

# Nathan Taich arrived clandestinely in Paris

back in 1931. He had fled from Poland where he was under threat because of his political activities. France refused him the status of political refugee but he managed to obtain a *carte de séjour*.

In 1938 a law was passed according French nationality to foreigners who enlisted for two years in the French army. "My attachment to France was already quite strong; defending France against Hitler's fascism was my duty; and I was happy to become French," Nat Taich remembers. "Towards the end of 1938 I volunteered and was sent to Fort La Mothe at Lyon as a soldier with the 99<sup>th</sup> RIA."

On the outbreak of hostilities they joined troops at the front in Lorraine. During the German offensive of Spring 1940, Nat Taich was wounded by a shell on the Chemin des Dames. Rescued, he was sent to a military hospital in Bordeaux. Bad news, however, attended his demob: he was judged no longer French. "Goodbye naturalisation! Stripping foreigners of the French nationality they had fought for was grossly unfair."

Nat Taich found his way to the Marseille Résistance after meeting a veteran Jewish militant Communist. He tells his story:

*"In the spring of 1942 I made the acquaintance of Schmulek, who had stopped off at Nîmes. He'd witnessed the first round-up of Jews in Paris and had fled south. It was through him that I joined the Committee of Jewish Solidarity headquartered in Marseille.*

*In Vichy France the persecution process was slower than in the North. We said that Vichy worked like an artichoke: leaf by leaf it plucked*

away the rights of Jews along with their place in society. The tactic was to keep us dozy. But then, in the summer of 1942, came a brutal round-up with a series of actions around the Midi and thousands of Jews were deported. Our role was to make Jews aware of their plight, to be sure they understood that they had become outcasts liable to deportation and death.

At the time I worked between Nîmes and Arles. The MOI bosses in Marseille sent liaison officers — among them Julia Pirotte — with instructions and propaganda. One of the bosses, Victor Menzel, came to see me. He had fought with the International Brigade in Spain and stood out by his honesty and his total involvement. He was also a brilliant intellectual who educated me politically, emphasising the need for vigilance.

Early in 1943 I arrived in Marseille, shortly after the big round-up in the Vieux Port area. I had a meeting with Rose, sister of Maurice Korsec. She'd brought with her a packet of propaganda and described the problem of finding paper and ink. She told me about the climate in town after the sweep of the Vieux Port during which two comrades, Vasernitz and Rothenburg, were killed. Vasernitz worked as a docker. Fernand Rothenburg was among the MOI's first freedom fighters. He'd been arrested alongside Basil Serban during the round-up, when French police had separated Jews from non-Jews. Serban had the presence of mind to get amongst a group of non-Jews, which saved him.

I returned to Nîmes with the material Rose had given me. As we approached Nîmes station the train suddenly slowed. People had spoken of a German control. I was on the point of putting my propaganda down the train WC when I remembered what Rose had told me about the trouble they all went to in producing this material. On that occasion it turned out there was no control on the train, but the town was full of check-points because the FTP had blown up a brothel used by German soldiers.

One Saturday at Arles two inspectors were checking the street market for black-market goods. One of them, flicking through my case, found a packet of propaganda, some of it clandestine CGT material, some of it aimed at the Jewish community. To distract his attention from the propaganda I started telling him about my recent past, my volunteering for the army, the fighting, my wounds. I wanted him to understand my motivation for joining the Résistance. I also told him that I had been naturalised but that the Vichy Government had denied me my rights. I asked him whether he agreed I was French. He was a reservist and said, yes, he considered me to be French.

He seemed to indicate that everything was in order, but I knew I'd been caught in the act by an officer of the Vichy Government, and there must be risk attached to that. I slipped my material to a nearby anarchist,

got on my bike and cycled off to Nîmes. Nobody followed me, thanks to that honest Frenchman, but the lesson I drew from this incident was that being a street-vendor and a member of the Résistance didn't work. I stopped what I was doing. I warned the bosses in Marseille who asked me to come to the city.

There I met Bella Lévine. Along with Victor Menzel she ran the Jewish section of the MOI. She was a remarkable organiser. She coordinated various Résistance activities – the clandestine press, combat groups, the National Movement against Racism. She put in place a network of support for militants and maintained contact with the Jewish groups which financed operations. Bella told me I was to work alongside Léon Tchermine Liova, a Lett responsible for the technical side of producing propaganda: roneo machines, paper, ink, stencils. We kept it all in a basement in the rue Neuve Sainte-Catherine. I introduced a friend from Nîmes, an engraver who produced marvellous counterfeit Ausweis once we had, little by little, collected originals.

Then I was put in charge of vigilance. The Résistance had just one code, to be clandestine – a code which must be adhered to at all times. My responsibility was to remind comrades about the rules of the game.

We in the Résistance all shared the dread of being arrested and tortured. Could we keep our secrets to ourselves? If we didn't, life wouldn't be worth living. But were we really capable of holding on? I would gladly have prayed to find a way to survive, praying to Someone who does not exist!

We also had the role of warning those Jews still in Marseille of the dangers they risked daily. Sadly, we were not always listened to. For instance, we warned several Jewish market traders on La Plaine that they were in great danger. They had the time to get out, but were still there when the Gestapo arrived with a truck and rounded them up along with their goods.

We had to convince Jews who seemed unaware of the dangers to adopt a clandestine existence, not to respond to being provoked, to change lodgings and their papers. If we obtained false papers for them we insisted that they destroyed their original identity cards.

We hid Jewish children in Marseille and the suburbs with the aid of a network provided by the MOI. That's how we hid the Heftman child. His parents lived in Marseille, where his father was a tailor who needed to earn a living even during the War, and had started to build up a clientèle in La Capelette. This tailor worked well and the word got round. We told him to pack up and move on. But he carried on working until someone denounced him. The day the Gestapo came to arrest him and his wife, his young son who was only two and a half was playing with a

neighbour's children, an Italian family. That's how he was saved. We heard about it quickly enough. One comrade, Bernard Adler, who had contacts in Savoie went to fetch him. The child spent the rest of the war in Savoie. Fate had it that his parents escaped deportation. We also made contact with a big-hearted woman at Fourques in the suburbs of Arles. She looked after several children in her home and placed others with friends.

In 1943 Jewish solidarity movements changed dimension and content. All the large towns of the Midi, in what was called the Free Zone, had Jewish refugee communities. The solidarity committees came to be called the Jewish Mutual Union for Resistance, or JMUR. I was part of one of the first combat groups formed by JMUR along with Lévine and Godchaut. Albert Lévine, an engineer, was clever with his hands. He worked in a radio repair shop. He brought appropriated material to the home of "Cot", where they both produced arms and explosives.

Marseille public opinion needed to understand that the Jews themselves were not going to be led like lambs to the slaughter. With this in mind we blew up the headquarters of Youth for a New Europe where a huge caricature of the Jew Suss had been painted along the side of the building in an attempt to depict the race's physical and moral ugliness. In the service of the MOI we executed someone who had denounced Jews, and we machine-gunned a militia group known for persecution activities in the Baille area.

We also alerted Jews to the real role of the General Union of Jews in France – the official French organisation supporting Jewish communities. Their office was in the heart of Marseille. They had put together a list of Jews living in the Bouches-du-Rhône which the Gestapo used for its own ends. On the last day of December 1943, at ten o'clock in the morning, we waylaid the concierge, got into the building and destroyed the Bouche-du-Rhône files, all 700-800 of them, then made off with typewriters and office equipment. After that, the Union played no further role in Marseille."

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