hide-out...

My liaison work in Algiers itself I always did veiled, on foot or in the street car. I often typed all day: the stencils of the first issues of El Mujahid, pamphlets... reports of the activities in the maquis, in Kabylia, Draa El Mizan, Boghni, the Constantinian North, Collo, the Nemenchas... at that time, these were unknown countries to me.

In the summer of 1956, I typed days and days on end in the heat. I typed all of the stencils of the Congress platform, the Summam... On April 12, 1956 we were married, Abane and I, we had a religious ceremony. Maybe it wasn't exactly the

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moment for it, but he had suffered so much, five years of prison and then living underground again.

He didn't tell me anything about what he did. At first he talked things over with me a lot, then near the end he was preoccupied. He went out a lot and sometimes slept elsewhere. Whenever he had the chance he came back.

Our son Hassen was born on January 8, 1957. A French midwife came to help me give birth... I told her I was an unwed mother and asked her to register the baby at the city hall under my name with the father unknown.

Abane was happy once his son was born... But the child was traumatized, later, by his father's death; if he had died in the maquis, that would have been different, but the way it was... A Tunisian compared Abane with a comet that passes through the sky and disappears. Abane left for a few days after the arrest of Ben M'hidi, the 27th or 29th of January 1957. After the eight-day strike there was total disorder, I had no more contact with him. My parents came to see me. Abane wrote me from Tunis asking me to join him. I got my papers, went to Marseilles, to my brother's, and then left for Tunis. His last letter was from the beginning of December, he was killed on December 27, 1957, but I didn't know it.

I arrived in Tunis in January 1958. I stayed with a family Abane had told me about. After one month I got an official letter telling me that Abane was in the maquis and that I should go back to Algiers. The people I was living with advised me to stay, but Abane had told me when he left that he would return to Algiers as soon as possible to take matters in hand. So I believed this letter. I went back with my baby. In Algiers, I waited two months, my mother advised me to return to Tunis. I dreamt that he said to me: "Meet me at such-and-such a place," I ran, I ran, and I never managed to meet him. The last dream I had like that I found two pairs of black shoes...

I went back to Tunis in April. No-one said anything. I saw Ouamrane who couldn't bring himself to tell me. Then I saw his best friend, Sadek Déhilès... I said to him, "I have no news of Ahmed" (this was the code name of Abane). He said to me: "You will."

He insisted that I be told. The next day, May 27, 1958, Mohamed Said came and told me pompously that Abane had died on the battlefield of honor. Then there was an issue of El Mujahid announcing his death in the maquis, but I didn't really believe it. For a long time I thought that it was a false report and I had an insane hope... Then I felt a lot of hostility, and there were rumors. It was Doctor Nekkache who made it clear to me that Abane had been liquidated. Someone close to Krim Belkacem gave me to understand that the life of my son was in danger if I didn't keep quiet about it. In reality he didn't need to threaten me, I kept quiet for the good of the Revolution. It was still wartime and we had to stay united.

The Bedj Family

All of the Bedj family were in the resistance. Three of the children took to the maquis and were killed: Messaouda at 25 years of age, Fatoma at 24 and their adopted brother Youssef. Talabia, the oldest, and Farida, the youngest girl, were active in the civil organization of the FLN. The father, a retired employee of the French police, arrested several times, died of fatigue in January 1959. The mother, left alone with Talabia and the youngest children, Farida and Mohamed, kept helping the maquisards.

After the war Farida married, had children, and lives a normal life. But Fatma, the mother, and Talabia, whose accounts follow, are broken. They live in seclusion in the family home in El Asnam.

Talabia Bedj

I had three younger sisters, all of us were resistance fighters... Two of my sisters were in the maquis: Fatoma and Messaouda. Every time there was an incident, they came to get my father and questioned him about Miriam (Messaouda's code name) and El Alia (Fatoma's code name). They took him, let him go, took him back... the last time they let him go, he was very sick, and died.

In 1958, they came because they had found a list of purchases... including a rather large amount of... paper, pens,

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and so on... It was my younger sister Farida who had made these purchases for the maquisards. They took her and my father away.

She made up a story saying that a guy had forced her to buy those things. She made up a false description of the guy and stuck to it. They took her to the camps with a hood over her head, so she could identify him, but she didn't identify anyone. A soldier hit her. In the camp, an old resistance fighter, seeing them hit her, said: "Say it's me to get out of it." We found her a lawyer and after two months she was released. As for me, she said I was crazy. So I pretended I was. But she saved me, she saved us all.

We got letters from my sisters and the other maquisards, they told us what they needed. They asked us to sew, to knit wool sweaters, to make badges... Often I brought them the packages myself, I put on an old veil, old shoes, and went out to the douars on the outskirts of town, 5 or 10 kilometers away. I never saw Miriam, but I saw El Alia five times...

The first time... I remember that day: she had on something like moccasins tied up with a string... (she cries). She showed me her feet, it looked as if they were burned, they were bleeding. She had marched so much, her shoes had holes. And her hair! She had such beautiful hair before, it shone. And that day, I remember, she scratched her head, and took off a flea. Her hair was full of fleas. She had a little checked shirt, jeans, and a little revolver, a 6.35. She was so pleased, look I've got a revolver, she put it in her pocket...

I learned of [Miriam's] death in March. I had gone to the maquis to see... El Alia. She was with Chafika and the two Khatib boys. I begged them to give me news of Miriam. Chafika took me aside and said: "She's dead, but El Alia doesn't know it." I was the one who wanted to know the truth and when I did... (she cries). That day, Chafika told me that Miriam was dead, but El Alia didn't know about it. And El Alia told me that Chafika's fiance was dead, and Chafika didn't know about it. Each one of them was hiding it from the other. They are all dead, Miriam, El Alia, Chafika, her fiance, the two Khatib brothers.... They were courageous, they weren't the kind that

would have just died by accident: they wanted to die. In our region many girls are named El Alia and Miriam in memory of them...

With Independence, I stopped doing political work. We did our duty, we let others take over... we were so tired...

Fatma Bedj

Miriam came from Algiers to say goodbye before she left for the maquis. What could I say? It was for our country, there was nothing to say. We knew she was in the resistance. Once her father found medicine and medical instruments among her things. She was a student nurse... I knit sweaters, scarves, my husband took them in a box on his motorbike as if he was going to work and gave them to someone in a store for the mujahidin, the resistance fighters.

We felt neither fatigue nor pain.

Those who died, may God have mercy on them, and those who survived, may God reward them, may God give to each one what his heart desires.

My husband, the French harassed him, he barely spent two weeks at home without getting arrested. They came in, shouting, "Miriam, that bitch, where is she?" And they took him off, I don't know where. Then fifteen, twenty days later, he came back, he was asthmatic, he pushed the door open, he came in... in a pitiful state... I washed him, I cared for him, they had hit him... and ten or fifteen days later they knocked on the door, they took him back... That's how it came about that he died on January 15, 1959.

They let him go because he was going to die. He couldn't move, I changed him, and he said, "excuse me, I am making you tired." I said, "Oh no, father of my children, may God forgive you, you aren't making me tired." The next day, January 15, may God rest his soul, he was dead. All of our friends said I should sign him up as a martyr. I told them: "Oh people, pray by the Prophet, this man died in his bed."

We worked, the revolution began with us and it ended with us. Everyone told me: "Ya El-Hajja ask for a pension, ask for something." I asked for nothing, not even a pin, we worked for

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the cause of God. But now I'll tell you the truth, I have regrets, I regret the loss of my daughters... (she cries).

...I knew in 1962. They came to my house, Farida, Si Said, Si Hassan, Slimane, they ate lunch, had tea, and they [my daughters], they weren't there (she cries). I didn't want to ruin their appetite, I didn't say anything. When they had done eating, I asked them:

"And my daughters? Miriam?"

They looked at each other, and told me: "She died a martyr."

A little while afterwards, I said: "And El Alia?"

In a strangled voice, Hassan told me: "She died a martyr."

I said: "And Youssef?" That was my adopted son, he also went to the maquis.

"He died a martyr."

I said nothing, I didn't want to cry in front of them. I went into the kitchen and I cried: "Oh, my little mother, my little mother, I am ruined." And then... God, may He be praised, gave me the faith to go on.

These accounts, imparted to me by my comrades from the underground, the maquis, or prison, were translated from spoken Arabic or Berber into French. It was necessary to do some minimal rewriting... To publish "as is" an interview with an intellectual is a kind of treason. If she had written it herself, she would have avoided awkward moments or repetitions inherent in spoken language. This is just as true for illiterate women. When a peasant woman makes up a song, she thinks over her text and works on it mentally. Therefore, I have corrected these texts, leaving out the detours the mind takes in tracking down a certain memory, and condensing the text to give it intensity.