

Hagop Nazaret Chekijian

1918-1990

WW-II POW

By:Cesar J. Chekijian - 2011

The Armenian name Hagop is Jacob in Aramaic, Yagoob in Arabic, James in English, Jacques in French, Jakob in German, Jaime in Portuguese & Diego in Spanish.

On 14th June 1940, the German Army occupied Paris. Paul Reynaud, the French prime minister, now realized that the German Western Offensive could not be halted and suggested that the government should move to territories it owned in North Africa. This was opposed by his vice-premier, Henri-Philippe Petain, and the supreme commander of the armed forces, General Maxime Weygand. They insisted that the government should remain in France and seek an armistice.

Outvoted, Reynaud resigned and President Albert Lebrun, appointed Petain as France's new premier. He immediately began negotiations with Adolf Hitler and on 22nd June signed an armistice with Germany. The terms of the agreement divided France into occupied and unoccupied zones, with a rigid demarcation line between the two. The Germans would directly control three-fifths of the country, an area that included northern and western France and the entire Atlantic coast. The remaining section of the country would be administered by the French government at Vichy under Marshal Henri-Philippe Petain.

The French Army was disbanded except for a force of 100,000 men to maintain domestic order. The 1.5 million French soldiers captured by the Germans were to remain prisoners of war. The French government also agreed to stop members of its armed forces from leaving the country and instructed its citizens not to fight against the Germans. Finally, France had to pay the occupation costs of the German troops.

Over the next four years Henri-Philippe Petain led the right-wing government of Vichy France. The famous

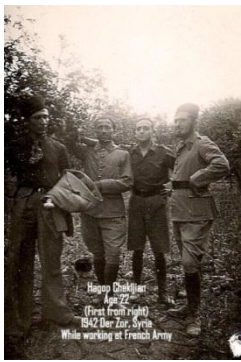
revolutionary principles of "Liberty, Equality, Fraternity" were replaced by "Work, Family, Fatherland". Prominent figures in the Vichy government included Pierre Laval, Jean-Francois Darlan and Joseph Darnand.

With that as backdrop, the Vichy government occupied what is now Syria & Lebanon during the WW-II when in 1940 Hagop Nazaret Chekijian (born in Aintab, Turkey late in 1918), at age 22 joined the French Vichy military as a civilian contractor (he had left school and had become a carpenter since the age 17 when his father Nazaret had passed away in 1936, quickly expanding to a General Contractor for the millwork for the doors and windows of a new Armenian church being built in Aleppo in 1936-1937). Hagop became known as Jacques by the French and was engaged as an in-house general contractor for the French Vichy military installations east of Aleppo, Syria. Jacques was building infrastructure such as bridges (see photo to the right), roads, installing telegraph lines, building large Quonset huts, underground fuel/ammunition depots and airport runways in the Deir-Ez Zor region of eastern Syria, in anticipation of the



Nazi Luftwaffe air force joining the French Vichy Army in the Middle East, which apparently was a secret plan of the French which Jacques was not aware of. By early 1941, it became an international issue that the French position on the Eastern Mediterranean coast was strategically important for both Britain and Nazi Germany. The Allies by 1941, also feared that Henri-Philippe Petain had allowed the Luftwaffe to establish air bases in the country already and would enter the Middle East very soon.





On 8th June 1941 the British Army and Free French forces entered Syria from Iraq and Palestine. Most of the foot soldiers were apparently Indians of the 20th, 21st and 25th Indian Infantry Brigade, with also the 2/8th Gurka Rifles. After facing tough

resistance from the Vichy forces the Allies captured Damascus on 17th June then the rest of Syria at the Battle of Haditha on July 3, 1941 after extensive and indiscriminate aerial bombings, with heavy casualties. Jacques was among the survivors of this decisive battle and was taken as a Prisoner of War, by the Indian Infantry Brigade to a P.O.W. camp on the Euphrates River in Deir-ez Zor.

Photo to the below are the actual Marmon Herrington armored cars in Aleppo on 22 July 1941.

The armistice was signed on 12th July 1941 and pro-British regimes were maintained in Syria for the rest of



the war. Just before his 23rd birthday, Jacques was taken POW. For the following 18 months as a POW, he was tortured to make him tell the whereabouts of all secret depots for arms and fuels. Being that his French commanders had not explained their alliance to the Nazi Germans had put Jacques

in a precarious position of not knowing why he was being tortured by the British with starvation, torture and hard labor to boot, at a POW camp on the Euphrates River in Syria. He was apparently given up for dead by his family, due to such rumors reaching the family, based on POW camp being known for its cruelty, where beyond starving everyone with hard labor, they would send them into the river with the pretense to drink and to wash up, but force them out within minutes, with soap all over their faces, firing at the ones who would not get out of the river fast enough and killing them on the spot.

When Jacques was released at the end of 1943, he apparently had lost much weight and was virtually a bare skeleton, not shaven for 18 months, so that when riding on a military truck, he apparently had said hello to his uncle Manook (Mannig) while in traffic in Aleppo, while Manook was riding a horse and carriage. Mannig did not recognize him and did not respond when greeted by his nephew, but told his brother Nazaret of the incident. Then when Jacques was discharged and had

gone home that evening, his mother Araxi Ajoian-Chekijian, who had also been told, but apparently still refused to believe that (now given release papers with his birth name Hagop) was actually her son, as hagop was given up for dead 18 months before and had lost so much weight since then, that he was not recognizable at all.

After the D-day landings took place in Normandy, the Maquis and other resistance groups emerged to help in the liberation of their country. Henri-Philippe Petain and his ministers fled to Germany where they established an exiled government at Sigmaringen. In 1945 the leaders of the Vichy government were arrested and some, including Pierre Laval and Joseph Darnand, were executed for war crimes.

Within three months of being released as a POW, early in 1943, Hagop Nazaret Chekijian had settled in Beirut, Lebanon, started a thriving jewelry atelier growing to Import, Export & Sales network throughout the Middle East, married to Siran Kazanjian on June 24th, 1945. Their first son Nazaret/Cesar was born in 1946, then second son Hrach was born in 1949. Their daughter Araxi was born in 1955, when plans were made to move to Montevideo, Uruguay. All arrangements were made to board ship in days, when a business proposal called for a quick business trip to Baghdad, which lead to multiple trips for the next year, ending up with a short term relocation of the family to Baghdad, Iraq in 1956, where he expanded his jewelry manufacturing, import, export, retail business, with dealing in precious gems and gold bullion. Their fourth child; Silvawas born in Baghdad in 1958.

Then 14 years later, once again in 1970, Hagop Nazaret Chekijian and his family immigrated to Boston, MA in USA (his son Cesar joined them in 1971 from the UK, where he had completed college). In Boston, Hagop (now known as "Jack") continued his jewelry business with his son Hrach who recently passed away at age 61, 20 years after his father had passed away in 1990; which was almost 50 years since Hagop Nazaret Chekijian was taken as a POW, the scars of which were never healed.

Liberty - Most give a lot for it, some gave all, and few like Hagop Nazaret Chekijian who suffered as a Prisoner Of War, lived the nightmare of it, every day, for the rest of their lives.