

## BERNARD PONS<sup>1</sup> HELPS CAPTURE A GERMAN DIVISION

(From a Conversation with the Vice-President of the Jewish Combatants' Union in Paris, Bernard Pons, who was honored with the French *Légion d'Honneur*. Reprinted from the "New Press" – Paris, June 5-6, 1965. Recorded by H. Baum).

Bernard Pons, vice-chairman of the Association of the Jewish Front Fighters from 1939-1944, received the title of *Chevalier* from the *Légion d'Honneur* Order. This fact has caused great satisfaction among his many combat colleagues.

The Legion of Honor is, as is well-known, the highest honor bestowed on the French Empire by those who have done great things to develop its material and spiritual values, or for particular heroism in defending the country against the enemy.

Those who really deserve it do not always get the award. And very rarely is it given to working people, especially immigrants. This is not because there is a lack of those who are worthwhile. Others factors affect the outcome, here.

It is therefore a satisfaction that a Jewish townsman received such a high honor, and that for his merits in anti-Nazi resistance.

In his studio, on the Rue Saint-Martin, we chat with our friend Pons. On the wall of his study, which serves to receive clients, we see a portrait of Shalom Asz. "I was born," says Bernard, "in the same city where he saw the bright light and spent his youth as one of the greatest writers of our generation, and not only among Jews."

We ask him to tell us about the battles in which he took part in the last war and for which he received the Legion of Honor.

"I want to remind you first," replied Bernard Pons. – that the "new press" wrote about me 17 years ago. This was in September 1948, on the occasion of the award to



Second from right: Bernard Pons

me and my French comrade-in-arms, Lieutenant Launay, of the "*Croix de Guerre*" award ("War Cross") with a silver star.

We both received it for a combat mission, which we carried out in September 1944.

But let's start from the beginning.

After the Nazi occupation of France, I joined the resistance movement. Since 1943, I have been in the "maquis"<sup>2</sup> of the Département of Cher<sup>3</sup>, where we have had

<sup>1</sup> TN: AKA Berel Poncz.

<sup>2</sup> TN: underground fighters hiding out of the city, in the mountains or forests.

<sup>3</sup> TN: in the middle of France, south of Paris, around the city of Bourges.

a large number of partisan units with about 2,500 men, among them quite a few Jews.

In the same department, at that time, stationed a German division, led by General Elster with 18 thousand men.

For months, we have carried out numerous operations and acts of sabotage against the units of this division: mainly in the area of Bourges.

After the landing of the Allies in Normandy, we further intensified our action. At the beginning of September 1944, our group seized an ambulance of the German Red Cross, which was filled with weapons.

During questioning, the German mayor, who led the ambulance, admitted that the morale of the German division was "poor".

The commander of our partisan divisions, Colonel Aubert, acquainted himself with the statements and decided to undertake a bold deterrent maneuver against the German division. Namely, he edited a letter to the head of the division with the request that he lay down his arms.

Immediately the dramatic question arose: who should deliver this letter to the "addressee"? Our colonel selected the French Launay and me.

With this letter, we are off to the German positions. Upon finding the first German patrol, we approached them waving a white flag and demanded to be presented to the German Commandant of the sector.

After various checks, we were led with blindfolds to the "real McCoy" Nazi Division-Commander, General Elster. In the first moment, when he read the letter with the demand of his capitulation, he fell into a terrible rage: "We have not lost this war" – he resented. Immediately afterwards he shouted: "Shoot on the spot!".

At this fateful moment for both of us, I called out: "We have seized an ambulance from your Red Cross this morning, filled with weapons. In case we should be shot, the same fate awaits the German prisoners."

The words seemed to work like a cold shower on an exasperated Nazi head. He ordered us to be taken back to the place where we had made contact with the German patrol.

A few days later, the general capitulated.

That's the truly legendary story of the Jewish tailor of Kutno, who with his cold-bloodedness contributed to the fact that 18 thousand Hitler soldiers should surrender without a single shot.

What do you think about it all today? — I asked.

I'm sure reminded of the past and especially of the fact that fate wanted the Polish Jew to force a Nazi youth to lay down his arms. But my persona is not important here. The main thing is that by awarding me the Legion of Honor, I think it recognizes – as also stated by the supreme leader of the anti-Hitler coalition – that a significant part of the Jews from all walks of life in the *Résistance* movement has made an important contribution to the dismantling of the German war machine.

Much more needs to be written about this part.

It is necessary, in my opinion, to tell especially to the younger generation, not only the heroic deeds of the leaders, but also of the nameless people who fought in the partisan groups. Each of them was ready without hesitation to consciously surrender his life in the fight against the Nazis, by helping rescue comrades-in-arms and not surrendering anyone when falling into the hands of the enemy. Same for the people of the regions where we operated, giving so much help, attention and love.