



The sand filterers

Majnoun, the passionate lover of Leila, wandering in the desert, was seen one day filtering sand in his hands.

“What are you looking for?” He was asked.

“I am looking for Leila.”

“How can you expect to find such a pure pearl like Leila in this dust?”

“I look for Leila everywhere”, replied Majnoun, “hoping to find her one day, somewhere.”

Farid Eddin Attar, as reported by Emile Dermenghem, Spiritual Masters' Collection.

Introduction

Whatever judgment passed in the future on Mostefa Ben Boulaid, Bachir Chihani or Adjel Adjoul, a place in the mythical Algerian revolution will be devoted to them. Many controversies will arise concerning the nature of this place. As for me, I only hope to be faithful to their truth. To achieve this, I think time has come to unveil the history of the Aures-Nememcha insurrection and rid it of its slag, reaching deep in its genuine reality which makes it fascinating.

The events told here go from November 1st, 1954 to June 1959. They depict rather normal facts, sometimes mean, often grandiose, and men who discover their humanity and whose everyday life in the bush is scrutinized as if by a scanner.

As it is known, it is not easy to revive part of contemporary History, particularly the one concerning the Aures Nememcha insurrection of November 1954.

I have started gleaning testimonies in 1969, leaving aside those dealing with propaganda or exonerating partiality. I have confronted facts and witnesses, through an unyielding search for truth, bearing in mind that each witness, consciously or not, is victim of his own implication.

The lack of documents and archive dealing with the first years of the Algerian insurrection has forced me to make do with oral sources, all the more valuable since they proceed from people still possessing all their mental power.

Needless to say, I have retained only objective facts, those recognized by all witnesses. The facts I could not vouch for, I chose to discard, hoping that future researchers will take them up.

At the end of this study, it is no wonder to note that those valiant men, with so small means, have succeeded in shaking the powerful France and making its whole Empire sway.

Acknowledgements

This work has been made possible thanks to the testimonies of Adjel Adjoul, Ammar Benchaiba, aka Ali, Lakhdar Abidi, aka Hadj Lakhdar, Messaoud Belaggoune, Mostefa Boucetta, Bicha Djoudi, aka Bousenna and Amor Mestiri. It has spanned almost thirty years, with cuts, more or less long.

Part one:
The end of the gestation

1

Baptism of fire.

On a freezing winter morning of the year 1972, Adjoul and I were driving down the steep slippery road that runs from Arris to Batna. At one point, the car got bewildered by ice and I lost control of it. Gone mad, it took to rambling in all directions. I started shaking like a Parkinsonian while Adjoul displayed a big smile on his face. Ultimately, thanks to luck more than to knowhow, the heavy vehicle stopped against an embankment. I remember having thought: “Did you notice Adjoul’s contempt for death?”

In Batna, at his father’s home of Bouakal, a poor suburb, we sat around a plate filled with shelled walnuts and honey.

“Si Adjoul, what did Mostefa Ben Boulaid say on his return from the meeting of March 1954, after the MTLD’s scission into Messalists and centralists?” (1)

“He was disgusted. Si Bachir Chihani and himself were outraged. Of course, they did not tell us everything and we could not ask.”

“But they did tell you about the creation of CRUA, didn’t they?” (2)

“Yes. They had to since we were on the verge to reviewing the party’s structures. Those structures were reinforced, in a way different from the MTLD. Militants were grouped in cells of three members only. They were compelled to a strict compartmentalization and their number did not exceed twenty four, all under Si Mostefa Ben Boulaid’s sole authority. The cells got in touch with each other only through him and each cell leader was accountable to him personally.”

(1)MTLD: Movement for the triumph of democratic liberties. It is the most important political Party in colonial Algeria. It fights, peacefully at the beginning, for the emancipation of Algeria from France. Its leader, Messali Hadj, is ousted a few months before the insurrection because he refuses to endorse armed struggle against France. The party then splits into two: Messalists or Messali’s supporters and centralists or his opponents.

(2)CRUA: comité révolutionnaire pour l’unité et l’action. After the MTLD’s split, a small number of militants set up a new secret committee, aimed at starting the armed struggle against France.

“So, Messali was no more the supreme leader?”

“No. He still was. To avoid problems, Si Mostefa, at least temporarily, refused to divulge the split of MTLD to the militants. Later, however, around July 1954, he simply advised militants to cease all collaboration with Messalists.”

Adjoul dips bits of nuts inside honey and gobbles them noisily, then lights a cigarette. I ask:

“Apart from a stricter compartmentalization, were there other differences between MTLD and CRUA?”

“Huge differences, indeed! CRUA has chosen armed struggle. Its followers have an approach different from the militants of MTLD who are forced to remain on the reserve and not respond to colonialist provocations. CRUA’s members, on the opposite, are ready to fight the French and stand against the pacifism advocated by Messali Hadj and Centralists; they are for war and prepare for it. On spring of 1954, a poll among 2,400 militants reveals that a majority is in favor of revolution and violence, against political maneuvering.”

Militants make an inventory of caves in Ichemoul, Chelia, Sraa, till down to the southern limit of Mchouneche.

They try hard to get weapons, as many as possible, either through buying them with their own money, either through borrowing from friends or parents.(3) The arms are dipped in grease, wrapped in straw and buried underground inside jars or rolled up in pieces of rag and hidden in fissures between rocks. Militants use straws to, in their mind, prevent arms detection by enemy devices.

In mountains, apprentice guerrillas choose isolated places to go through a succinct military training. They learn arms manipulation, shooting, making up rudimentary bombs. They are taught camouflage rules, how to use a password and to behave toward police if arrested. The instructors are Party chiefs transferred from their home regions by Party HQ to hide in Aures in order to prevent their arrest by French police. The three most known are Benaouda, a refugee from Constantine, at present established in Inoughissen, Lakhdar Bentobbal, another refugee from North Constantine, living now in T’Kout, Rabah Bitat, sent from Algiers to Ichemoul.

Another instructor, named Zoubeiri, has been appointed to the regions of Khangat Maache and Oudjana.

The instructors are introduced to militants as Party supervisors; four courses of political indoctrination are dispensed to literate as well as to illiterate militants.

(3)In Aures, it is exceptional for a Chaoui to lend or sell his weapon which he deems part of the family patrimony.

At R'Cif (Constantine), on April 13, 1954, Bachir Chihani attends a meeting regrouping the chiefs of the kisma (4) of the Constantine Département (5). He is accompanied by five chiefs of the daïra (6) of Batna, namely Adjel Adjoul, Abbas Laghrour, Mohamed Cherif Soulimani, Messaoud Belaggoune and Tahar Nouichi. The meeting is attended by around one hundred MTLD delegates, all tendencies mingled. It is chaired by Belgacem Beidaoui, a Messalist contested by Batna's delegation. The floor majority agrees to grant the 100 delegates power to decide who will stay and who will leave. Beidaoui raises his hand and declares: "There are inside this room several Centralists who have come as onlookers. It is their right!"

The atmosphere becomes stormy. The rift between Centralists and Messalists gets exacerbated. The delegates of Batna propose their expulsion, while those of Smendou and El Milia remain neutral. Voting is carried out. The majority says yes for the presence of both Centralists and Messalists. Chihani, Laghrour and Adjoul are activists who are allergic to politicking. They stick to their demands: expulsion of the rival factions and return to the OS (7), the only group that matters for them, because of its paramilitary structures.

Meanwhile, new comers have arrived. Among them, stands Mezghenna, one of Messali's lieutenants. The uproar increases. Chihani gets up. Adjoul and Laghrour shout at Mezghenna: "Don't come in!"

Mezghenna tries to argue, in the midst of booing, shouts, hissing. He declares: "Let me say something. Messali himself ..."

Laghrour yells at him: "I too want to say something, in the name of God!"

Both men have a go to each other, exchange blows. Laghrour grabs a chair, whirls it up in the air. Finally, the two men are expelled. Discussions resume, a motion is voted and forwarded to Party executive committee in Algiers.

April 30, 1954: Mostefa Ben Boulaid gathers in his farm of Lambese, a small group of militants. They are: Adjel Adjoul, Tahar Nouichi, Messaoud Belaggoune and Abbas Laghrour. All of them take the oath to enlist in the insurrection.

Fifteen days later, join this group Bachir Chihani, then chief of the daïra of Batna, Bachir Hadji from the town of El Khroub and Mohamed Khantra from the town of Barika.

(4)Kisma: it represents a subdivision of a nahia.

(5)Département: French administrative division, endowed with duty of enforcing government policy. The Constantine département covered all north eastern Algeria.

(6)Daïra: it is a division of a mintaka. Batna is a daïra. Its Party leader since 1952 is Bachir Chihani, aka Si Messaoud.

(7)OS: *Organisation spéciale*, a paramilitary alliance dismantled by French police in the early fifties.

The date of the insurrection launching has not been fixed yet. The chiefs decide not to disclose any information to the rank and file militants. They just speed up their psychological preparation by keeping them under pressure: "Get ready! Something is coming soon."

Concerning the political part, the 8 chiefs refuse to side with either Messalists or Centralists. They wait for clarifications, ready to denounce one faction or both should they go on with their fractional activity.

Mostefa Ben Boulaid declares: "We must compel both wings to unite and set up a front in the eastern region of Constantine."

To achieve this aim, he intends to bring together in the near future all the chiefs of kisma or sectors of the whole Constantine region, which roughly at that time included North east Algeria and the Southern Territories (Sahara).

Financially, Mostefa disposes of no reserve.

Later, during the 1954 summer, takes place in Aures a ferocious contest between Messali's followers and Mostefa's; precisely on August, is held a popular gathering in a village named Tlati, near Medina. A Messalist chief is to give a political conference. A CRUA militant lights a newspaper and throws it in the middle of the crowd, crying: "Beware! A bomb!" A scattering follows. The meeting is cancelled. The men of Messali leave the region, ironically thanking the Chaouia for their 'hospitality.'

September 1954: Militants, mostly Messalists, meet in Algiers for two days. Batna's daïra is represented by Bachir Chihani and some kisma chiefs. They are lodged in Hussein dey and Maison carrée. The meeting is chaired by Benteftifa, assisted by Bouda and Mehri, both Centralists.

On the very first day, Messali's men threaten with excommunication any militant who does not pledge allegiance to Messali. Moreover, any ousted man will be regarded as a traitor. Bouda, a Centralist, appeals to everybody's common sense. During lunch break, militants are offered slices of bread and butter. On resumption, a delegate from Kouba says: "Messalists and Centralists are no different. They only want leadership."

The second day, a motion is voted. The chairman asks Adjoul and Abbas to deliver a copy of that motion to Moulay Merbah, one of Messali's assistants. Merbah refuses to see them. Abbas is angry. He rails against Merbah and his boss, Messali.

Mostefa Ben Boulaid declares: "From now on, we will not attend any meeting. We shall rely only on ourselves."

He informs Chihani that the Centralists are opposed to armed struggle. On leaving Algiers, Centralists give 9,000 centimes (old francs) to Mostefa and his companions.

October 20, 1954: Mostefa assembles at Lokrine (Chemora, 30 km east of Batna) a group of militants in the house of Abdallah Oumezitti. They are: Adjoul, Chihani, Laghrour, Nouichi, Hadji and Khantra. He informs them that November first, 1954, will be day one of the insurrection. Adjoul, Laghrour and Hadji already know the date since a few days.

After a moment of surprise, the discussion resumes heatedly. Mostefa has brought from Constantine an alcohol duplicator and tracts. He explains:

“The insurrection will be masterminded by the National Army of Liberation (ANL). Its goal is an independent Algeria, Arabic speaking, and Moslem. The struggle is not a holy war; it will last many years. France will propose to us internal autonomy. We shall refuse it.”

Each group's chief will assemble his men on next Saturday, two days before the date of the insurrection. Two places are chosen: one at Khangat Maache, seven kilometers West of Foum Toub, where sixty fighters will gather under Nouichi's leadership. The other place is located at Tighezza, near Arris, where will regroup two hundred men, under Mostefa's leadership. During the gathering, is planned a distribution of arms and uniforms.

Twenty-five groups are selected to carry out the first attacks of the insurrection.

Mchouneche has two chiefs, one group and three objectives: Biskra, Tolga and Sidi Okba. The chiefs are Hocine Berrehail and Slimane.

The group of Kimmel is led by Mohamed El Abed with two objectives: Zeribet El Oued and Dermoun. Messaoud Zahaf has been assigned one objective: Berga.

Abdelwahab Othmani is endowed with three goals: first, political indoctrination, second, distribution of tracts to the population of Kimmel and Tadjemout, third, attack of the gendarmery of Taberdga.

Khangat Sidi Nadji and Ouldja are to be dealt with by Abdelhafid Soufi and his group.

Lamsara and Tamza are to receive tracts and political explanation by Boularas.

Kais is to be attacked by Kilani and Nacer.

The assault of the town of Khenchela has been left to Abbas Laghrour and some civilian militants, with the help of Ammar Maache and his group.

There are four objectives in Zalatou: T'Kout with Mekki Achouri, Taghit with Mohamed Sebaihi, El Ksar with Belgacem Meziani and finally, Inoughissen with Mostefa Goughali.

Ichemoul has three objectives: the mine and tax office with Ammar Benchaiba, aka Ali and Messaoud Benaissa. The two men are ordered to steal dynamite sticks from the mine. Third objective: destruction of bridges between Arris and Batna by Layeche Batsi.

Ali Benazza is told to take advantage of a wedding to distribute tracts and explain the aims of the insurrection to numerous guests.

Arris is reserved to the group of Ahmed Nouaoura with four targets: bridges, administrator's offices, the gendarmery and the Arris-Batna bus.

Barika is to be attacked by three veterans: Mohamed Cherif Bouslimani, Sadek Bendaikha and Goughali, with a squad of six men armed with English rifles.

Ain Touta is allotted to Smail Kechroud who heads a group.

Batna, county town of the sub prefecture, is a big stake. Three groups totalizing sixty elite fighters are to attack barracks, the sub prefecture office and gendarmery and other targets. The groups are led by Ali Baazi and Mohamed Cherif Benakcha. They are backed by Tahar Nouichi, Hadj Lakhdar and Belgacem Grine, instructed to blow up a gas station facing the railway station and the powder magasin.

The villages of Chemora, Foug Toub, Timgad, El Madher, Ain Yagout, Toufana and Bou El Freis are taken care of by the rest of Tahar Nouichi's men.

Ain Mlila and El Khroub are to be attacked respectively by Hadj Moussa and Bachir Hadji.

The ten days preceding the first of November 1954 have not been a sinecure for Mostefa Ben Boulaid. To accommodate three hundred men in total discretion, to choose a lodging place for at least two days and two nights, to select trusted liaison agents and map out secret itineraries, to explain the how again and again to slowwitted militants: Mostefa feels exhausted.

During the incubation period, it has been stipulated that each militant brings his weapon, either bought or borrowed. The arms were given to kisma chiefs who hid them; on D day, most arms are found rusted and out of service.

For Mostefa, the race against time is not the sole problem. The man supposed to give shelter to the three hundred militants in his house stands him up on the last minute. Tahar Nouichi, chief of the Foug Toub kisma, informs Ali Benchaiba. The latter, shattered at this news, tries in utmost urgency to get in touch with Mostefa or Adjoul and ask for new instructions. To no avail! He is desperate. What should he do? Mostefa in fact has asked Adjoul to organize the gathering on Saturday October 30, 1954, that is two nights before Monday November first, 1954.

The house chosen for shelter belongs to a certain Benouana. Adjoul passes Mostefa's order on to Benchaiba. At the last moment, Benouana refuses to lend his house, thus breaking the last link of the chain. Getting no answer from his direct bosses, Benchaiba improvises. He decides to use his own family house, located in Dachrat Ouled Moussa, luckily vacant at this time of the year.

Mostefa ignores that his skilful construction is about to crumble like a deck of cards. Ahmed Nouaoura, appointed to attack Arris at the head of a platoon, does not show up at the fixed rendez-vous. His men, arrived first, wait in vain for him, long before the dawn of November 1st. Messaoud Belagoune, an old militant, wears himself out and uses tons of endless arguments and patience to keep them on the spot, in wait for new orders or a new chief. In Batna, happens the same fiasco. Mostefa has planned to invest the town with four platoons through two access routes. Sixty fighters are chosen to come down from Dachrat Ouled Moussa and link up with sixty other men arrived from Khangat Maache, led by Nouichi and Grine.

Prior to that, to secure the men's transportation from Dachrat Ouled Moussa to Batna, Mostefa has struck a deal with a certain Boussaad, owner of a heavy goods truck, a Wilhelm of German make. He tells him: "I need your truck to transport wheat." They settle on meeting on Sunday October 31 in the evening. Boussaad, feeling something in the wind, does not show up. Mostefa, who hates improvisation, has to improvise.

Sunday October 31, 1954, at midnight: Mostefa decides to waken Azzouz, his one-time bus driver. He tells him:

"I need a truck to transport guests for a wedding. Urgent!"

"Yes, Si Mostefa. There is the truck of Ben Lahlah at El Hadjadj."

"OK! Let's go."

They go and in a very short time, come back with the truck, a panting medium-sized 2.5 tons and stop on the path below the refuge of Dachrat Ouled Moussa. (8)Time is running out. A few minutes later, starts the laborious descent down a goat path of dozens of men overloaded with bombs, rifles, bullets by the hundreds and entangled in new crisp uniforms. When Azzouz, the driver, taken unawares, spots them on the road in the blue night, hanging on the raves and sinking heavily on the truck platform, he feels sick and heaves up noisily. As many as thirty-five men climb on the truck, squeezed up like sardines. The remaining twenty-five cram into two cars, one belonging to Mostefa Ben Boulaid, the other to a militant, Brahim Benchaiba. A former Spahi, called Mohamed Seghir Azoui, whose assignment is to guide the fighters inside Batna and show them the way to barracks, suddenly goes sick and refuses to set off. Mostefa rudely pushes him inside the truck and commands to Ali Baazi:

"Keep an eye on him! If he flinches, kill him!"

Not reassured by the turn of events, he decides to go with them. There is not much time left. Batna is sixty kilometers away and the targets are many: the sub prefecture, two barracks, the powder depot, the gendarmery and gas station. The truck and the two cars stop near the last bridge before the town, two kilometers ahead of the barracks. Worried, Mostefa warns the men: "Watch out! Try not to shoot yourselves!"

He stares wistfully at them while they cut through plowed fields.

(8)Bouha, the truck owner, mistrustful, wants to accompany them. Mostefa scolds him with a surly tone. "What! Bouha, you want to come! There will be only women in your truck. I told you: it is a wedding. You want to ride with women? Shame on you."

Here follows an account of the attack of Batna, as narrated to me by one actor, named Kiour.

“Aye, brother, November first is very far indeed! Should we have known its aftermath, we would have shoved off quick, believe me. What? Yes, you can say that our hearts were on our boots. Mostefa had stuffed us in a truck and two automobiles. Ah, you can say that we looked like monkeys, rigged out in brand new uniforms. Our movements were hampered and we carried such heavy bombs with fuses we were supposed to light with cigarettes. Yes, sir! They even gave us cigarettes and a box of matches. We were twenty four. When we reached the barracks, dawn was already nearing. Enemy sentries were visible. Dogs barked. The former Spahi, Mohamed Seghir Azoui, yelled: “This is the barrack! Go for it, you castrates!” With all due respect I owe you, he said more crude words. We started shooting, yes, we had modern arms: Statts, Garands, German machine guns. What? No, sir: no wooden butts. All arms made of iron! We killed a sentry and hurried towards the Spahis’ barrack. We managed to kill another sentinel who was fleeing with his dog. Yes, the dog, we killed it too. Mohamed Seghir cried: “Stop firing, you sons of whores! Retreat!” Easier to say than to do. We ceased fire. After, we were supposed to blast the powder depot, but, with all respect due to you, we were as you might say, inside a monkey’s ass. We totally ignored where we were. The French began shooting from balconies. Mohamed Seghir disappeared near the graveyard. We saw him bury his Achari (9) in the ploughed field and run away. Left to ourselves, we roamed the streets aimlessly, turned around the war memorial. In the program, we were supposed to kill sentries, enter the barracks and take all weapons. In fact, things turned out differently. Instead, we blew up lamps of street lights. At the time we left Batna and went up the hills of Bouakal, it was full daylight.”

Monday, November first, 1954, at 2:00 a.m: Ali Benchaiba sets off with two platoons towards the east and the lead mine, twelve kilometers away deep in the mountains. They progress slowly in pitch darkness. Benchaiba’s mission consists in explaining the goals of the insurrection to the six hundred Algerian miners, supervised by seven French foremen and in seizing several mules and above all, dynamite sticks. He is accompanied by Messaoud Benaissa whose task is to recover taxes and burn down the tax office.

At dawn, they reach the vicinity of the mine. Without warning, Benchaiba’s subordinate opens fire, immediately followed by the other fighters. The offices’ windows fly into pieces. The excitement rises at its peak. Each man dips deeply into the three hundred bullets supply allocated to him. Then, for the same mysterious reason that started the shooting, they stop and withdraw in the woods where, tired, they fall into a heavy sleep until around 9 a.m. As for Benaissa, for unspecified motives, he leaves the tax office intact. Two men ask Benchaiba for permission to leave the platoon and regain their home. He does not object. Sometime later, his assistant Mohamed Seghir Tighezza leaves the detachment with fifteen men, all of them Bouslimani (10), and heads on his own for Inoughissen, his home region.

(9)Achari: ten shots rifle.

(10)Bouslimani: one of the Aures tribes, led by Messaoud Benaissa.

Benchaiba and the rest of the platoon descend from the heights and set up a rudimentary check point on the road. After awhile, he is shouted at by a certain Benakcha, known as a collaborator of the French: 1

“Hey, Benchaiba, I have a message for you, from the tax collector.”

A fighter insults him. He goes away. Benchaiba thinks for a moment of attacking the tax office. He renounces because he has been recognized by the sneak and he fears harassment for his family. That same morning, a plane circles over them at low altitude. Benchaiba clearly makes out the pilot, but does not shoot at him because he had no order to do it. After the plane, arrive a halftrack and a truck loaded with goumiers (11). Insults are exchanged on both sides, then things are left at that.

Monday November first, 1:00 a.m: Abbas Laghrour, who, the evening before, has left Dachrat Ouled Moussa armed with a Mauser rifle, a parabellum and three thousand cartridges, is presently standing about at Ain Silane, near the Roman thermae, seven kilometers West of Khenchela, in the middle of hot sulfurous vapors. He waits in vain for Ammar Maache who is supposed to join him from Yabous with his platoon. Irate and frustrated, Abbas decides on returning to Khenchela on his own. He ignores that meanwhile, in Khenchela, some youth, armed only with blades and tired of waiting for orders, have resorted to action: sabotage of the transformer station, thus plunging the city in the dark, attack of the police station and locking up of policemen in jails, then at last, overcome by emotion and excitement, withdrawal *without* taking the policemen’s weapons! Abbas meets them on the outskirts of the town. He shoots at the administrator’s house, shatters some windows and hits two or three French soldiers, then takes to the mountain with his young companions.

Region of Zalatou, Monday November first, early morning: Mekki Achouri and his group harass the gendarmery of T’Kout, from the Kouza Mountain that overlooks the Chennaoura Valley. Much farther on the South East, Abdelwahab Othmani fires a hail of bullets at the gendarmeries of Taberdga and Ouldja, sets fire to a school and to the office of the caid of Ouldja.

Towards the south west, Mostefa Goughali who heads a platoon, sabotages roads and bridges, fells telephone poles in the area bounded by Inoughissen and Tifelfel.

It is daylight when Mohamed Sebaihi arrives with his group at three kilometers from Tighanimine. He rapidly erects a road block. Two hours later, the coach Biskra-Arris stops in front of it. Sebaihi orders the passengers out, gets ready to harangue them and hand out tracts. One of the passengers happens to be the caid (12) of Mchouneche. Misunderstanding Sebaihi’s intention, he attempts to take things in hand and extend his protection on a French couple, passengers like him. He insults Sebaihi, brings out a toy-like 6.35 m/m pistol. A hail of bullets cuts him down. The French are collateral victims, the man wounded fatally.

(11)Goumier: native armed auxiliary of the French administration in charge of the maintenance of order.

(12)Caid: native auxiliary of French administrators, acting as chief of douar.

Already on the spot since October 25, 1954, the group of Barika, led by Mohamed Cherif Soulimani, Sadek Bendaikha and Mansour Goughali, is given away to French police. The militants are left with just enough time to flee together with a certain Kaddour, aka l'Oranais after abandoning their arms, among which nine English rifles brought specially for that operation.

Biskra's platoon, headed by Hocine Berrehail, a former outlaw, has also been in position in Mchouneche since October 25. The men's action consists in harassment of gendarmeries and blowing off of public buildings. Berrehail is assisted by Slimane 4, a former junior officer of the French army, enlisted by Chihani. On his return from Biskra, Berrehail tries without success to disarm through use of brute force the Communist group of Mohamed Guerrouf. Later, Guerrouf will complain to Mostefa Ben Boulaid:

"Hocine Berrehail has used sheer violence and has shown disrespect to me in front of my men."

As usual, Mostefa smoothes things over:

"Hocine did not mean harm. He was only implementing my instructions."

On the western front, the town of El Khroub, one hundred sixty kilometers away from Arris, has been machine gunned by Bachir Hadji. Hadj Moussa has attacked the town of Ain Mlila, harassing likewise some French military posts. (13)

Parallel to all these war objectives, it has been decided to preserve four war-free zones in order to facilitate the militants' supplying with food and ammunitions. They are respectively a southern region centered on the town of Oued Souf, through where will eventually transit arms and ammunition much in need already. Liaison between demilitarized regions is ensured by experienced tissals 5, civilians or in a few cases, military. Thus, Arris is linked up to Batna through Layeche Batsi, to Barika and Ouistili Mountain through Hadj Lakhdar, to Taberdga, Ouldja and Kimmel region through Athmane Kaabachi, to El Khroub and Ain Mlila through a civilian militant of Chemora, to Khenchela through a civilian militant of Chelia Mountain, finally to Biskra and Mchouneche through Hocine Berrehail. One notes that four liaison agents are military and two are civilians. During the days immediately following November first, Mostefa Ben Boulaid seethes with impatience: he can't bear the blackout to which he is confronted. In fact, he ignores his bliss since very few news at that time are matter for rejoicing.

The men he has handpicked to open with him the first page of the revolutionary epic have nearly all stood him up. Starting with the one he had designated to accommodate the three hundred militants who were to constitute the frame of the Liberation Army. He had chosen Benouana's house because of its ideal situation at Tighezza, west of Medina, well camouflaged inside thick woods. On October 24, 1954, after the meeting of Lokrine, Mostefa has asked Adjoul to summon the militants. Adjoul passes on the message to Benchaiba, then chief of five cells: Hadjadj, Yabous, Melloudja, Khangat Maache and Ain El Fodda.

(13) Mostefa would have liked to attack the huge Central Penitentiary of Lambese, but he had neither the weapons nor the hardened fighters to do so.

Between brackets, three cells have been appointed to him by Chihani because they refuse Nouichi's leadership. Afterwards, Chihani comments before Benchaiba:

"If you manage to make them *work* together, I will give you a medal!"

Benchaiba starts preparing the meeting planned for October 29: food supplies, liaison, order maintenance and militants conveying. One day before the date of the gathering, on October 28, Tahar Nouichi, then head of the kisma of Fom Toub, sends him a message:

"Benouana refuses to lodge militants in his house. Consider another plan."

Panic stricken, Benchaiba desperately endeavors to reach Mostefa Ben Boulaïd or, failing that, Adjoul. Neither is available. So, in desperation, he requisitions his own house, empty at this time of the year (13). A modified plan of action is installed; it begins functioning. The liaison agents contact the militants, tell them about coming maneuvers, and advise them to dress warmly and, for those who had them, to wear uniforms, pataugas and cachabias (14).

Then, they guide them through diverted routes to trick any possible informers up to a few kilometers away from the final destination which they reach in darkness and in small squads. Armed sentinels are posted many hundred meters downhill, with order to shoot on sight at any intruders, especially if they come from the village of Hadjadj.

Dachrat Ouled Moussa, situated at less than one kilometer east of Arris, is a caravanserai. Its walls, fifty centimeters thick, are made of a double row of blue stone and delimit a series of forty rooms, all on the ground floor and all equipped with multiple exits. Above, a rectangular floor, supported by an assembly of pillars and joists made of cedar and juniper darkened by smoke, overhangs an inner yard reserved for kitchens and women. Still higher, a terrace from where an unimpeded view stretches on a sumptuous perspective of dark blue mountains nested against each other like a litter of puppies. South and west stretch the two hamlets, Hadjadj and Arris; in between, flow two twin brooks from where women slowly walk back up, carrying water-full goatskins on their napes and stopping three times along the steep rise to get their breath back. Far below, southward, spreads out the Oued Labied valley.

Near the front door, Benchaiba has transformed into lavatory a dung-littered stable. Food supplies are brought to the house on mules and stocked in rooms next to the kitchens where soon will start cooking Benchaiba's cousin Nouna, helped by old Khadra, his sister and a niece. Benchaiba has slaughtered five goats.

Saturday night, October 30: Militants arrive in small teams. More than once, they recognize each other and, because of a strict compartmentalization, they are for some time surprised at seeing a neighbor or a work colleague in the clandestine organization. On the whole, they rejoice. The so much waited for moment has finally come.

(14) In Aures, it persists semi nomadic traditions: the Chaouia spend the fall and winter in the warm regions of Mchouneche and Biskra and the spring and summer in the much cooler mountains.

(15) Cachabias: woolen djellaba with openings for the arms.

Some of them wear new uniforms, with too tight armholes. They have also put on linen ankle boots with rubber soles, known as pataugas. As a sign of resolution, they have rolled around their heads well tightened turbans. The atmosphere is country festive. The day of the baptism of fire is eagerly waited for.

At the beginning, the militants were told of maneuvers. But now, they know that this time is the good one. Adjel Adjoul, Bachir Chihani, Abbas Laghrour, Mostefa Boucetta, Meddour Azoui, Messaoud Benaissa, Ali Baazi and Abdelwahab Othmani, all actors are present, ready and feverish with the desire to start the play, so often hoped for, so often called off. They pace in the rooms where the display of so many weapons lights sparks in their covetous eyes. They feel with their hands arms of all origins: Italian Stattis, German Mausers, American Garands, English Stens, French MAS 36 and 49. Bullets, of all calibers, are piled up in big heaps. Against walls or lying on the floor, they look with sadness at rusted rifles and machine guns.

When, sporting a tight turban (16), 5 Mostefa Ben Boulaid arrives at Dachrat Ouled Moussa on the evening of October 30, 1954 he looks worried and declares straightway:

“I smell in here an odor of treason!”

His face exhibits a dubious pout while he listens to Adjoul’s explanations concerning Benchaiba’s initiative after Benouana’s defection. Thirty-seven year old, he is still in the prime of life. Those past weeks, he hasn’t got much sleep, entirely bracing himself for the rendez-vous with the insurrection. For him, it has become a matter of honor, in spite of the lack of means and now, some militants’ unreliability.

After the preliminary greetings, he explains:

“Kids, we are about to launch the war of Liberation. Our struggle is the struggle of the weak versus the strong. But we do have strength. It resides in our faith and in the linkage between groups, even distant from each other. When shed for a same Cause, blood can be a factor of unity. We must force the enemy to go for us. Then, we hit back without exposing ourselves. If retreat is not possible, we must know how to die for honor. Our enemies are sly. Never trust them. If, by any chance, you find on the ground a pen or a sweet, be careful: they could hide a bomb or be poisoned.”

He goes on to show them how to behave if they are caught or met by French police. He insists on strict obedience to orders, on how to change and use passwords, on how to indoctrinate the population.

“We will give you tracts to distribute. Explain them with utmost patience to the people.”

Afterward, he spends a long time with Bachir Chihani to pick the groups. About one third of the strength is dedicated to ideological indoctrination and tracts delivery. The political documentation has either been brought from Constantine or run off on a mimeograph machine on the spot.

(16) In Algeria, when a man wears a tight turban around his head, it means he is ready for action, generally perilous, with a danger of being harmed or killed.

Except for Adjoul and Chihani (17), all kisma chiefs are scheduled to take part in the first military operations. They are: Abbas Laghrour, Abdelwahab Othmani, Tahar Nouichi, Ali Benchaiba, Bachir Hadji, Ammar Maache, Layeche Batsi and Ahmed Nouaoura. After the constitution of the groups and platoons, after identification of the objectives, Mostefa proceeds with the arms distribution. Each fighter is entitled to receive a gun and three hundred bullets.

The weapons are all army rifles and machine guns. There are no shotguns. Homemade bombs with hanging fuses are lined up on the ground. The specialist, Abdelwahab Othmani, has lectured the militants on their handling.

Finally, when is completed the arms and missions distribution, Benchaiba brings in large dishes of couscous (18) fitted up with small pieces of goat meat.

Afterwards and as usual, Mostefa's worries return: the expected truck has not showed up. He must cope with a second defection, after Benouana's.

The man supposed to lend his truck won't come. His name is Boussaad and he is very distrustful. I happened to be his detention mate for several months in jails of the French Deuxieme Bureau (19) during the War of Liberation. Boussaad never spoke to me, if only one single time. He never departed from a disgusted look on his face. Being the youngest detainee-I was 18-the French military had compelled me to clean the cells and fetch food from the kitchens. Boussaad never thanked me or said hello.

Adjoul chooses this moment to approach Mostefa and ask him to repair a so-called injustice. Ali Benchaiba, who has sold a cow and several goats to buy three rifles: a Garand, a Statti and a carbine, and two pistols, has been forgotten by Mostefa in the arms distribution. Benchaiba requests Adjoul to intercede with Mostefa for him. Mostefa nearly loses control of himself: "What will be our fate if we must obey an advice or another? In the present case, I am the one to decide! I give the weapon of my choice to the militant I choose!"

Adjoul insists:

"For Benchaiba, it is not fair. I agree with him. After all, it is not an arm of the Organization. He bought it."

(17) Conscious of the worth of these two men, Mostefa refuses to expose Chihani and Adjoul in risky raids.

(18)Couscous: North African traditional dish made of rolled and steamed semolina and served with a stew of meat and vegetables spooned on it.

(19)French military Intelligence service. In the Algerian war, it played a role in infiltrating and destroying Front of National Liberation networks.

From a distance, Benchaiba observes the negotiation. Mostefa calls out to him:

“Tell me! Why do you need a gun anyway?”

His voice is harsh. Benchaiba answers:

“I will use it to fight colonialism, like all my brothers.” (20)

Mostefa has a dubious grimace. He calls the Serhani (21) to whom he has given the rifle and commands him to hand it over to Benchaiba. The latter is delighted and at the same time puzzled:

“Look, Si Adjoul! My family has ostracized me and drags me through because I squandered my fortune for the revolution. And now....”

Adjoul advises him to forget the incident.

At Dachrat Ouled Moussa, now oddly silent and empty, are heard only the comings and goings of the four women who have cooked for the fighters. Akin to frightened ants, they hurry to hide the rusty guns in sacks and bury them under a huge dunghill, inside the stable. Outside, Chihani says: “Now, we can’t change anything. Each one of us has done his best.”

Dachrat Ouled Moussa, November first, 3:00 a.m: Mostefa returns from Batna. Exhausted, Chihani, Adjoul, Meddour Azoui, Mostefa Boucetta and Bicha Djoudi wait for him near the front door. Worn-out, Mostefa has still the strength to check that no traces of their presence persist and that the rusted rifles are well concealed in manure.

One hour later, they climb up to Tafrent Ouled Aisha, five kilometers east of Dachrat Ouled Moussa, at an altitude of about 1,600 meters. They shiver in the cold. The surrounding silence is broken only by the noise of their steps.

Tafrent Ouled Aisha, November first, 5:00 a.m: They listen to the news on a battery radio. Not much is said, except for the mentioning of *events* - a word which will be often used by the colonial power to mask the ongoing war in Algeria – in Batna, Khenchela and Arris. Mostefa hides his frustration, and then, pretty soon, gets over it. He inquires from Boucetta about food availabilities. Since, for that matter, nothing has been anticipated, mainly because of lack of money, he takes 5,000 centimes (old francs) from 15,000 that constitute their war funds and gives them to Boucetta to buy provisions.

For the first time, among these hardened men, appears not the fear of death, because they stand well beyond it, but the fear of failing. Mostefa says that if they don’t succeed, it will be because of the people’s unpreparedness.

Tissal or liaison agents begin coming in to Tafrent Ouled Aisha with catastrophic news. Now, Mostefa understands why there was no stir.

(20)Islam considers all humans as God’s creatures. They are all brothers and sisters.

(21)A Serhani is a member of the tribe of Serahna. Serahna like Chorfa are the only tribes in Aures that speak Arabic and not Tamazight.

Arris only five kilometers away has not budged. Why? The gendarmery and administrator's office have not been attacked either, despite the fact that Mostefa himself has given militants the starting signal to advance towards Ras Eddraa. What happened?

Mostefa refuses to believe that Ahmed Nouaoura has forgotten to wake up on D Day. He belittles the role played by old Messaoud Belaggoune in quelling the militants' anger. He even gets frankly irate when he learns that his brother Omar has helped Belaggoune in this operation. (22)

News is bound to be incomplete. Some groups or platoons' leaders, too emotional or unconscious, have sent only fragmented information. On morning end, Mostefa declares that if the beginning is not a total success, it is not either a total failure. One hundred fifty armed men are set loose in nature; something surely will come out! In the afternoon, he can't keep still and heads up south-west, towards Zalatou Mountain. He stays there until late at night when he finds a shelter with his four companions in Mostefa Boucetta's house, east of Kef Lahmar.

November 2: Mostefa and his escort sleep till late morning. Then, they walk down towards Arris and from far away, witness a burial in Sidi Ibrahim's cemetery. The men accompanying the dead begin a soft recitation of the Burda. (23) Mostefa and his comrades are so enthralled by the religious hymn that they don't notice they have been encircled with skill and style. They jump nervously when a brutal order enjoins them to raise hands. They laugh with relief when they recognize Mohamed Sebaihi, chief of the group of Taghit. He gives Mostefa an account of what happened in Tighanimine, mentions the incident provoked by the caid of Mchouneche. Mostefa replies crossly:

"Why have you shot at civilians? I have told you more than once to distribute tracts, explain the goals of our struggle, nothing more!"

"But, Si Mostefa! He has aimed at us with his pistol."

He shows him the caid's arm.

News arrives from Batna; Mostefa is not surprised to hear about the former Spahi's defection. He curses Tahar Nouichi for not giving any sign of life. A militant informs him that the French on a battery radio have announced that the capital Algiers has *budged*. At long last, a good news. Aures is not alone any more.

Ali Ben Ammar offers them a frugal dinner and, in the evening, they move to the mountain of El Hara, farther east. During the night, Mostefa sums up events of the preceding two days.

(22) Mostefa has demanded that his brother Omar be kept out of the freedom fight, but militants have carried on regardless and admitted him in their ranks to avoid French reprisal on his family and, curiously, to avoid also that his name be *dirtied*.

(23) Burda or The Mantle is an ode of praise for the Prophet Mohammed. Its refrain goes like this: "My Master (God), descend peace and blessings continuously and eternally on Your Beloved - i.e. Mohammed- the Best of all creation."

The information collected remains incomplete but from what he has got so far, he retains defections, indiscipline, disorder and groups' disparity. He realizes how fragile the revolutionary flame is. Besides, he is sadly aware that he has no supplies in stock. No food, no arms, no ammunitions (he has calculated that each fighter's provision of bullets doesn't by now exceed one hundred fifty bullets). He decides to hold a meeting of evaluation with the groups' leaders.

November 3, El Hara, early morning: Abbas Laghrour has come. His chest corseted by two bullet belts, a rifle slung around his right shoulder, a big pistol stuck on his right hip and a filled cartridge pouch hanging on his left side, he is truly impressive. For the moment, he boils with anger. If the attack on Khenchela has failed, the thirty men of Yabous, especially their leader, are the ones to blame! "They were not present at the rendez-vous. I waited for them at the Roman bathes, in vain. (24)" Mostefa quiets him down; he says that he knows his sense of discipline. The radio has mentioned Khenchela in its news bulletin: all is not negative. Abbas narrates the civilians' assault against the police station and praises their bravery: "With more self confidence and had the men of Yabous been with them, they would have brought along the policemen's guns."

Later, Mostefa is told that T'Kout, Ouldja, Kimmel, Lamsara, Taberdga, Tamza, El Ksar, Arris, Ichemoul and Inoughissen have been more or less harassed. Tracts have been distributed, bridges demolished between Arris and Batna, telephone poles felled.

November 4: the day is very long. Mostefa waits in vain for other tissals. The battery radio broadcasts that France acknowledges a grave insurrection in Aures, carried out by hundreds of rebels. A reconnaissance plane flies over the Zalatou Mountains and Beni Melloul forest in large lazy circles. Mostefa orders his companions to stay put inside the forest.

November 5: Mostefa can't wait any longer. He must go and look for information. Once again, he moves on in a southwestern direction, crosses the canyons of Ghassira, cuts through Ahmar Khaddou Mountain and stops at Mchouneche, an oasis that spreads along the left bank of Oued Labied. There, he meets Hocine Berrehail, a former outlaw, the same who has attacked Biskra, Tolga and Mchouneche. Mostefa blames him for his silence:

"Hocine, after the actions, you should have sent me a report. You have no right to leave us without information. After Biskra, you were supposed to return to Mchouneche."

"That's what I did, Si Mostefa. I swear I respected your orders."

He then starts narrating with details his assaults of the three places. Mostefa interrupts him; "Where is Slimane?"

"Slimane? He should be in Algiers by now. Why? Did I do something wrong? I let him go, Si Mostefa, I thought you knew about his destination. Nobody told me anything. He left with Guerrouf and took 190,000 centimes (old francs) belonging to the Organization."

(24)Roman bathes, called in Arabic, Hammam Essalihine (bath of the Righteous) and in Latin: *Acquae Flavianae*.

Mostefa fixes Chihani who hastens to declare:

“I ignore why he left. I just instructed him to give a hand to Berrehail. Nothing else.”(25)

Berrehail affirms his readiness to invest by force the hamlet of Ouled Abderrahmane Kebach, held by a group of Communist partisans, led by Mohamed Guerrouf. Prior to November 5, Guerrouf had accompanied Slimane to Algiers and introduced him to members of the Central Committee of the Algerian Communist party. Afterward, he had returned to Kebach.

Mostefa agrees: “Yes, Hocine, we will go together to Kebach.”

The night is well advanced when they leave Mchouneche, tread cautiously toward Tadjemout and cover fast the thirty kilometers that separate them from Kebach. After a one night journey, they arrive in time to accomplish the dawn prayer with Guerrouf and his men. A mocking Mostefa will later tease his escort:

“Kiddies, you have prayed with a nonbeliever. You will have to redo your prayer!”

Guerrouf is pleased with Mostefa’s visit. He slaughters a sheep in his honor. In the meantime, Mostefa asks him about Slimane’s whereabouts. “I met him in Biskra. I thought you knew about his trip. I accompanied him to Algiers. He wanted to meet members of the Communist syndicate.”

“What did they talk about?”

“About the best way for the syndicate to help the Liberation army. I thought you were the one who sent him for that purpose.”

Mostefa does not comment. Guerrouf goes on and complains about Berrehail’s misbehavior and declares:

“My group is at your disposal. We are ready to fight on your side but under our Party’s command.” (26)

Mostefa says no. He demands that the arms be turned over to him. Guerrouf tries to argue things over, and asks for a ten day delay to inform his supervisors in Algiers. Against the advice of his companions who are in favor of using force, Mostefa accepts (27).

November 6: return to El Hara. Mostefa is informed of French paratroopers’ arrival in T’Kout. Bicha Djoudi and Mostefa Boucetta are sent out on reconnaissance. A civilian confirms the information and advises them to go for them. Bicha, diehard, does not relinquish and despite the Piper Cub spy plane, spots the enemy, rushes in their direction and fires blind. He hits a paratrooper, later air lifted by helicopter. On his way back, Bicha shoots again, this time on the reconnaissance plane.

(25) Slimane supposedly a deserter from the French army has been recruited by Chihani. It is said that he was a French agent.

(26) The members of the Algerian Communist Party are compelled to sign a declaration where they renounce their adherence to the Communist Party and accept to fight under the authority of the Front of National Liberation. Eighteen of them will pay with their lives their allegiance to the Communist party.

(27) Mostefa predicts before his companions: “In any case, the Communist Party will not respond and will not turn over arms.” Fifteen days later, Guerrouf gives his arms on instruction from Algiers and gets out of the maquis.

A little time after, appear hedgehopping fighter planes that machine gun Tafrent, shortly afterwards followed by bombers which hit from high altitude.

As soon as they come back, Bicha and Boucetta are sharply berated by a furious Mostefa. “You must respect guerrilla rules! Never underestimate the enemy. Never trust or shoot enemy planes!”

Unconvinced, Bicha replies:

“Let them come, Si Mostefa! Head against head and you will see who will win!”

“Shut up, you oak head! Content yourself with obeying orders.”

In addition to their penetration in T’Kout, paratroopers now patrol in and around Arris, Bouhamama and Foum Toub. When they get too close, the freedom fighters vanish and reappear where they are not expected.

November 7: For the first time, Mostefa evokes the necessity of a trip to the Middle East. He says he has a rendez-vous with the insurrection chiefs abroad. At that time, one could hardly talk of an embryonic revolutionary delegation in a foreign country. At first, Mostefa considers sending Chihani to *the mythical Orient, rich with promises, spreading from Tunisia to brother Arab countries, all ready to send arms and volunteers.*

Messages are sent to the groups’ leaders to inform them of a meeting. Mostefa prepares the agenda with Chihani and Adjoul. The problems are huge and numerous. All demand an urgent solution. The handling of ill-suited and antinomic groups, as seen during these last days, is by no means easy. If one adds mutual incompatibilities, and indeed often a true mutual antipathy and even hostility between group leaders, as is the case between Ammar Maache and Abbas Laghrour, then a real danger exists. The risks of overtaking and anarchy are very much present for, in the name of the Liberation struggle, dubious events might occur, bordering on settling of scores. Empirism prevails, propitious or not, depending on the group leader’s merit and characterized by the primacy of the rifle on the verb. Mostefa affirms:

“We need to lay things flat. The merit of present group leaders is too volatile. We must both accept and limit damages. Violence and the use of the rifle are too frequent. Priority is to be given to discussion; we have to steer away from forced indoctrination.”

Adjoul grimaces:

“It won’t be easy, Si Mostefa. If we don’t intervene, anarchy shall prevail.” (In Arabic: *faoudha*).

Chihani adds:

“I agree, but if the population ignores why we fight, it will betray us at the earliest opportunity.”

Mostefa goes on:

“Each sector must have its boundaries. No encroachment will be tolerated. Adjoul, could you draw a map for us?”

Mostefa has bought maps of Aures in Batna, at Bouillard’s library, but Adjoul – and for that matter, the other men present – can’t read them. He is credited though, together with Mostefa, with having an extensive knowledge of the region. In his head, Adjoul has itemized hamlets

and their situation, roads, tracks, height of mountains, water sources, wells, caves, houses and dwellers, rivers dead or alive. He draws on a note book the limits of each sector, inspiring himself on the colonial administrative division and relying on the fact that fighters, untiring walkers, know their habitat and its frontiers, rooted deep in their subconscious.

Adjoul writes in Arabic the landmarks of each sector, named after its chief: e.g. Mekki Achouri for the sector of T'Kout, Abdelwahab Othmani for the sectors of Taberdga and Ouldja, Mostefa Goughali for the sector of Inoughissen.

Mostefa inquires:

“How are we to codify relations between groups’ leaders and headquarter whose site is to be kept secret?” (28)

The selection of tissals or liaison agents used by HQ as go-between to give and receive information is crucial (29). Still Mostefa:

“How will we assure supply of food, arms, ammunition, pataugas which by the way start getting worn out already?”

November 8 and 9: Apparently, the baptism of fire has succeeded. The insurrection has passed its first test. Mostefa proposes:

“We must now make it meaty.”

He laughs when he hears that France declares there are three thousand rebels in Aures.

November 10: Four groups’ leaders of south Aures meet at Ain Touzalt, near El Hara. They have been summoned to a smoky house made of huge stones cemented with clay; its walls and roof are held up by cedar trunks and it is perched on top of a crest facing the valley. Inside, in the dim light, Mostefa is lying on his right side, a woolen hood on his head covering part of his front. On his left, is sitting Chihani with an open note-book on his lap. Facing them, an austere Abbas looks bored while Adjoul from memory recites for the four chiefs the limits of their sectors. A rapid assessment is done: first, the defections; around ten fighters have asked permission to leave. Mostefa complies, since as he puts it ‘militantism is based on voluntary service.’ Then begins the session of self-criticism. Mostefa brings back for discussion the death of the caid of Mchouneche. “Orders are sacred. They must be obeyed imperatively.”

“Even if we are shot at?” insinuates Sebaihi who feels being got at. Mostefa acknowledges that proved self defense could justify killings.

(28)Headquarters location is kept secret. Any attempt to look for it is punished by death. It eventually will become a mythical place for djounoud, accessible only by tissals.

(29)Tissal means liaison agent. The tissals are chosen from a pool of hardened militants. They are able to journey anywhere, day and night, to respect confidentiality and to feel the atmosphere inside the maquis. They often are called the barometers of the High Command.

He insists:

“Another recommendation: a fighter assigned to a group has no right to leave it on his own initiative. This event has been signaled many times. Likewise, a group positioned in one given sector cannot move elsewhere without headquarters’ order. If it does, it endangers the whole defense system. The Liberation army resembles a house: when a wall falls down, the entire house soon follows. Our security depends on everyone’s vigilance.”

With in mind Bicha’s misbehavior, he once again warns against attacking enemy when in a weak position. “Above all, never shoot at a plane with a rifle. Guerrilla is not a matter of whims.”

To a group’s chief, he explains:

“Passwords are the key of relations between groups. You must change them every day. It is quite easy. For example, you say: egg, the other answers: hen. You say: mountain, he answers: cedar. The important thing is an agreement on the choice of words and on your remembering them. Another thing, very crucial too: you must always agree on a fallback position in case of forced dispersal.” He gives examples, cites precise places, because most men are illiterate. *Mostefa’s status requires him to take a leading role: he listens, explains, develops, all the time, constantly returning to the work until he gives it a semblance of coherence. Besides, on top of that, except for Chihani, he does not trust his collaborators. He has no faith in their ability to judge or decide. It definitely is not Chihani’s case with whom he enjoys talking of political and military matters, trying to foresee oncoming problems and solve them.*

He continues:

“We are short of ammunition. You have to implant into your men’s mind a sense of economy. Instruct them to adjust their fire to hit. Warn them that no contacts with civilians are permitted, even with parents. A priori, any civilian should be suspected of collusion with enemy.” When he talks of mistrusting civilians, more or less enemy’s informers, Mostefa knows what all is about. Tribal rivalries, initiated and sustained by France, by far surpass any concept of nationalism. (30) He goes on with his lecture:

“The armed struggle is just a side of the freedom fight. You must never get tired of explaining the political goals of the insurrection, at every opportunity, to your men and to the population.”

Afterwards, to deal with specific problems, each group’s leader is called alone and given instructions specific to his sector. It is clearly emphasized to him the importance of the no-war regions, vital for the circulation and stocking of supplies. Adjoul explains that engaging the enemy in those regions is forbidden.

(30)It is well known that Chaoui tribes have gone as far as to acclaim the French invader, out of hatred for other tribes. They say: “Better present our enemy with our bread than give it to our cousins.” It is told that notables belonging to Mostefa Ben Boulaid’s tribe, the Touaba, one day asked Faby, the French administrator of Arris, to expel the *‘foreign’* tribe of Bouslimanis from Arris, which they claimed as their land. After a day of thinking, Faby told the Touaba: “Here, in Aures, I consider there is only a foreigner and that is me.”

During the discussions, it appears that Mohamed Cherif Soulimani has not led the attack on Barika in person. Mostefa is angry, all the more so since Chihani had at first refused to give Soulimani the responsibility of the attack. He demands his punishment.

Another platoon's leader, Ali Benchaiba, brings up his problem:

"I am victim of injustice and abuse of power. Messaoud Benaissa, against my will and my men's, has dared split my platoon into four groups. He pretends obeying HQ's orders."

Adjoul intervenes:

"Untrue! HQ has not given him any orders."

Ignoring Adjoul, Benaissa addresses Benchaiba directly:

"You command two platoons of thirty men each! Are not they too many for you? What about the other sectors? You want them to remain empty?"

"No. That is not my wish. I repeat that I am the chief of two platoons, invested by HQ to fulfill my mission."

Mostefa intercedes:

"We'll take care of this problem later. Now, we have more urgent matters to deal with."

On Chihani's proposal, Soulimani is stripped of rank and transferred to Khangat Akriche as a simple combatant. Layeche Batsi and his group are assigned to Kimmel. Mostefa Goughali is appointed tissal to assure liaison between HQ and the regions of Chemora, El Khroub and Ain Mlila. Messaoud Mokhtari and his group are sent to the mountain of Ahmar Khaddou. Ali Benammar is charged to set up a support network among civilians.

At the end of the meeting, on the evening of that same November 11, maybe secretly encouraged by Adjoul, guerrillas call out to Mostefa about a problem they deem serious. Some chiefs, namely Messaoud Benaissa and Meddour Azoui, because they belong to the first circle of command, shun carrying out chores, like guard or water duties. Mostefa tries to quiet down the discontent and, conciliatory, declares his readiness to stand in for the two culprits. The fighters refuse, demand that Messaoud Benaissa be put in quarantine. They force him to leave Mostefa's group and take refuge in a cave. This quarantine raises Benaissa's hackles, *making him bound later to seek revenge.*

After his departure, and without Mostefa's knowledge, Adjoul gives back his grade to Soulimani, appoints him leader of the Serahna and commands him to harass Benaissa by all means, to force him out of his cave and kill him. Luckily for Benaissa, the scheme worked out by Adjoul fails because Soulimani is captured by the French army a few days later.

November 13: A second meeting is held at Inoughissen, this time with groups of the northern region of Aures. With his usual witty eloquence, Chihani appears resolutely optimistic:

"The revolution is now on its rails. The war won't last more than a few months."

In nearly the same manner, the groups' leaders are instructed to obey the same oral orders: how and when to attack enemy, which civilians to contact, hideouts where to rest or meet in case of scattering, which sectors to avoid.

Chihani issues a stern warning:

“It is strongly forbidden to try and get in touch with command centers. For this aim, use the tissal.”

Then begins the letting out. Ammar Maache answers Abbas Laghrour who angrily reproaches him his absence at the rendez-vous of Ain Silane:

“I have come. The platoon’s fighters can testify. Abbas must have gone to a wrong place. He has failed to spot us because of the night or trees, I don’t know.”

Abbas cries out: “I know the region. I can cross it in day light or night darkness. Had you come, I would have surely found you.”

Both men exchange words, heating up in the process. Mostefa minimizes the matter, speaks of a lack of experience. He is well aware that the men of Ammar Maache, who belong to the clan of Beni Oudjana, have since always craved for their freedom; they have refused to join the platoons of Tahar Nouichi or Ali Benchaiba because they strive for a complete liberty of action in their own region, located between Yabous and Khenchela. Mostefa understands and readily complies with their wish. He transfers Abbas Laghrour to Head Quarters to stop the embittering of his relations with Ammar Maache and then pulls apart the Beni Oudjana from the group of Khenchela which he invites to take up position around Tebessa, declared a war-free region.

A problem is settled, another comes up, this time more serious since it calls directly into question Mostefa’s authority. One remembers that Ahmed Nouaoura, chosen to undertake the assault on Arris, has not showed up on the scheduled day. Mostefa, in spite of this defection, decides to maintain him as leader of Arris sector, unleashing a wind of revolt. The groups’ chiefs, once again influenced by Adjoul, turn down Mostefa’s decision and declare:

“That is pure cronyism, Si Mostefa!”

They propose, instead of Nouaoura, Ali Baazi, the man who led the failed attack upon Batna. Mostefa tries hard and argues things over but, before the general outcry, he yields grudgingly. Old Messaoud Belaggoune chooses this moment to declare most emphatically:

“If, on November first, I had not been there to keep combatants at their posts on a faltering Nouaoura’s behalf, the revolution would not have started. I tell you, Si Mostefa, the man who helped me quiet down the restive fighters was none other than your own brother Omar.”

Mostefa frowns. The atmosphere remains tense.

Despite the critics, Nouaoura is appointed quartermaster.

November 13, in the evening: Mostefa and his companions descend toward Hadjadj, a small hamlet east of Arris. The insurrection picture gets more precise. On the events of Batna, tissals (liaison agents) report only fragmented informations. Mostefa literally yearns for details to explain the failure of the operation. He gets angry at Tahar Nouichi who has not yet sent his liaison agent. That same day of November 13, Mostefa is told that four fighters have been killed by the French at Ichemoul between the seventh and eighth November. He collects information on the circumstances of their death and their names. He concludes that they have died because they did not respect guerrilla’s rules. *When Mostefa edicts a judgment, it becomes a dogma.*

Bicha Djoudi is standing, leaning against a wall. He listens in silence for awhile, and then sneaks out. He does not like speeches. If the decision had rested with him, he would have attacked Arris in broad daylight and taken all arms of the gendarmery. He thinks Mostefa quibbles too much.

One remembers that on November seventh, Mostefa has evoked a trip to the Middle East. He intends to send Chihani to the Outer Delegation of the revolution with a mission: enjoin them to hurry the dispatch of arms. For, indeed, the situation in Aures is far from brilliant.

Guerrillas dispose now of 150 bullets each. Besides, most of their rifles are of foreign origin and their ammunition difficult, if not impossible, to find on local markets. *Arms contraband has begun in 1947, mainly east, in Tebessa and south, in Oued Souf. Rightly banking on the Chaoui's passion for fire arms, smugglers have made out of this traffic a juicy trade. Arms are bought in Libya and Bizerte (Tunisia) from Germano-Italian WWII stocks and transported about four times a year in camels' convoys. Each convoy consists of four to six camels. An average of three hundred arms is smuggled in Aures every trimester. Most of them are recovered by the colonial administration following brawls, crimes or sheer informing. In 1950, an army rifle costs 18,000 old francs, an Italian Statti with 60 bullets costs half this price.* At regular intervals, Mostefa sorts out the arms, asks Adjoul to sell the old ones. On a selling operation, Adjoul is given away to gendarmes by a Toubi. The case, like many others, will be hushed thanks to the intercession of corrupt French policemen and gendarmes, and also thanks to native notables, especially the most known among them, Abd-el-Kader Cadi, who acts as a remunerated go-between. (32) The insurrection has not yet gone through its first ten days and Mostefa is compelled to remove from the battle field many arms, unusable because of lack of munitions. A dogma becomes imperative: retrieval of weapons and munitions from the enemy, soon followed by retrieval of uniforms, shoes, belts and wristwatches.

Meanwhile and up to November 17, meetings go on, devoted to evaluation and clarification. Civilian militants are called and assigned missions of sabotage and intelligence. Chihani warns:

“The insurrection is not a one way matter. It requires everybody's participation.”

His tone is not openly threatening; it is not openly friendly either. The civilians get the message. He shows them how to set up polyvalent groups to collect supplies and intelligence, and also to spread the good word. They listen, without committing themselves, because they ignore what is going on: they are facing a new and dubious phenomenon. These people who have taken to the bush are crazy, no doubt about it. *If your interlocutor is mad, you better stick to your good sense.* To rise up against France, its armies, tanks and planes, don't forget: the fourth world power, is sheer madness. Of course, the Chaouia, last century, have made up a cannon out of an oak trunk, *madfaa kerrouche*, but it exploded at the first shot.

(32) Another case that could have been damaging to Mostefa occurred a few weeks before the insurrection. Mostefa had stocked homemade bombs in a shop located in the centre of Batna and belonging to a certain Mechelak. For an unknown reason, several of them exploded. No judicial inquiry was set going against him thanks to corrupt French policemen.

In front of Chihani, they play themselves as well meaning rural ignorant, quite the opposite of those native city dwellers who enjoy a minor role in the colonial society and don't feel concerned: they have nothing in common with these mountain people who spit on their urine or shoes' soles when they are turned upside down. The French will later call the city natives moderate; for the revolutionaries, moderation is the atrium of treason.

From November 3 to November 13, skirmishes between freedom fighters and French troops are light. After the November 5 engagement at Ichemoul, followed by aerial bombings of Tafrent, guerrillas engage again enemy paratroopers at Fom Toub and Ichemoul. On the evening of November 9, Hocine Berrehail assaults Mchouneche. On November 12, another engagement at Ichemoul, this time in the morning: two paratroopers are killed. On the 13th, the village of Pasteur is invested for a few hours by guerrillas. The November 18 encounter looks more serious. An informant tells the French of guerrillas' arrival on the evening of November 18 to Hambla, a hamlet situated 12 km east of T'Kout. The French attempt to surround it, but the partisans, more rapid, manage to get out of their grip and fire several shots. Two rearguard fighters remain blocked though till dawn. They engage paratroopers and score about ten times before retreating. The French response is swift: the officer gathers all residents of the three hamlets, Hambla, Akriche and Boucetta; he orders them to hurry and collect wood to burn their shacks. A paratrooper jostles a woman, too slow for him. She hits him back with her billhook. He falls. His companions shoot. Four women are killed. Amor Benzerara, a deira (33) of the colonial administrator, calls out to the officer, tells him that it is impious to set fire to houses and kill innocent women. He insists so much by appealing to the officer's honor and generosity that he succeeds in moving away the villagers. The French then burn themselves the shacks.

Mostefa is appalled, he who pays special attention to the sense of honor. The fact that the French take it out on women and cold-bloodedly execute them appears to him the acme of abjection. He decides to leave at once El Hara so as not to expose the population and settles in the forest of Kimmel, quasi empty.

November 19: Enemy bombers bomb the forest of Beni Melloul. From Arris, Ahmed Nouaoura begins sending some supplies. Mostefa champs the bit, waiting for tissions.
November 20: planes disgorge tracts by the thousands on Ichemoul, Zalatou and Ghassira, inviting the population to assemble in safe zones before November 21 because *"soon, a terrifying and dreadful calamity, the fire of Heavens, will fall on the rebels' heads. After that, will come back French peace."*

One of the selected safe zones is situated at Toufana, some 30 km east of Lambese. Mostefa declares that France has swallowed the bait and will from now on push the population on the revolutionary side by its blind repression. The liaison agents who live among peasants tell him that French officials have fixed a three-day deadline for the rebels to lay down arms and surrender with their kin. In Batna, high authorities will welcome them and provide them with jobs, housing and food.

(33)Deira: multipurpose employee in the administrator's office.

Mostefa bursts out laughing. He denounces colonialism that reacts only when a knife cuts its throat. He adds:

“We won’t give any order to the population. People shall decide on their own. The Liberation army will respect their will.”

November 21: All wait for the ‘Heavens’ fire.’ It won’t come. Mostefa speaks of a French backing down:

“They are mixed up and in disarray. Beside, bombing costs a lot of money.”

The HQ men move down south east, at Dermoun, north of Zeribet El Oued. On their way, Mostefa threatens to shoot Bicha if he does not speed up his pace. At Dermoun, they rest in Adjoul’s house, take a bath in the hot sulfurous waters of Hammam Chaboura, devour plenty of fresh figs and dates.

During the bath, takes place a well appreciated ritual: every fighter shaves his companion’s arm pits; for a Chaoui, clean shaven armpits represent a must of body hygiene.

November 21, evening: Hocine Berrehail catches up with Mostefa’s group at Dermoun. He relates in detail his attack on Mchouneche. Mostefa is eager for details, such as the number of bullets fired, the enemy’s reaction. He tries to conceal his anguish before the increase of French pressure: paratroopers everywhere, in Arris, T’Kout, Medina, and Foum Toub, with armored vehicles of all models, buzzing reconnaissance planes that open the way for aerial bombers. The anguish becomes nightmarish when he compares his own forces with the enemy’s. The disproportion is abyssal. Adjoul teases him:

“Si Mostefa, since we have no munitions left, why not make up cartridges with the sulfur of Hammam Chaboura, like our forefathers?”

When Mostefa is in this state of mind, he doesn’t remain still. He has to move elsewhere in a try to retrieve strength from new informations.

November 26: He leaves Abbas Laghrour on duty at El Hara HQ and sets out on a new trip. This time, he heads south to know more about an arms arrival from Tunisia. Traditional smugglers of Oued Souf are supposed to convey them. Mostefa reaches Biskra by Tadjemout, Ahmar Khaddou and Mchouneche; at Baniane, while he refreshes his bare feet in a flowery water hole, a tissal catches up with him. He informs him that an engagement between guerrillas and the French has occurred at Khangat Maache; the partisans have recuperated twenty individual arms. At the same time, he notifies him of Belgacem Grine’s death and the annihilation of his group at Loreddam, northeast of Arris.

Belgacem Grine, a former outlaw, belongs to the Chorfa clan. He joins the MTLD in 1950, four years prior to the insurrection. He is appointed by Mostefa to attack Batna on the first of November with Tahar Nouichi and Hadj Lakhdar. Later, he spends the three following weeks in the region of Batna, under Hadj Lakhdar’s leadership. He misses his native mountains. Now, follows Hadj Lakhdar’s account: “Grine was under my responsibility and Lakhdar Benkaouha’s. He managed to convince the 14 men of his group, composed of Chorfa,

Serahna, Ghouassir and Touaba, to leave for Arris, closer to their families. Without notice and without giving me back my field glasses, he leaves Kasrou and from the indications I got a posteriori, he goes to meet Guareschi, a French settler living in Timgad. One day before, Grine had informed me that a settler in Timgad wished to give him a machine gun and a *khemassi* (34). I forbade him to go. But he disobeyed. At daybreak, I don't see sentries on the crest. I cough, throw stones: no answer. I climb up the peak: nobody. I wake up some men, look for Grine. We find his traces heading toward Arris. We learn later that he stopped at Oued Taga, to rest with his men in the hamlet of Loreddam, along Oued Labied, heedless of any danger. They are spotted by enemy plane or informed on to enemy, the result is the same. In any case, they fight gallantly and pass away with honor.”

This is the first defeat of the Liberation army, due to disrespect of HQ's recommendations which has forbidden any unauthorized displacement. After hearing the informations, one good, the other bad, Mostefa reacts in an even way: “Adjoul, you return at once to El Hara. Abbas can make it by himself, but I'd rather you stay with him.”

He turns to Chihani and Berrehail:

“You two, wait for me at Mchouneche. You, Boucetta, come with me to Biskra.”

Mostefa Boucetta narrates:

“Mostefa contacts militants in Biskra. The tissal of Oued Souf is absent. A total fiasco! No arms have arrived. The prior to 1954 promises have become dead letters. Mostefa has no power on the course of events, he who wants to control everything, small or big. We leave Biskra, head down to El Meghaier, meet people of Touggourt and Oued Souf. All affirm that arms are on their way. Their arrival is imminent. We wait and nothing comes.”

The end of November is cold and rainy. Adjoul arrives at El Hara HQ. He finds Abbas busy preparing an assault on a goumiers' post located in Louestia, ten kilometers south of El Hara. He inquires:

“Did you complete intelligence about the number of soldiers, rotation of relief sentries, armament?”

“No, but I will get it soon. I have sent a tissal to gather it.”

The tissal though, takes a long time coming back. Abbas waits three days and then sends guerrillas to look for him. And, of course, as it often happens in these cases, he gets no reply, either from the tissal or from the partisans. The weather is execrable. A thick fog hides the relief. Abbas waits for two days more and decides to go and see by himself. It is rainy and windy. Abbas is not familiar with the region. He takes the wrong itinerary and wanders aimlessly in the forest during long hours, completely lost.

At El Hara, Adjoul worries. He goes out hunting for him and hours later, finds him drenched to the skin. Some days after, a tissal tells them that Mostefa is expecting them in Tadjera, a few kilometers north. Before complying, Abbas decides to postpone his attack on Louestia until his return. He entrusts his men to the care of veterans Sebaihi, Mestiri, Sidi Henni and Bayouche. He recommends utmost prudence because the guerrillas are new comers, with no experience.

(34)Khemassi: 5 shots rifle.

Meanwhile, in Tadjera, nothing new under the sky for Mostefa: things look rather bleak. He has not met the Oued Souf tissal despite all his efforts. Without elaborating, he grumbles for himself: “Everything is messed up!”

Muffled up in their cachabias, the men are seated on alfa mats around a wood fire. Abbas talks of the attack he is planning. He tries to cheer up Mostefa:

“I shall get weapons, all kinds of them, Si Mostefa, and as many as you want. We won’t need those outer funklers!”

They laugh. In fact, they realize that the part given to them in the revolutionary play is not the easiest. The brothers-militants of the Exterior still have to carry out their share of the contract.

There is a basic principle: when a militant or a member of his family are threatened with internment or looked for by enemy police, the gates of the bush get wide open to them. The bush though is not exactly a sinecure. Every would-be guerrilla should be fit to defend himself and his comrades; his arming is thus vital. Beside, a guerrilla to whom it is recommended again and again to shoot only in absolute necessity is entitled to ponder over his safety, itself directly proportional to his fire capability.

Of all this, Mostefa is conscious. Once more, he repeats his will to travel east to reactivate armament networks ‘because the arms have already been bought.’

Month of December, exactly the 13th. Tired of waiting, the seventy partisans left by Abbas at El Hara agree to attack the post of Louestia. Led by Sebaihi, Mestiri and Sidi Henni, they leave HQ and go east, spend the night in the hamlet of Tamdint. A short time before dawn, they are awakened by a gnawing hunger and cold. They resume their southern hard trek through the mountains towards Louestia. It is dark and frosty. The wind blows fiercely and the snow stings. They stop at Ras Tbabouche, a pivot mountain between Serahna and Chorfa, facing the path linking the hamlets of Djeniene and Sidi Ali. Ahead of them, extends the forest where a sheep’s flock trots in the fog. At least, one hundred heads. Famished fighters approach the old shepherdess, at the same time owner of the flock. They ask for one or two sheep. She says no. They choose a few ewes, rapidly check they are not gravid, and slit their throats despite the woman’s cries. She observes them with hostility while they cut up the animals and build a stone kiln. (35) Later, she keeps on watching them devouring the roasted meat, muttering non-stop:

“Eat without my forgiveness. No pardon!”

She remains with them the whole day and leaves the place with her flock at dusk.

(35)The kiln is an assembling of flat stones, covered with earth to prevent heat loss. The stones are heated by a big fire burning underneath. The meat is disposed in large chunks on the stones. Its cooking is signaled by the heating of the outer layer of earth.

They huddle up in the frosty night until morning when they are spotted by a reconnaissance plane flying over Djeniene. Abbas will claim later that it is a local informant who has given them to the French. Anyway, in mid morning, arrive from T'Kout, Lamsara, Tadjemout and Ouldja truck convoys that unload collective weapons and soldiers in an endless shuttle, for many hours. The guerrillas don't seem to worry; they don't even know that they are encircled. The he-nurse, Selmi Boubekour, bitten by a cruel cold, sneaks down between trees looking for a ray of sun. As soon as he sets out of the cover, someone yells at him in French. Without wavering, he sprints straight ahead and escapes from the hoop net.

At first with no reaction, the French open a heavy fire in the direction of the forest. Sebaihi falls down, mortally wounded. In a frenzied mad rush, the freedom fighters split in two groups. One climbs up east, all the way to the peak of Ras Tbabouche, 1,600 meters high and races ahead towards Sidi Fethallah below. The other runs down in the direction of the bare slopes of the Ras, bumps into French soldiers waiting in ambush who kill three more guerrillas. Ghazali Benabbes is wounded in his right leg; he manages though to spot the enemy machine gunner and kills him. Out of breath, his running comrades stop at a place called *Kroumet Essid*. (The Lion's nape). There, they see without being seen. Abdelhafid Soufi shoots dead several French soldiers, as if in a firing range. On his sides, around twelve partisans machine gun, hitting more than once.

Right in front, they hear a shout: "Move forward!" They ready themselves for the assault and a hand to hand. No one shows up; after awhile, the same voice cries out: "Move back!" Soufi understands: enemy mortars and cannons are about to start firing. Raising his hand, he signals his companions to follow him and, by instinct, firing like mad, they rush furiously on enemy lines, break the circle and sneak out between trucks into the thick undergrowth. All achieve passing through except for one of them, Ali Badri, who doesn't notice their leaving and continues to shoot from the top of a tree. The French discover him thanks to a heap of cartridges at the foot of his tree and kill him. At the same time, they capture an unarmed Melkmi.

Meanwhile, leaving the enemy base far behind, part of the guerrillas reach Lamsara, north east of Sidi Ali. They rest there three days. On the fourth, they return to Sidi Ali, chosen before as a rallying place with Abbas Laghrour. In twilight and dark forest, they hear without seeing somebody talking in French. They think the enemy has trailed them and, once again, they take to their heels, this time southward, stopping only in Tadjemout. In fact, as they will discover later, it was Layeche Batsi who by using Voltaire's tongue, has unwillingly mixed up their minds. Yet, it is not the end of it! In Tadjemout, a guerrilla complains of abdominal pain. Some of his comrades immediately recall the old shepherd's maledictions. The ailing man writhes on the ground near the fire, bullets fall in the flames, explode and again, the flight resumes, every man for himself. The men's dispersal drives them very far south, till Ksar Ouled Aïssa where rescuers dispatched by Abbas will find them many days later famished and sustained only with tree bark.

During the day and night of December 13, 1954, from the hamlet of Tadjera, Mostefa, Adjoul and Abbas have monitored the sequences of Ras Tbabouche battle. They get a clear awareness of their weakness before such a huge downpour of fire! They see and hear firsthand the unceasing rumble of guns and the muffled echo of mortars shells.

Abbas is anxious. Mostefa does his utmost to prevent him from joining the deadly trap: “Wait until we get a clearer picture.”

Finally, yielding to his insistence, he lets him go, but in the company of Adjoul who knows the region.

Both men are pessimistic. They would have been even more pessimistic had they seen the forest swarming with enemy soldiers. While hurrying down the path, Abbas has not stopped holding a big grudge against himself:

“They are so young. I shouldn’t have left them.”

Adjoul tries to calm him. Night falls when they reach Kef Bou Yedmamene, north of Djeniène. They stop at the edge of a thick dwarf forest, which they barely make out on their left. Three red rockets pierce suddenly the night at very short intervals. Abbas mutters: “Bad omen!” Seconds later, a pour down of mortars shells and heavy machine gunning shakes trees and ground. Adjoul looks at his watch: 8:00 p.m. They throw themselves on the ground, crawl toward cover on a crunching snow. They progress slowly, Adjoul ahead, hampered and torn apart by a headwind that hardens their soaked clothes.

Adjoul detects a pounding drawing closer and closer. He stops; four men rush out of darkness, trample him underfoot and stumble. He rolls on one side, recognizes them when they turn back. Abbas also recognizes them. He questions them, makes them repeat answers. They have gone through enemy’s circle. They tell what happened. Yes, there are some guerrillas dead, one is wounded. Adjoul advises not to advance further. Enemy is perhaps waiting in ambush. They hide under a wet boulder, wait for the end of alert. Abbas steams with rage at not being able to enter the battle.

The night is very long. On morning, the French leave. As soon as the rear lights of their vehicles disappear, the six fighters enter the forest.

They discover the corpses of four guerrillas, among them Sebaihi, recover their arms and bury them. A little farther, they drive out three combatants, alive. Still deeper in the woods, three other corpses are found out and buried. Abbas counts up the gruesome findings

“Out of seventy men, seven are dead, seven are alive. Where are the others?”

He is moved as if he had lost his own children.

With morning, the weather becomes milder. The rain replaces the snow and the wind slackens. On midday, addressing the people of Djeniène and Lougles, Abbas utters accusations:

“Someone has informed the French. There are informers here, not far.”

Adjoul objects:

“Maybe, it is a plane.”

Abbas glares at him. For him, no doubt: a local informer has tipped the French about guerrillas’ presence. Changing tone, he requests a sack of semolina, insisting that it should be taken from a reserve stock and a mule to transport it up to El Hara. The civilians clam up on him, but they obey. Adjoul keeps silent. The Serahna, people of his clan and the Chorfa, his traditional allies, expect him to stand up for them, but he knows too well Abbas’ thorny temper.

In Abbas’ eye, a holy warrior’s single drop of blood equals liters of civilians’. He just can’t bear enemy’s informants. He can’t admit either that his men be reduced to steal their food from the population. Before Mostefa, he does not cool off. Mostefa lectures him: “Listen to me Abbas. We have no right to take people’s goods through violence. If we do, then there is no difference between colonialism and us. Goods are to be got willingly or bought.”

“I agree, but where is the money? Beside, Si Mostefa, I can assure you that enemy has been informed.”

Mostefa replies with a tired smile:

“If to honor you, a poor spreads out his *burnous* (36), take good care not to sit in the middle. I repeat: the population is not in the obligation to feed us. What you have taken to-day may represent part or all food painfully earned by poor people.”

Two days after Ras Tbabouche battle, Bicha Djoudi who is on a mimeograph fatigue, endlessly turns the machine crank. When his arms get tired, he lies down on his back and turn the crank with his foot. At the end of the day, he is all excited: Mostefa has invited him to accompany him and Adjoul to Taberguinet and Djeniène. Mostefa wants to know more on the Ras Tbabouche battle and see what lessons can be drawn from it.

Adjoul shows him the guerrillas’ graves, the shell holes half filled with a muddy snow, the numerous prints of tires and chains of enemy vehicles. Mostefa asks question after question.

“Tell me, Adjoul, how is it possible for an armada like this to climb up here without being spotted? It means that on one side there were no lookouts or sentries.” Adjoul mentions the recruits’ lack of training. Mostefa insists:

“How about their chiefs?”

“I don’t know. Maybe they have underestimated the enemy?”

“Right. This is the weak link of our chain. I tell you, Adjoul, looking down on enemy is a crime. Answer me, where are the other fighters? Caught by the French?”

“No, Si Mostefa. We have kept a constant watch on enemy. We have seen them leaving. Many have slipped on ice and even fallen; they were in a hurry to go.”

(36)Burnous: traditional hooded cape made of wool or camel hair.

“Then, they are hiding in the woods. We must look for them.”

“Abbas is sick. He goes without sleeping or eating. He is really upset.”

They spend the night at Taberguinet in a civilian’s home. The day after, they return to El Hara. A big plane flies high over them. Bicha, as if possessed, rushes behind it, stops to fire two or three shots, and then resumes his mad pursuit, eyes up toward the sky. He chases the plane for one or two kilometers, unaware that Mostefa and Adjoul are on his tail. When he stops to shoot, Mostefa jumps on him, crying:

“Anarchist! You’re going to have us killed with your stupid madness!”

He snatches the rifle from his hands, slaps him. Bicha falls. Short of breath, he looks up at him, without moving, eyes full of questions. Mostefa repeats:

“I swear I’ll kill you!”

He fixes him a moment in silence, then lifts him up off the ground by his armpits and vigorously wipes away the snow from his back.

The fourth day after the Ras battle, the missing guerrillas are found near Oued Souf for five of them, at Ksar Ouled Aïssa for the fifty others, famished and surviving on eating bark stripped off trees. Abbas looks delighted. The sign of that is his smile: half of his superior canine shows up. Mostefa who likes laughing up his sleeve, whispers:

“Those who said that fear lends wings are not mistaken. To run all the way down to Oued Souf is quite a feat indeed!”

Chihani and Adjoul start a half laugh, swiftly put off when they notice Abbas pulling a sour face. *He considers a freedom fighter too holy a person to be teased.*

Chihani writes on a note-book the names of the deceased guerrillas and of the Melkmi captured.

Still the month of December: Chihani has received type writers. He writes to his heart’s content, in Arabic and French, tracts, double-aimed letters: congratulation for supporters of the insurrection, intimidation for counterrevolutionaries, listing of basic guerrilla rules and monthly recommendations written on individual booklets sent to every group’s leader. He foresees addressing condolences messages to dead guerrillas’ families. At last, he starts setting up an embryo of archives.

Mostefa is still champing at the bit. Tissals’ rotation is not fast enough for his liking. He burns with the desire to know everything. Now, the weather is indeed nasty, but it is not enough a valid reason. Inside the refuge, it is freezing. Frost bites heads and feet, despite chimney fire and clothe-doubling. Mostefa says to Adjoul:

“If the arms don’t come soon, we are heading straight against a wall.”

Adjoul plays it reassured:

“We’ll make it, Si Mostefa, even if there remains a single one of us to blow on the fire.”

Adjoul belongs to the clan of Serahna who, despite a centuries old cohabitation with the Chaouia, has retained its Arab identity. Like the Chaouia, Serahna lead a semi-nomadic life. During summertime, they live in the mountains of Kimmel, known for their poorness, canyons and water resources. In wintertime, they descend to Mchouneche and Biskra, much warmer. Adjoul's knowledge of Aures is phenomenal. In his memory, he has stored all kinds of data, concerning Aures tribes, their number and qualities. Unrepentant traveler, he knows the situation of caves, watering places in most unexpected sites, out of reach for laymen. He has grown up in a family that owned some land and a small live stock of goats and sheep. By the riverside, his father has planted fruit and palm trees. Adjoul has studied at Ben Badis' school in Constantine, where he gets impregnated with Arab culture. As a clandestine militant, he is ordered to join the maquis after the dismantling of the Special Organization by the French. He lives in the mountains, then under outlaws' yoke. Mostefa intervenes to have them accept him; at the same time, he enjoins him not to respond to colonial provocations. This order will almost cost him his life since he won't respond to a gendarmes' attack. The cohabitation with outlaws is difficult because they don't accept his clipping of their wings. In 1947, Adjoul is appointed by the Party as a conveyor of arms from Tunisia. He told me he knew each arm's destination and hiding place in Aures.

Bad weather gives opportunities for Mostefa to have lengthy talks with Chihani, concerning mainly the guerrilla's code. For the more than three hundred registered partisans, and forty five days after the outbreak of the insurrection, time indeed has come to define a revolutionary framework. First, for the freedom fighter, what are the lines he must not trespass in order not to incur death? Priority of priorities, he must not disobey orders or modify them, rebel against the revolutionary authority, create or participate in the creation of armed groups outside the Liberation army, surrender or betray the revolution. He must not lose his weapon. He has no right to indulge in sexual intercourse, except with his legal spouse. Are considered less serious faults, punishable by imprisonment in a cave: theft, seeking an interview with a commander, unauthorized family visits, getting in touch with civilians. Is forbidden also, carrying documents that could prove his identity, like ID, photos, other administrative papers. The pass is compulsory; it is endorsed by a commander and delivered only for specific missions or family visits. There are no grades: commanders, at this stage very few, are for most of them, ex-members of CRUA. They are called by surnames, e.g. Si Messaoud for Chihani, Bousenna for Bicha. The others use their real first names: Si Mostefa, Si Adjoul and Si Abbas.

At El Hara HQ, one feels the command is two-headed between Mostefa and Chihani. The latter shines by his efficacy and quick wittedness. Mostefa, akin to an elder brother, seems to encourage in him command practice.

Days slowly pass by in the wintry cold. Mostefa asks Chihani to summon the groups' leaders to a meeting to be held on December 23 at Bougherzal with the following agenda: evaluation of the military situation, supplies problems, liaison shuffle. As a legacy of his old militant's past, Mostefa likes meetings to be prepared in advance. This time though, he seems to have fired a blank shot.

December 23, 1954. Early morning, Mostefa, Chihani, Meddour Azoui and Bicha leave El Hara headquarters. Similar to a frightened butterflies' swarm, a tumultuous snow rushes on them. Mountains slopes and peaks, usually purplish blue, are now white. Nearby, almost within arm's reach, Ichemoul and Chelia (37) have discreetly hid their heads under a tuft of clouds. A few days earlier, Chihani has asked Adjoul who knows the region to use his liaison talent and inform all group leaders of the forthcoming meeting. Adjoul has gone with Abbas. At the end of their journey, they fail to contact groups' leaders, except Ammar Maache, because all ways are snow bound. It is only on December 24 that the three men, mostly thanks to Adjoul, manage to reach Bougherzal, on the Ahmar Khaddou's summit, facing the hamlet of Tifelfel. Mostefa has already spent a night at Bougherzal with Chihani, Bicha and Meddour. The adobe walls of the refuge are wet. The men are frozen to the marrow. Mostefa battles to start a fire; water rises up on the hearth stones; the wet wood cut by Bicha exhales an acrid smoke that pains to escape through the roof hole or the small triangular openings dug in the walls. Mostefa asks:

"How about the rest of the group, are they coming?"

"No, Si Mostefa. We have not made it. We need... a chopper."

"No problem, Adjoul; if you can pilot it, we get one in Arris."

The afternoon, Bicha slits a kid's throat, dismembers it in no time and cooks an unrefined meal, badly supported by Chihani. As a delicate city dweller, Chihani's stomach does not tolerate the rugged rural diet; he spends plenty of time in the bog and he feels worn out. Someone gives him a decoction of *arar* (38) to swallow, but it comes out as if he had taken *tasselgha* (39): diarrhea increases and deprives him of all his energy.

Except for Mostefa and Chihani, the five other men assume each a guard duty. Bicha is the one who gets it in the neck, since he is left with the last watch, the hardest. In predawn darkness, he walks down the source, fills up seven individual cans with water and lines them up against a wall. When he is through with his comings and goings, he hears a noise, turns back, sees his own can in Meddour Azoui's hands. He steams with anger:

"Why do you use my can? First, tell me: why perform morning ablutions since I have always known you godless? Since when do you pray?" Meddour answers in the same tone. Bicha grabs his empty can and starts upon going down to the source when he notes amid the cold of the nascent day a single filed column of enemy soldiers progressing in silence towards the refuge.

(37)Chelia: highest peak of northern Algeria.

(38)Arar: juniper.

(39)Tasselgha: senna.

Bicha unlocks the safety catch of his Garand, aims at the French, changes his mind:

“If I shoot, Mostefa is going to flee downward and fall in their hands.”

He hurries back to the refuge, gently wakens the sleeping Mostefa and Adjoul.

“The French!”

“Where? Are you sure?”

Mostefa gets up and questions at the same time. He and Adjoul leave the refuge like cannonballs, closely followed by Abbas. Two or three hundred meters further, they stop behind a crest, soon joined by Ammar Maache. Bicha is the last to come.

Mostefa asks worriedly:

“Where is Messaoud?”

Bicha answers:

“How would I know? How do you want me to know why that blasted man has not come?”

Mostefa gets up, walks back towards the refuge. Adjoul stands up in his way:

“No, Si Mostefa. I’ll go and fetch him.”

Adjoul is well aware of what is going to happen. Bicha blocks their way:

“No, Si Adjoul. I will go and bring him to you, the cursed!”

In the dark, he hurtles down the snowy slope on which he slides more than he runs. Inside the refuge, he finds both Chihani and Meddour motionless, as if tetanized. He shoves them, hits, curses, finally threatens to kill them. They still don’t move. In a last resort, he bends down, loads a lightweight Chihani on his shoulder like a sack of wheat, kicks Meddour out and, with an extraordinary cheek, dashes before the French. As soon as he reaches the crest, Adjoul and Mostefa fire several salvos to slow down the French who answer back with heavy machine gunning and caliber 75 cannon shelling.

From the top of the hill, the partisans see the enemy rush into the refuge and come out holding Mostefa’s air mattress.

It snows abundantly. The seven fugitives make it up to El Hara HQ. Azoui Meddour mocks Mostefa:

“Si Mostefa, they have taken your mattress, still warm!”

He resumes his argument with Bicha:

“Bousenna, admit it. You’ve discovered the French thanks to me. Just imagine if I had not been with you. You should be grateful to my ancestors’ *Baraka*. (40) We all live under their protection.” Bicha doesn’t budge an inch:

“I repeat it to you. For me, godless you are, godless you remain.”

Mostefa laughs, transforms the argument into a big joke.

Chihani is ill. On his cold stricken face, only his eyes seem to be alive. Mostefa reckons that he is unable to put up with the Middle East trip. He decides to stand in for him.

(40)Baraka: God’s benevolence towards sincere Moslems.

2

The days of fast.

End of December: less than sixty days from the beginning of the insurrection, Mostefa takes stocks of the situation. Of the 350 men who went out in the bush, 10 have returned to their homes, 30 have died in battle. There remain 310 guerrillas, high command excluded, divided up into around 20 groups. Many volunteers have been turned back, either because of lack of arms, or because of security reasons. Mostefa has erected as a dogma total mistrust toward recruits. "If outside enemy is easily picked out, the one inside is not." In fact, he is confronted with the circle squaring that is the arms supply. The printed instructions as a self evidence recommend the fighters to make arms recuperation from enemy their first priority. Up to now, it has been a wishful belief and Mostefa doesn't feel bold enough to require more from men facing each day death and miseries. He reckons that the Liberation army is not like the Viet Minh, much luckier since it can get direct supplies from a neighboring friendly country. Countries which could have helped the Algerian Liberation army, such as Tunisia and Morocco, are still under French control. Libya and Egypt are too far.

Mostefa has a tendency to conceal his worries. When faced with problems, he either laughs or adopts a joking tone. Around November 20, 1954, Chihani had showed him tracts dropped from French planes and saying that populations should assemble within safety zones outside which shooting on sight is permitted. Chihani had commented:

"The French are trying to isolate us." Mostefa had replied:

"Yes. Does it change anything? We have always been alone. Remember, we've been alone against Centralists and Messalists' reformism. Now, we are alone to bear French pressure."

January 15, 1955: The French decide to hit hard and show off their strength. Nearly six thousand soldiers are mobilized to comb the southern side of Aures. In addition to paratroopers, the troops comprise Spahis, goumiers, tirailleurs (native infantry men), gendarmes, CRS (41) and even judicial police to entertain the fiction of a French province's pacification. The Ahmar Khaddou and Taktiout Mountains are bombarded by artillery and planes; by the hundreds, napalm barrels throw out their incendiary spurt on centennial trees. Distressing and impressive sight! From S'Raa el Hammam's fold, 50 km east of Mchouneche as the crow flies, the partisans observe the immense columns of smoke and the glimmering red glow of the flames in the purplish woods. They catch a glimpse of soldiers advancing, flanked by tracked tanks and combing the bombed region, starting from Oumache, Mchouneche, Sidi Masmoudi and T'Kout. Mostefa exults:

"Kiddies, look! An operation like this costs France plenty of money."

(41)CRS: compagnie républicaine de sécurité, i.e. police detachments used for maintaining public order.

Despite the bad weather and sealing off, a tissal manages to cross the battle field and informs Mostefa that no less than ten paratroopers, among whom two officers, have been killed in an ambush near Oued Taga.

A few days later, on January 22, 1955, the French hit again, this time north west of Biskra. More than 4,000 troops comb the region lying between Djeniène and Ain Zaatout, up to Djebel Bous.

The results of both operations are disappointing, not to say insignificant. The French aim at reasserting their presence in Aures and use a heavily-equipped obsolete army, more prone to noisy maneuvers than to strict military efficacy. As for the freedom fighters, they get out unharmed; due to their small number, they dispose of plenty of time to scatter in safe places.

Much further, north east, a paratrooper is killed in an engagement at Ichemoul. At long last informed, the groups' leaders arrive at El Hara on January 20, in the evening. Straight from the beginning of the meeting, they talk with one voice of hunger, all kinds of miseries and lack of munitions. To hear these tough mountaineers evoke with great shyness the absence of food, is an indication of the gravity of the situation.

"We fast, Si Mostefa, an endless fast."

Mostefa reminds them:

"You have sacrificed yourselves for your fatherland. There exists no more dignified sacrifice. Freedom is not a grant. It is earned through an all time fight. History shall testify!"

The magic word of freedom, *istiklal* in Arabic, enlightens their eyes. Still ill, Chihani remains silent. Mostefa goes on:

"We are alone to bear the war burden, because it is a war, is not it? You have seen Ahmar Khaddou shake and burn under the bombs. The French are in no kidding mood. Never underestimate them. They have artillery, planes, every means to wage a war. We don't have what they have, but I repeat: we have faith. With faith and arms, we shall vanquish, with God's help."

He smiles, looks teasingly at them:

"The arms, I will go and get them in the Orient."

At first, they don't comprehend, and then they cry out in protest:

"No, you can't leave us now!" "Not now." "We will get arms on the battlefield." Each one intervenes in his manner, according to his feelings, in an unusual disorder. Mostefa laughs. He explains that he has a standing rendez-vous with the External Delegation of the revolution.

Outside, beyond the open door, they observe a mischievous snow fall between trees like a capricious down. Hunger has given to cold the strength of ten, and vice versa. There is nothing to eat. They are out of food in a region where peasants already nearly starved because of the French blockade. The 15,000 old francs that made up their war treasure have gone since a long time. Ali Boucetta strongly pulls down the hood of his cachabia on his head and goes out, heading toward Sidi Ali, a nearby hamlet.

Less than an hour later, he returns, carrying a sack half filled with grey coarse semolina, smelling musty. He kneads it as it is, shapes about twenty flat cakes, bakes them, or rather burns them by putting them directly on wooden fire. Then, he cuts them up into crumbs, throws them in a large wooden bowl, *tarbut* in Tamazight, and copiously soaks them with melted salted butter mixed with plenty of mashed red peppers. With an impish look, Mostefa picks up small branches, gives one to each man and says, in a half sad and half joking tone: "Here are your forks. Remember, kids! Survivors will testify."

The meeting resumes after the meal. Chihani is exhausted by his dysentery. He keeps quiet.

Meddour Azoui takes up his leit motiv:

"Assuredly, you have no right to leave us."

Mostefa replies:

"The revolution resembles a tree. It has now taken roots."

Messaoud Benaïssa raises his hand. He throws down the gauntlet to him:

"Si Mostefa, I warn you: I won't furnish any supplies to Kimmel."

Messaoud Benaïssa has recently been appointed chief supplier: he dispatches to the regions meager food supplies collected in Arris. At present, the French exert a strict blockade around Arris, drying up the only remaining supply source. Adjoul protests. His reaction implies that now is the time for Mostefa to take on his responsibility and penalize once for all Benaïssa's insubordination. He cries:

"Do you hear, Si Mostefa?"

But Mostefa shilly-shallies. He doesn't take seriously this deep rooted hatred that poisons relations between Adjoul and Benaïssa. Now, Benaïssa eyes scornfully and openly Adjoul:

"You have weapons like all of us. Why don't you go and get your supply?"

Adjoul keeps quiet. Mostefa on the opposite seems exasperated:

"The matter is closed. At any rate, this problem is outdated since there are no more supplies available."

Kimmel, Adjoul's stronghold, is known for its extreme poverty. Without external food supply, it will choke in the short term.

Late that night, Mostefa stays aside in the Oued (42) with Adjoul and Abbas. He informs them that until his return from Orient, command interim will be assumed by Chihani. He recommends they obey his orders and help him manage things '*because he is a young man of great personal worth.*' Both men willingly back up his proposal, assured that by asking them to help Chihani, he reckons, this is true especially for Adjoul, that they have more experience than Chihani and that they will run the insurrection as his tutors and protectors.

The day after, in the afternoon, Mostefa confirms his plan: Chihani is the chief of Idara or Administration. Abbas and Adjoul are respectively first and second assistants, Mostefa Boucetta is named financial councilor, Meddour Azoui is designated general supplier and Messaoud Belagoune secretary.

(42)Oued: dry riverbed, containing water only in wet seasons.

As if doped, Chihani emerges from his lethargy. He is his old self again, dynamic and loquacious like before his illness. With Adjoul, he handpicks two groups of guerrillas, in addition to four bodyguards, to escort Mostefa down to the Tunisian frontier. Amor Mestiri is his travel companion; Adjoul and Abbas urge him to take good care of him '*for he is the soul of the revolution.*'

January 22, 1955: Mostefa journeys down to Ras Guedelane, a few kilometers from Batna, where he meets Hadj Lakhdar and Tahar Nouichi. He announces to them that he is leaving for the Orient. On his return to El Hara, he stands alone with Abbas and tells him:

“I ask you to do two things. The first deals with my brother Omar. It is imperative that he be kept out of the Organization (43). Let him stay where he is now, in Lazreg Mountains. The second, you warn Messaoud Benaissa that I won't tolerate any more his sabotaging.”

(43)Idara, Nidham, meaning Administration and Organization are both terms used to designate the insurrection directorate.

3

Mostefa's departure to Orient

January 23, 1955: After a final briefing with Chihani, Mostefa leaves El Hara and sets out in a southeastern direction. He skirts around Mount Ras Fourar, covers with his escort about sixty kilometers and stops at Kheirane where the weather is much more clement than El Hara's. Puzzled by shouts coming out of a dive, he walks inside and finds a group of gamblers. He gets very upset and yells at 'those men who spend their time gambling while their country is in the middle of a liberation war.'

"Why don't you shave your moustaches? You are not worth them!" (44) The day after, he holds an impromptu meeting with workers of road services. "A rumor goes that the French have supplied you with pills to send to sleep freedom fighters and hand them over to them tied like sheep. Is not that a shame? Let's imagine this story is true, I ask: who will have enough guts to drug fighters' food? In any case, they will eat only after you; never before. That's the very strict instruction I gave them."

Mostefa is well conscious that at this stage of the fight, there exist no affective ties between the Liberation army and the population. They are still foreign to each other. Sympathy will come only in weeks and months ahead.

The trek continues, in the same south eastern direction. They pass Djellal, reach Galaa at the Nememcha's gate. He meets seventy armed fighters, worn down by idleness. Surprised, he asks:

"How do you spend your time?"

Ill-at-ease, they stare at each other. He goes on:

"Here, you are not of much utility."

He divides them in half groups of six men and posts them in the sectors of Liana, Ain Beïda and Souk Ahras, following a direction south-west-north-east, under the command of respectively Abdelwahab Othmani, Ghazali Benabbes and Tijani.

He proclaims: "The Liberation army must be present everywhere, even in small numbers."

He is introduced to a Kabyle who has just defected from the French army. He talks with him for a moment.

(44)Moustaches are a precious attribute for Mediterraneans and Arabs. They represent virility and all that comes with it: sense of honor, sexual drive, courage, etc.

Mostefa has always had a leaning toward deserters, a proof in his eyes that the revolutionary message is starting to cut into the colonial sheath. He gives him a letter for Youcef Zighoud who is stationed in the northern region of Constantine. He enjoins him:
 “You will return here to Galaa and wait for me with Zighoud’s answer.”

To a tissal, he gives the list of militants of Touggourt. He tells him:

“Give this list to the sector’s chief of Touggourt. If you are caught, eat it.”

He gets in touch with a number of militants, brings many matters up for discussion, listens a lot, stays up until late at night and in the dawn of January 25, he finishes writing a long letter for Chihani who receives it two days later, on January 27.

On the morning of January 25, he takes leave of his escort, fixes them rendez-vous in two months and resumes his journey toward Tunisia.

First week of February 1955: Mostefa and Amor Mestiri have a new young companion. He comes from the town of Negrine and is supposed to know the frontier lay out.

The three men walk at a good pace in the direction of Ferkane, struggle passing through a semi desert zone, occupied by nomads who rarely welcome them. The procedure is nearly always the same: when they spot a tent, they take care to stop at some distance from it. The young man of Negrine approaches it and shouts from far:

“Ho, you the people inside the tent! Peace on you!”

The very first try, a man walks out to meet them:

“And on you, peace. What good (45) brought you?”

“Only the good, brother. We are travelers and we are tired. Could you offer us hospitality under a part of your tent? We would like to prepare a pot of coffee and rest for awhile after a tiring trek.”

The man stares at them a long time while they fix on his patched tent whose flabby torn cheeks hang down sadly on the ground. He replies:

“No. Go your way.”

They obey and resume their painful trekking on a stony desolated ground, sometimes enlightened by an evanescent mirage.

Several kilometers further, they encounter a herd of camels and sheep trotting alone back from a chott (46).

(45)A manner for Moslems to attribute a priori good intentions to a visitor: Only good, non evil intention has permitted him to arrive where he is.

(46)Chott: dry salt lake of the Sahara.

On their left, they see a tent. The young guide comes near it, shouts to announce his presence. A man suddenly rushes out, looking very angry. He yells:

“What right do you have to approach so near?”

He advances toward the youth, who steps back. His companions tell the raging man:

“Calm down. First, we are far from your tent, second, we have cried out to announce our arrival. Our intentions are good.”

The man doesn't seem to listen. Still aggressive, he continues to advance in Mostefa's direction. Mostefa flies off the handle on his turn. “You! I advise you to stop where you are!”

The man stops. He looks uncertain. In a softer voice, he explains that he is mourning a parent deceased this morning and that he fears evil people. Mostefa does not insist. The youth affirms they are not far from the frontier. Mostefa is not fooled: when a Southerner tells you that destination is close, you must understand that there remain plenty of kilometers before reaching it! They drag themselves over to an isolated tent out of which comes an old bearded man. He too refuses to let them in for, as he puts it, ‘safety accommodations.’

“*They* patrol all time. You could well be captured. Go rather down in the oued.”

They do as he says, hide under a bush and make coffee. The old man joins them and addresses Mostefa:

“Sonny, you are unwise to travel like you do.”

Mostefa doesn't reply. Old men like this one, he has met lots of them before the insurrection when, under cover of solidarity committees for the construction or renovation of mosques, he has journeyed to and fro across Aures Mountains. More than once, sitting with his back against a wall, he has tirelessly listened to their talks about the past. The old man repeats:

“What you do is dangerous. You might get caught.”

Mostefa explains:

“Our work is demanding. It requires sacrifices.”

By day break, the three men finally reach the Tunisian border. At Djebel Mandra, Mostefa is too tired. He has to hire a mule, and with his companions, reach Redyeff that same day on the afternoon. A Nemouchi, who lives in Tunisia and militates for the Organization, accommodates them for three days. (47) Other militants, when they hear of Mostefa's presence, flock to say hello and get first-hand news of the insurrection. Five armed men propose their services; he orders them to attack Bir el Ater, 50 kilometers north and to wait for him at Djebel Onk on the end of February 1955.

Mostefa and his escort abandon their Italian Stattis in their host's home, change clothes and ride to Gafsa, by bus and train. (48) They reside there for three days. On the fourth, Amor Mestiri gets lost in Gafsa: he is not familiar with the city and is unable to return to their stopping off place. His companions, not seeing him, don't wait and take a coach to Gabes, on the coast, where they are spotted. After multiple events, Mostefa kills a French auxiliary with his pistol, flees with his companion toward Ben Gardane, 30 kilometers before the Libyan frontier.

(47)Traditionally, hospitality in a Moslem family lasts three days, free of charge.

(48)Mostefa keeps a small hand gun in his bag.

He takes the wrong road though and returns to Tunisia, thinking erroneously he has crossed to safety in Libya. Enemy meharists follow his foot prints on the sand, catch him, handcuff him and punch his face. Blood runs from his nose. (49)

Meanwhile, Mestiri frets in Gafsa for 25 days, in a vain wait for a signal from Mostefa. Until at last, a Tunisian informs him: Mostefa has been captured. He at once trips back to Redyeff where he spends the night, then, with a guide, crosses the frontier back to Algeria at Djebel Onk. They both carry on their shoulder sacks full of medicines collected by militants for the Liberation army. They pass Djeurf, head west toward Guentis. Civilians inform them of the presence of Lezhar Cheriet, Saï and Bouguerra, all three ex-freedom fighters of the Tunisian Resistance against France. Mestiri follows them until he reaches Megaceba before daybreak. He rests in that place a whole day, seeing people. In the evening, under the crude light of a full moon, he meets the three chieftains and their squads. He recognizes only Lezhar Cheriet. The two others he does not know but, since he is Mostefa's companion, they manifest a certain respect for him and suspicion wanes. Prior to all that, Mestiri has talked at length with local civilians. They have told him the three chieftains' misconduct toward the population. He doesn't comment. He contents himself with splitting the groups into four platoons he appoints temporarily in their present sectors pending the final decision of Idara. He fixes them a rendez-vous on March 1955, at Megaceba and, before leaving, draws up an exhaustive inventory of their arms. (50) Four partisans escort him to Galaa.

El Hara HQ, end of January, 1955: Bachir Chihani has just received the report sent by Mostefa prior to his leaving Algeria. He reads it before Abbas Laghrour, Adjel Adjoul, Omar Ben Boulaid (Mostefa's brother), Messaoud Belaggoune, Ali Benchaiba, Mostefa Boucetta and Bicha Djoudi. Mostefa writes that the situation in Nememcha till the Tunisian frontier is confused and not up to much. "Algerians, who have taken part in the Tunisian freedom fight against France, have returned home after their demobilization. They terrorize the population. Each one of them claims without right a commander's grade of the Liberation army and imposes at will a tax on people, going as far as to slit the throats of those who don't pay. There exists a real danger of tarnishing the Liberation army's image and of people setting their faces against us. It is hence of utmost importance that you go on the spot and sort out the whole matter." Abbas proposes:
 "I am ready to take up a position in the region of Tebessa and exterminate all these traitors to the last man."

(49) Detained at the Kasbah's Prison of Constantine, Mostefa Ben Boulaid is chained up like a convict. He goes on a hunger strike for 17 days, asking to be treated as a political prisoner. He wins his cause. He is unchained and transferred to another prison.

(50) When Mestiri told me how he got lost in Gafsa, I was stunned. And then, I was not any more when he informed me he did not know the address or the name of their host. Mestiri had gone out for a stroll in the city and could not return because he picked out no markers.

Chihani replies:

“It is out of question that you alone expose your life to danger!”

Adjoul intervenes:

“Then, let me go with him.”

El Hara HQ, February 3, 1955: Chihani has thought things over. He summons the groups' leaders to HQ, informs them of his decision to go to Nememcha with HQ commanders. Interim will be assumed by both Meddour Azoui and Mostefa Boucetta.

4

Chihani in Nememcha.

February 13, 1955: escorted by thirty guerrillas, Chihani and his assistants set out in the direction of the south east and Ras Fourar. After crossing Oued el Arab, they enter Nememcha through Ali Nas. Against their will, they fall in an engagement between guerrillas and French troops. They stop at Taousint, south east of Taberdga. Abbas Laghrour orders the platoon's dispersal, installs look outs and hides with Chihani and Adjoul inside a stone refuge. There, he immediately starts upon digging holes on the walls, soon followed by Adjoul, while Chihani observes them with a somewhat confused eye.

When they finish, both men crouch down before the loopholes and insert in them their rifles' barrels. Through the crevices, they see French soldiers at about fifty meters, pacing and hailing each other. Chihani whispers:

"Let's hope our men won't shoot."

Abbas and Adjoul exchange a glance full of innuendos. The French speed on, don't notice the refuge on their left. At midday, they disappear altogether from their field of vision.

At 13 hours, the three men attempt a sortie. Lookouts are still in their posts. One of them makes a reassuring gesture. Chihani and his companions race toward the oued, where a tissal informs them that guerrillas have captured eight French soldiers, among them four non commissioned officers. He adds:

"Their comrades have launched an operation to retrieve them, but we have put them in a good hideout."

Chihani asks:

"Where are they?"

"I will take you to them."

He steers them over to a crumbly gully where wounded prisoners are being taken care of by a male nurse. As soon as the latter sees Chihani, he cries out: "Attention!" and he stands upright. After a moment of hesitation, other guerrillas follow on and adopt a stiff faultless position. Chihani answers with a vague hand salute. The nurse turns to the prisoners and announces: "This is the Head Quarters' Staff of the Liberation army!"

Chihani comes closer, inquires after the prisoners' health in their mother tongue. They respond they are fine and decently taken care of. Chihani nods his head:

"Good. We will get you civilian clothing and sandals." (51)

(51)The French prisoners will be released safe and sound by the Liberation army on May 22, 1955.

Two days later, Chihani progresses toward Djebel Galaa when he hears the news: Mostefa has been captured. It is a severe blow for the revolution, but for Chihani, it represents a new challenge. He says:

“We have to work more.”

February 20: Chihani decides to transfer HQ from El Hara to Galaa, not easily accessible. HQ places for him are not perpetual since he has made it a rule not to linger in the same spot. Guerrilla is movement. The reasons of his choice of Galaa are numerous: proximity of Tunisia, population of Nememcha traditionally hostile to France, relative economic wealth of Tebessa, especially when compared to the endemic miseries of Kimmel and at last, the challenges posed by Nemouchi (52) leaders who balk at recognizing Idara’s authority. This choice of Galaa will be later considered as treason by Aures fighters.

During twenty days, Chihani gets down to organize the eastern region. He summons at Galaa Lezhar Cheriet, Bouguerra and Saï, plus other bogus-officers of Tebessa and Khenchela. He demands explanations. Then, sanctions fall, irrevocable: death for mischief-makers, guilty of rape, murder and looting, transfers to other sectors of the less guilty, nomination to HQ of some lucky few. Abbas and Adjoul give Chihani a hearty approval. Adjoul keeps on repeating:

“Whoever kills will be killed!”

Sometime after, however, he acts as a guarantor for Cheriet and saves his life. Chihani asks the chiefs of Nememcha to read the revolutionary code printed at El Hara HQ which states that murder, rape, illicit sexual intercourse, disobedience to orders or their modification, loss of arm, informing, looting and squandering of friendly goods are all punishable by death.

These rules well accepted by Aures guerrillas are outright rejected by Nemouchi warriors who often think that the law lies at the end of their rifle.

Here is what Adjoul says about Chihani:

“Chihani is a man who has neither friend, nor enemy. He feels neither love, nor hatred. For him, the end justifies the means because only matters revolutionary efficacy.”

He has told me this in the 1970 winter. We were inside his seedy looking father’s home in Bouakal, a Batna’s district, with its untiled floor and reddish color. I recall my surprise at his speech. I fixed his eyes: unfathomable, abyssal. An AFRAS (53) cigarette butt was slowly dying away between the nicotine yellowed stumps of his hand. In those days, he let it be understood that Chihani had been executed because of sexual deviation. But since the time to talk about it has not come yet, he had not elaborated.

(52)Nemouchi: from or of Nememcha.

(53)AFRAS: an Algerian cigarette brand, named Afro Asian. In the seventies, Algeria believed in Third World and its fight against Imperialism.

On the beginning of March 1955, Chihani then has managed to set up and impose new structures to the volatile Nememcha region. He makes up guerrillas' groups and appoints them to well limited sectors, under the command of Mestiri, Bedjaoui, Tijani and Sidi Henni. He has noted, by the servile look of civilians, that the population is terror stricken. He has seen fear in their eyes. He decides therefore to meet civilian militants of Tebessa, Cheria, Bekkaria, Elma Labied and Kouif, telling them:

“Come to us! Help us! You are the cover and protection of the revolution. We are your brothers and we have the same mother. Increase the number of support cells and help the Liberation army which indeed is your army.”

He begs them to collect funds, supplies of any kind and intelligence. His message gets through. Within a few weeks, are delivered many quintals of semolina, coffee and sugar. In addition to cooking oil, canned milk and sardines, in short, all kinds of food goods he hurries to send to famished Kimmel. Money too starts getting in. Chihani beams. His operation is a success. He emerges as the unique chief thanks to light strokes. His ascendancy over Adjoul and Abbas ensures him a large maneuvering power. Moreover, since he is not a native of Aures Nememcha, he remains impervious to inter tribal rivalries.

One must remember that it was not Chihani's choice to militate in Aures. Like other militants, he obeys Party orders. When the French secret police, known as Renseignements généraux, RG, much feared by Algerians, looks for him in Constantine, the party dispatches him to Batna where he lives underground and leads the local MTLD दौरa. The दौरa of Batna comprises four kisma. Chihani meets their chiefs once a month: Abbas Laghrour, Mohamed Khantra, Tahar Nouichi and finally, Adjel Adjoul, respectively chiefs of the kismas of Khenchela, Barika, Foum Toub and Arris, the largest. A fifth kisma, of Batna itself, spreads from Fesdis to Ain Touta and is under Chihani's control. Chihani has totally integrated the specific characteristics of Aures, going along with the Chaouia, people who are at the same time, frugal and proud, brave and touchy. One never knows what is in their hearts and their touchiness gives them a mental fragility which they often translate into destructive deeds. Chihani has learned how to cope with them, helped by Mostefa Ben Boulaid. Now, after the latter's capture, he has to play it tight. At first, his cohabitation with locals runs smooth, then, afraid of his loneliness and later carried away by a strong will of power, he makes several tactical mistakes and loses the support of the Touaba, dominant clan in Aures.

Chihani continues his popular indoctrination. He enjoins militants first to encourage average citizens to throw off their wait and see posture, second to condition them through a ceaseless propaganda to burn all family record books and identity documents issued by the French administration. People are advised not to use the judicial system in force, but rather the revolutionary assemblies where registers of births, marriages and deaths are open.

Parallel to civilians' structuring, he creates a special network endowed with the task of dispatching arms sent from Tunisia by Salah Ben Youcef. To facilitate arms distribution, he

sets up a new region in Alinas, limited south by Ras Tadjemout and north by Djebel Draa Bekkar, under the command of Abdelwahab Othmani.

End of March, 1955: Chihani returns to Kimmel, precisely to Louestia, a hamlet situated between Djeniene and T'Kout. He summons there all platoons and groups' leaders: Tahar Nouichi, Hocine Berrehail, Messaoud Benaissa, Omar Ben Boulaid, Abdelwahab Othmani, Meddour Azoui, Mostefa Boucetta, Messaoud Belaggoune, Ali Baazi, Mohamed Ben Messaoud and Sidi Henni. Assisted by Adjoul and Abbas, he presides over the meeting. To write down the draft of the meeting, the secretariat is assured by Hocine Maarfi and Salah Hannachi. On the agenda are the following items: account on Nememcha reshuffling, extension of guerrilla West to Setif, posting of overseers in the region of Barika.

In the refuge, reigns a Siberian cold. Akin to troglodytes, guerrillas huddle up against each other. Their frost hardened uniforms are by now too large for them. They listen in a religious silence, seated on a hard packed ground or standing, leaning for those behind on naked stony walls.

5

Extension of the guerrilla

“The revolution has gained a big scale. The region of Constantine which covers eastern Algeria and the southern territories requires now a new military and political organization.” Chihani’s words bring no reaction from his audience. He changes the key:

“We all know that the revolution started in three places: Arris, Ain El Ksar and Nememcha, despite a strong Messalist presence. Four months later, what do we see? A propagation of the war from these three centers has gone west up to Setif and east till the Tunisian frontier. The battle field has enlarged a lot and guerrillas’ groups can’t control it. We can envisage two solutions: either, we increase the number of fighters, which as of now can’t be carried out because of lack of weaponry, either we condense the sectors so as to render them more manageable.”

He stops for awhile, and then continues:

“The 1955 spring has just begun. There are roughly half a thousand partisans in Aures Nememcha. Distances covered each night by the groups often exceed sixty kilometers. To make trekking easier, we have decided to increase the number of resting places between sectors. For example, we have set up a buffer zone in Alinas to alleviate the burden on Arris and at the same time, fill up a gap between Aures and Nememcha. In short, Alinas will represent the umbilical cord that will feed directly Kimmel and southern Aures.”

That same evening, they dine in the light of kerosene and carbide lamps. For in Kimmel, the Liberation army is not a charge on the population any more. Supplies that arrive from Tebessa are indeed a real manna which benefits to guerrillas and to civilians blockaded by the French. Adjoul, eyes wide open, has personally supervised the dinner’s sequence. The groups are served in turns. Each time, six of them sit around a *gassaa* (54) full of *dechicha* (55) soaked with a burning hot *merga*. (56)

As soon as they finish, other fighters take their place. With Adjoul, the service is rapid and well done, in keeping with ambient Chaoui austerity. The meal is the same for all. After dinner, Messaoud Belaggoune informs Chihani about a death sentence required by the revolutionary court against a rapist guerrilla. Old Belaggoune has been designated honorary member of the newly appointed military tribunal. Chihani seems eager to know more about the case and court proceedings. Belaggoune explains:

“Everything is written down in the file. The guerrilla has left his post at Ahmar Khaddou without permission. He has attacked a lonely widow at Mchouneche and raped her daughter. He will be rewarded with a bullet in his head.” (57)

(54)Gassaa: large dish made of wood or earth.

(55)Dechicha: roughly ground wheat.

(56)Merga: sauce.

(57)In Aures, the revolution has granted women utmost respect. Rape is punished by death. In ANL, asceticism is the rule.

Chihani comments:

“The court should give something to the widow, call it a compensation or an allowance as you wish. As for the rapist, inform his family of his death, without mentioning any reasons or giving details.”

The first revolutionary tribunal comprises three men: two ex-teachers and, on an honorary basis, Messaoud Belaggoune. Sentences are passed in accordance with revolutionary principles. The judges receive reports written by military chiefs, after thorough investigation by a special squad, read them to the defendant and try in honesty. If the defendant is sentenced to death, he is not informed. He is shot in the head and buried immediately after. There exists no appeal against the judgment. Most of the cases judged deal with treason and collaboration with enemy. For example, a goumier is captured, tried and sentenced to death for collusion with enemy. Another time, two goumiers are caught and get a death sentence. They ask for the court clemency. The judges refer their case to the commander Mostefa Ben Boulaid. He forgives. Adjoul has narrated me another case. Two civilians from the hamlet of Oumache are arrested by Hocine Berrehail at Tifelfel. Without any investigation or proof, he accuses them of treason. He informs Mostefa and Chihani who up to now have deemed him trustworthy. The two men go on trial, are sentenced to death. While waiting for their execution, Bicha is ordered to keep watch over them. They tell him their story. A puzzled Bicha hurries to inform Adjoul who inquires into Berrehail's accusations and finds they are phoney. He does not hesitate a second and frees the two men. To spare them a sure death, he advises them to enlist as ...goumiers in the French army! On April 1955, a collaborator is captured at Ziris. He confesses his crime and voices regrets. He is sentenced to death. Adjoul pardons him, making him a most useful NFL militant. Old Messaoud Belaggoune answers my question: “Of course, as judges, we were totally unaware of judicial procedure. The judges were just teachers in their civilian life. Nonetheless, we used to confer, weigh pros and cons. For us, the revolutionary ethic was of paramount importance. Justice was dispensed on the victim's name and we could summon any witness we needed. No! Idara usually did not meddle in our work; when, rarely, there was meddling, we did not comply all the times. Sometimes, our judgments were considered too lenient. Almost always, our death sentences were backed up by HQ, especially when they concerned traitors who were seen as a danger for the revolution.

On next morning, after the resumption of the meeting, Chihani declares:

“Aures is encircled. It is necessary to open up a breathing space and for that, extend our action out in the direction of Setif. This will be achieved by Si Tahar, Si Abdelhafid and Si Mostefa Reaïli.”(58)

He fixes his eyes on Tahar Nouichi, leader of the nahia (region) of Batna (59), Abdelhafid Toreche and Mostefa Reaïli, nephew of Mostefa Ben Boulaid.

(58)Si: it is a title of respect.

(59)In fact, Nouichi is only a nominal leader since Hadj Lakhdar has always been considered as the real chief. After Grine's group extermination by the French, there remain in the region of Batna only around sixty fighters.

“A first group will depart from Seriana Mountains toward Setif, a second group will advance from Bouarif Mountain in the direction of Ain Milila and up to Khroub if possible to loosen the noose round Aures. This group, sent to strengthen guerrillas in Conde Smendou in the northern part of Constantine, is made of 40 fighters, led by Djeraoui. In addition to their own arms, they carry 24 machine guns and 2 automatic collective weapons which they will deliver to local unarmed guerrillas. A third group will go from Metlili Mountains and head for Barika, Magra, and Djebel Boutaleb to link up with Kabylia. Junction with other regions of Algeria is vital. Otherwise, Aures will suffocate to death.”

Up to that date, Aures is totally blockaded. The French confiscate everything: semolina, sugar, coffee, milk, medicines and money. What they don't take, they destroy. The few mountaineers who are lucky enough to have parents in Arris or Batna, have already left their homes and gone down to live in those towns. The others either refuse point blank to abandon their homes and herds, incurring hence the worst punishments from the French, either decide outright to join the Liberation army and share with it a chronic food shortage, becoming more and more acute. On the third day of the meeting, Chihani endeavors to set up liaisons. He asks both Adjoul and Abbas to reconnoiter the main and replacement routes used by tissals 7. The afternoon, he ends the gathering with a speech the first words of which are: “The people are watching us. Let us let them take us as a model of sacrifice.”

In 1970, in the heat of a sticky Batna's summer, we are sitting, old Belaggoune and I, in Ali Benchaiba's gas station. He has just finished unfolding a sequence of the revolution and, from under his turban, he removes a white serge skullcap and shakes it vigorously before his face. He proclaims: “To each man corresponds an animal. There exists a tiger man, a fox man. Chihani is a lion man. God has created him in a lion's image.”

Chihani's audience is under his spell:

“The armed struggle is our response to colonialism. The only language it understands. If someone asks you: ‘Why the bush? Why this suffering?’ What do you answer? ‘For our beloved country, for its freedom and the end of colonial oppression.’ And you will be right! If the same person asks you one more time: ‘What profit do you expect for yourself?’ What do you answer? ‘None. I expect nothing for me, but all the good for my country.’ And once more, you will be right!”

Chihani is a master in using dialectic. As an accomplished speaker, he takes advantage of the euphoria induced by his speech and proclaims that from now on, the new commander in chief will be Si Omar Ben Boulaid, brother of Si Mostefa. After a moment of stupor, bursts out an indescribable hullabaloo. (60)

(60)One can only speculate about the reasons that pushed Chihani to place Omar Ben Boulaid at the head of Idara despite Mostefa's ban. Chihani has constantly lived under Mostefa's protection. In his absence, he probably feels less secure in a rude environment where he has no friends and where his authority is being questioned by Adjoul. Aware of that, he tries to put himself under another Ben Boulaid's wing, Omar, a man with no caliber or charisma. He fails.

Two clans form immediately: on one side, Ammar Maache, Messaoud Benaissa, Tahar Nouichi, Meddour Azoui and, of course, Omar Ben Boulaid back up the proposal with shrill cries of approval; on the other side, a majority of against, among whom tenors of the insurrection, like Abbas Laghrour, Adjel Adjoul, Ali Baazi, Messaoud Belaggoune, Ali Benchaiba, Mohamed Ben Messaoud, Abdelwahab Othmani, Mostefa Boucetta and Sidi Henni.

On the right, an affirmation: "Responsibility is not hereditary. One has to deserve it." On the left, a question tinged with threats: "Let anyone who reproaches Si Mostefa's brother with anything stand up and speak openly!" And so on, from one repartee to another, until Chihani restores orders with the help of Abbas and Adjoul. But for all that, excitement does not fade. Chihani declares:

"I have not the least intention of imposing somebody. We will proceed otherwise. Who would go for elections?"

Turmoil resumes. Wild with anger, Belaggoune gets up:

"We can't hold elections in war time."

He leaves the room. Abbas get up too, says:

"I am against holding elections."

He embarks upon going out, Adjoul stands in his way, declares:

"Our standpoint must not be misunderstood. We have no ill-feeling for Si Omar. It is just that we are against the principle of holding elections."

Old Belaggoune would have said of Adjoul that he is a fox man, who always falls on his feet and adopts a low profile while preparing the fatal kick out.

Chihani is neither taken in, nor fooled by Adjoul. He commands him to bring back to the refuge Belaggoune and Boucetta. Adjoul goes out, returns some time later, alone:

"Both refuse to come back. As for me, I ask to be released from all responsibilities."

Chihani replies dryly:

"You have no right to ask for anything. You just stay where you are!"

Adjoul nods his approval, because, as he tells me: "I don't want to disobey orders of the Nidham."

When I ask him to explicit, he answers: "I am an old militant. I have been raised to comply with Party's orders. For me, discipline is way above personal pride."

Meanwhile, the never ending discussions go on for hours. Chihani has made his first tactical error. He wavers between opposite impassioned views until old Messaoud Belaggoune returns with an unexpected compromise. "I propose that Si Omar be appointed Idara's commander on an honorary basis." A trick to which all subscribe with relief. Omar and his allies understand the charge *with* the honors, Adjoul and Belaggoune confine themselves in petto to the title, without real function, in short, a chief in partibus. They vote. Omar is elected. The groups' leaders, a little confused, suspect, just beneath the surface that real power still lies in Chihani's hands.

End of March, 1955: Five months have already passed by since the beginning of the insurrection. A long time for people who walk on glowing embers. Command has been reshuffled as follows: Omar Ben Boulaid is commander in chief of Aures Nememcha. Bachir Chihani is his first assistant. Abbas Laghrour and Adjel Adjoul are respectively his military and political advisers. To sooth Messaoud Benaïssa's feelings, and at the same time, evacuate his conflict with Adjoul, Chihani appoints him quartermaster assisted by Meddour Azoui. Old Belaggoune is promoted general secretary of Idara. Chihani does not stop there; he carries out a new task setting: Benchaïba, in addition to supervising his sector of Arris, is named chief of liaison and intelligence, Boucetta is forwarded as chief of the sector of Biskra, Sahara included. Mostefa Reaïli becomes chief of the new sector of Setif, Abdelhafid Toreche chief of Barika, Mohamed Cherif Benakcha of Ain Touta, Ali Baazi of Mchouneche, Tahar Nouichi of Bouarif, Hadj Lakhdar of Batna and, at last, Ammar Maache chief of Chelia.

The meeting of Louestia will have lasted three days. It ends on the first week of April 1955. Chihani has printed on it his flamboyant style. For the first time, two secretaries write down the proceedings because Chihani is a convinced adept of the written thing. He takes no rest until the fundamental code of the revolution is written down on a note book. For him, written texts endow the freedom fight with remanence and stability, while simultaneously being a reference and a control tool.

As usual, at the end of the meeting, he assembles all fighters and harangues them lengthily. After, he dismisses them, keeping only his direct aides and announcing to them an unforeseen proclamation: "I have the duty to finish organizing the regions of Tebessa and Khenchela, as required of me by Si Mostefa Ben Boulaid. That is why, for reasons of efficacy and convenience, I have decided to move part of HQ to Galaa."

Meddour Azoui, who is sitting near Omar, raises his hand:

"Si Messaoud, may I ask you a question. What is the true reason of HQ transfer?"

Chihani answers with another question:

"How do *you* interpret my decision?"

"Only God and you know what is going on." Chihani smiles.

"You all were present when I read Si Mostefa's letter. He has strongly insisted on restoring the revolutionary rule in Nememcha. If I move HQ to Galaa, it is to fight better the anarchy that prevails there; besides, our job is just beginning: we need time to achieve an in-depth organization of the sectors of Kouif, Ouenza and Negrine, all strategic crossing points for the arms sent from the east."

From Egypt or Libya, has arrived a rubber hexagonal seal with the following inscriptions: Front of National Liberation and, underneath, Army of National Liberation. In the middle, are drawn a star and a crescent. Old Belaggoune criticizes: "On this seal, the FNL is placed above the ANL." Chihani rectifies: "There has been a misunderstanding. The FNL is under the ANL's authority. No questioning about that!" (61)

(61) In 2013, 58 years after, Chihani's assertion is still valid.

He answers another question: guerrillas can't get in touch with civilians, except when on mission or family visit. Abbas Laghrour, on his own initiative or executing Mostefa's recommendations before his departure to Orient, tells Omar:

"Why go to Galaa if you don't have to? I suggest you stay here at El Hara."

Omar's reaction is violent:

"Out of question! Wherever the command goes, I go!"

Messaoud Belagoune advises Abbas to take Omar with him. Later, Chihani, put in the picture about the incident, invites Omar to accompany him to Galaa. "The others stay at El Hara; there are a lot of things to be done here."

He orders Adjoul to requisition mules to carry to Galaa archives and type writers. He commands him also to mark out with Abbas the new itineraries between Kimmel and Galaa.

How does the situation look on this beginning of April 1955? Messaoud Belagoune, Messaoud Benaissa and Meddour Azoui are on duty at El Hara HQ. Omar Ben Boulaid, Chihani, Abbas Laghrour and Adjel Adjoul are on call at new Galaa HQ, in Nememcha, on the far eastern side of Oued El Arab. The first days, things seem to run smoothly. Adjoul in person plays liaison officer between El Hara and Galaa, faithfully passing on Chihani's orders to El Hara and Belagoune's replies to Galaa.

Messaoud Belagoune tells me some fifteen years later:

"Matters roll on without incident in both HQ. All work to the best of their capacities. But we had not reckoned on Messaoud Benaissa's mistrust. I felt he did not like his new job. He told me having been trapped by Chihani. He just would not bear the sight of Adjoul comfortably settled in Galaa HQ with other high commanders. One morning, he disappeared."

When he sneaks away from El Hara, Benaissa joins Ammar Maache in Chelia Mountains. Soon after, his assistant Meddour Azoui follows him.

Adjoul informs Chihani and advises him to take sanctions. "All what I foresaw about Benaissa has come true. His act of insubordination must be punished now. The credibility of the revolution is at stake." Abbas Laghrour, who himself holds a grudge against Ammar Maache since the foiled rendez-vous of November 1st, 1954, insists on his scolding as well. Chihani does not react. All his time is devoted to organizing the new Galaa HQ and getting acquainted with the people of Tebessa. It looks as if he has lost all interest in Aures.

In 1969, I accompanied Adjoul to Sidi Ali, a hamlet of about ten families east of Arris. We walked through dirty alleys, cluttered with timorous and cackling hens. We paused by a brand new dispensary. I saw a male nurse raise his arms in the air and cry out at a compact crowd of coughing and trembling patients: "There are no more medicines. Go home!" I asked him. He explained that once a month a Bulgarian doctor comes and examines patients through an interpreter. People get free low standard medical care, to no avail. Adjoul smiles: "Nothing

has changed here. Sidi Ali continues to be the hidden side of the moon.” We enter his cousin’s home and sit on alfa mats posed on plain earth. No ceiling: above our heads, red tiles. Our voices resonate in the empty cold room. A boy enters carrying a wooden tray loaded with a dish of honey and thin galettes. Adjoul says that Sidi Ali has a dam, useless since there is no water shortage. What the village needs is a road to open it on outer world. Officials in Arris have decided for a dam.

In mid afternoon, we drive back on a dirt road to Batna. We speed between trees standing on each side of the road, muting noises. I ask Adjoul: “What did you do in Lambese Central Penitentiary? Five years locked up, that is ages!” 8 elaborate on Adjoul’s detention in Lambese.

“I returned to the holy Book. I read and memorized it again and again. Now, with age, I have forgotten most sourates. I also talked with fellow prisoners, opposed to the government, at least those who were able to discuss.”

The Beni Melloul dwarf forest spreads around, thick and impenetrable. I say:

“We are approaching Medina.”

“Yes. I already see the garden of Si Benchaiba.”

We pass a rustic mosque and its bright color streaked tower, topped by a star and a crescent. We enter Medina through a deep slope and come across another mosque, as high as the first one. Adjoul remarks:

“This mosque has been built by the people, without government’s help. It has cost 15 millions old francs.”

I note the presence of huge country houses, built on hills.

“People apparently have the means, Si Adjoul!”

“Yes. Most new houses belong to goumiers who have come back!”

We leave Medina, pass behind Arris, drive down on the national road to Batna. Before reaching Oued Taga, Adjoul has finished explaining Mary’s Mystery. “Yes, Mary was pure. God has breathed life into her and asked her to retire into hiding to avoid people’s sarcasms. She was provided with dates clusters to permit her survival until delivery.” We leave the link road that heads toward Arris. The road now is less uneven; the sun, at first spread out on boundless undulating plains, at present curls in a ball and slides slowly behind the dark mountains.

Not innocently, I start off Adjoul on Prophet Loth. He questions:

“Where is the problem?”

I admit my incomprehension of the sourate. He stops me:

“Wait! Let me try and remember it.”

He closes his eyes, recites rapidly in a low voice and lifts up his right hand:

“Here we are! After In the Name of the Clement and Merciful, *‘Remember Loth! He told his people: “Will you indulge in this abomination that nobody in the whole world has committed before you? You approach men rather than women in order to satisfy your passions. You are a depraved people.”* God’s saying is true.”

“Si Adjoul, when did you discover Chihani’s deviation?” After a long silence, he answers:

“At Galaa, in the night of April 9, 1955. I suspected something.”

“What? Did you see anything?”

I try to control my voice. Adjoul lights a cigarette on a still burning butt.

“I saw Chihani lying side by side with a youth from Khenchela under a blanket.”

“What were they doing?”

“Nothing. They were just talking in French and joking.”

“Were there other persons present?”

“Yes. Si Abbas, Chaib Ali, Bicha, Si Omar.”

“Did they notice anything?”

“No. I was the only one to suspect something.”

April 10, 1955. Chihani tells his assistants to wait for his return to Galaa HQ, then, with a light escort, heads toward Tebessa. As soon as he disappears behind the horizon, Abbas and Adjoul on their turn, clear off, the first to Khenchela where he spends a day, the second to Alinas HQ where he sojourns a day and a night in Abdelwahab Othmani’s company.

In Galaa, remains only Omar Ben Boulaid.

6

The ambush of Djellal

April 11, 1955. After their jaunt, both Abbas and Adjoul come back to Galaa where the atmosphere is enough to bore one to death. In Chihani's absence, HQ activities are cut down to a minimum. Omar has now got a few weeks' stubble on his chin and, akin to a distrustful novice, strives hard to resemble a chief. Abbas turns around like a bear in a cage, then grabs his rifle and loads his haversack with ammunition. To Adjoul's question, he replies:

"I am going to wage war against colonialism. We are here for that, are not we?"

Adjoul would have gladly accompanied him, but, cagey and fearing Chihani's reaction, decides to inform Omar.

"Si Omar, Si Abbas and I are leaving. We should not be too long."

Most flattered in his vanity by Adjoul's words, he asks:

"Does Si Messaoud know about your plan?"

Not taken aback, Adjoul replies: "Yes."

Afternoon is well into evening when they get moving. They march north, cross Garn Labied, skirt round Bouyakadene and, around midnight, reach Henchir Ali Ben Othmane, a place located north east of Taberdga, in a sector controlled by Messaoud Ben Maache. At Henchir Ali, they are met by the local military chief, named Hadj Kerbadou, armed with a Garand. Three guerrillas accompany him: Ali Laafif, Mohamed Salah Aissaoui and another Kerbadou, his cousin. They are armed respectively with a machine gun Thompson, a US 17 rifle and an Italian Statti rifle.

Abbas explains to Hadj Kerbadou the reason of their nocturnal visit. Hadj Kerbadou advises: "Then, we better go to Djellal." Without losing a minute, they start toward Djellal. There, lives very close to a French military post, a civilian militant who in theory could give them some intelligence. Leaving his companions behind, Hadj Kerbadou sneaks near the militant's house and gives light knocks on the door. He calls the man by his name and invites him to come out. A long silence follows. Hadj insists. A woman's voice whispers:

"There is nobody here. Come back in daylight."

Hadj hears murmurs and muted sobs. He repeats:

"Tell him to come out. We just want to chat with him."

At last, the door opens up. An old moaning woman wearing a black shawl and a turban grabs his jacket. Embarrassed, he repeats: "We only want him to inform us."

The woman maintains:

"I tell you, he is not here. Besides, he won't come out!"

Then, as if changing her mind, she proposes:

"Yes, indeed, he will come out; provided you eat first a *zammitta* (62). Whoever has eaten our salt for sure won't do us any harm!"

(62)Zammitta: fast cake, prepared with roasted semolina, honey and melted salted butter.

Hadj accepts. He waits near the door till the cake is ready, hurries to eat it with the man while, behind, watchful women stare anxiously. It appears that the man does not know much. He directs Hadj to a more informed neighbor who reveals:

“Every day, a convoy of seven trucks crosses through Djellal.”

“Where do they come from?”

“Khangat Sidi Nadji. They head for Khenchela.”

After listening to Hadj Kerbadou, Abbas decides:

“We will wait for the convoy at the town way out.”

Dawn is not far. Abbas picks up a place for the ambush, puts the man armed with the Statti on top of a hill, ordering:

“You shout as soon as you see the convoy.”

Facing him, Ali Laafif is ordered to open fire only after Adjoul or Abbas’ signal. Hadj Kerbadou and Aissaoui lie down on the embankment bordering the road, Abbas and Adjoul do likewise on the opposite side.

Dawn finds them frozen to the marrow. The sun rises, lights up dewdrops around, uncovering an arid and icy landscape. Up to the middle of the morning, things go well; then, heat builds up and makes their position uncomfortable. They are thirsty; their joints have stiffened.

Still no convoy on the horizon. Adjoul crawls toward Abbas:

“I am dying of thirst and hunger.”

Abbas glares at him. It is eleven a.m. He enjoins:

“Gesture to the others to go and bring some water.”

Adjoul moves hands and arms, contorts himself in an effort to convey the message. The others either don’t see him, either don’t understand! Abbas has forbidden everyone to move or speak. Adjoul narrates, with a faint smile:

“And when Abbas gives an order, you better obey! I approached him closer, almost touching him, showed him my parched lips, begging: ‘I am dying of thirst!’ He looked away. I kept moaning till, with bad grace, he allowed me to crawl in the others’ direction and ask them to fetch water.”

Luck is not on their side. The men return empty handed, thirstier than before. Hadj Kerbadou enquires from Adjoul:

“Are we to attack any military vehicle?”

“No. Out of question! In any case, you shoot only after me.”

Adjoul regains his place near Abbas who at first ignores him, then says with utmost determination:

“We shall wait until *Dhohour* (63) if need be.”

(63)Dhohour: midday prayer.

About twenty minutes later, far away and akin to a monstrous and endless caterpillar, appears a convoy of at least seventy vehicles, protected in the front and rear by half tracks and armored cars. Already, the leading heavy tank slowly moves closer, stops for a moment on the top of the crest, lazily revolving its inquisitive head. Enemy soldiers are seen walking along its side.

Abbas is overexcited. He exults: "It is now or never!" Adjoul tries to hold him. When he understands that he is about to shoot, he literally jumps on him and stretches on his rifle, furiously whispering on his ear:

"That is not guerrilla, Si Abbas! That is suicide."

Stunned, Hadj Kerbadou observes the scene. Adjoul goes on, breathless:

"The enemy is too strong."

Abbas rolls on the ground and in a violent move, frees himself from Adjoul's grip. He roars: "You are a coward, Adjoul. You are not made for war. I swear to God that I shall never take part in an operation with you."

He is very, very angry. Meanwhile, undaunted, the convoy quietly stretches out endlessly.

Appointed once more by Adjoul with the task of bringing water and food, Laafif has to walk back to their informer in Djellal who provides him with a tin of water, a piece of homemade bread and few handfuls of dry dates. They all eat and drink, feel better and regain their positions.

Around 16:00 hours, on *Asser* (64), under a blazing sun, Laafif raises suddenly one arm and shakes it over his head. Hadj Kerbadou stands up, sees three GMC trucks racing from Djellal. He flattens against the ground. His companions do the same. Laafif, when he remarks the first truck is slowing down in the bend of the hill, opens fire. The convoy stops. Soldiers jump out of the trucks, lie flat and start shooting at random. For fifteen minutes, two heavy machine guns, one a 12/7, the other a 30, plus rifles and sub machine guns, spit several volleys of bullets. The guerrillas answer with a brief salvo, followed by cease fire.

Adjoul narrates: "I recognize tirailleurs hidden under the trucks. I inform Si Abbas that we are caught between two enemy posts, the first at Djellal, the second at Khangat Sidi Nadji. To get out of the trap, we have to use ruse. I explain what I have in mind and then begin at once to yell: 'Stop firing! Brothers of yours are facing you!' Si Abbas follows up, with his stentorian voice: 'Watch out! Don't shoot! Group 24, section 12, don't take pins out of your grenades!' The other guerrillas join in, each trying to outdo the other in shouting, in Arabic and broken French until they create confusion in enemy ranks. Luckily, thanks to a rare heavenly help, Laafif's shots had smashed the radio antenna of the head truck."

After several minutes full of hanging on and furious clamors, they see two men rush from under a truck and race like rabbits toward Djellal. Adjoul shoots, hits one of them at his left shoulder. Laafif shoots too, but misses. He runs after the second soldier under the protection of the embankment, catches him and brings him back to Abbas.

(64)Asser: afternoon prayer.

The runaway explains to Abbas: “I am a native of Tamza. I am now prisoner of the French. I am being taken to major Miquel for questioning.”

“To where were you running like mad?”

“The French sergeant has set us free with my friend to alert the post of Djellal. The radio is out of order.”

Abbas talks in aparte with Adjoul for a short time, then returns to the fugitive:

“For now, you are free. Go back to the French and tell him this: ‘More than three hundred fighters armed each with four grenades are waiting for the order to attack. He has better surrender with his men.’”

The prisoner is liberated. A wait starts that lasts many minutes. Adjoul says:

“A century long wait! We feared an enemy assault from Djellal.”

Suddenly, two other soldiers make a bolt for it from a truck and take to their heels, like two frightened partridges. Guerrillas shoot at them, hit one. Aissaoui goes for them and brings them to Abbas.

Abbas is all light and sweetness while the captives look contrite; he says: “We are your brothers. We won’t harm you. Look by yourselves.”

The soldiers don’t dare raise their eyes from the ground. Abbas continues: “We’ll let you leave. Go back to your comrades; advise them to surrender. We will guarantee your security.”

Adjoul narrates:

“And the unbelievable happened! They surrendered. In Indian file, one behind the other, twenty-seven soldiers and a French sergeant. Abbas got scary they discover the trick and kept ordering them to look down, throw their arms and hurry down to the riverbed. Before me, there soon formed a big heap of arms: 21 machine guns, a Garand, a heavy machine gun Bar (I had at first mistaken it for a caliber 30 machine gun), 2 boxes of ammunition, and a box of hand grenades. When all reached the bed of the oued, I climbed on a GMC, tried in vain to dismantle its machine gun. Frustrated, I sprayed gasoline over it and, helped by Aissaoui, I burned it.”

Adjoul puts fire on the remaining two trucks. When he comes back to the oued, one of the prisoners informs him that the first truck contained bags full of money. Adjoul hides his disappointment:

“None of your business. It is only enemy banknotes! Let them burn.”

Abbas talks to the prisoners. Adjoul listens. “Welcome in the Army of National Liberation! You are now in safety, forgiven by the same Army. We are your brothers. We are not criminals, but holy warriors.”

He turns to the French:

“You, the French, are you a democrat? Answer frankly.”

The sergeant obeys:

“Yes! I am a democrat. I respect and understand the Liberation Army. Now, I comprehend the meaning of your fight. I am sure you will win.”

With an air of triumph, Abbas addresses the other prisoners:

“Now, it is your turn, my brothers. Let those who wish to enlist in the Liberation Army raise high their hand!”

Not a single hand is raised. The soldiers all talk at the same time:

“We are simple conscripts, to be discharged soon. But we promise to come back after discharge.”

They talk of children and old parents to be cared for, of administrative documents to be straightened. Abbas’ face clouds over, as if ashamed. He asks the French:

“How many kids do you have?”

The sergeant puts up two fingers. Abbas pulls out some coins from his pocket:

“Here! Take these coins. That is not much. Just to buy them some candies.” 9

He puts the money in his trembling hand, then commands:

“The conscripts assemble near the sergeant.”

Twenty soldiers scramble for a place near the French. Eight remain alone, those enlisted in the French army. They suddenly look worried. Abbas takes a reassuring tone:

“You should not worry or get scared. You just help us carry the arms up there.” His index points toward a nearby crest. “To-morrow, we will let you go.”

Unconvinced and still upset, they decide to offer all their belongings: wristwatches, money, everything, provided they are permitted to leave with their comrades. Abbas knits his brows. Enough is enough. He calls out to the sergeant:

“You can leave. Take the conscripts along. We let you go under two conditions: first, that you won’t harass the conscripts, second, that the two wounded civilians will be taken care of and set free.”

The sergeant promises everything. He adds that he will write letters to French newspapers:

“You can rely on me! I will write them how you treat your prisoners. I will testify that you are not murderers.”

The face of Abbas glows with joy. The sergeant though is so overcome that he takes the wrong way. When Abbas realizes that, he races after him, jots down a pass and gives it to him, in case of an encounter with a guerrillas’ patrol.

Meanwhile, a taxi from Khenchela happens to pass by. The driver first slows down, then steps on the gas. Abbas fires a shot in the air. The taxi stops dead. Abbas tells the French and the two wounded civilians to climb inside, and orders the driver to take them to Djellal. To the conscripts, he says:

“You’ll have to manage on your own and return to Djellal, like grown up adults.”

It is dusk. Abbas, Adjoul, their four companions and the eight prisoners get moving toward Galaa. They make a stop at Hadj Kerbadou’s home where they eat and spend the night. The day after, civilians tell them that a great number of enemy troops have combed the place of the ambush.

At Galaa, while Abbas proceeds with the prisoners' questioning, Adjoul carries out the arms distribution.

April 13, 1955. Chihani has come back from his Tebessa round of inspection. Adjoul informs him of the Djellal ambush. Chihani questions him:

"Where are the weapons?"

"I have given some to the groups."

"You have no right to give them as you please! All arms are the property of Nidham."

Adjoul revealed to me that, in fact, Chihani wanted to equip his platoon, informally dubbed "the Sheik's platoon" whose men were exempted from all duties, even from fighting. Their unique reason of being was HQ's protection. Adjoul gives him a few machine guns with some ammunition.

The second fallout of the ambush appears after Chihani listens to Abbas' report on the prisoners' questioning. He decides after this testimony to execute major Miquel. (65)

This French officer is stationed at Ouldja, fifteen kilometers north of Khangat Sidi Nadji. Chihani appoints a special squad for his execution. A civilian militant is requested to collect the maximum of intelligence on the next movements of Miquel and his battalion. He infiltrates legionnaires, native mercenaries and tirailleurs, drinks many a beer in their company, counts up trucks, chats a lot and quibbles over trifles, then takes up to the bush to report to the special squad's leader. Miquel will travel in the third vehicle of the convoy, with the chaplain.

April 15, 1955. The trap is quickly set up. The sinuous road between Ouldja and Kheirane crosses two cliffs, climbs up steeply, forcing the vehicles to slow down. Eight men are posted with automatic weapons on the brow of the hill, four on each side. They have been warned to concentrate their fire on the third vehicle and pull back immediately after. What they do. They open fire on the rear of the second vehicle, then focus on the third. Truck drivers jam on the brakes, legionnaires and tirailleurs jump out, flatten in ditches. In the evening, the caïd dispatches a tissal to announce the deaths of Miquel and the chaplain.

(65)Based at Ouldja, Major Miquel misbehaves with the population. One day, he assembled Ouldja's people and told them: "Do you see these olives? I will press you like them and extract oil from your bodies."

7

Adjoul's tour of eastern Aures.

It is still the month of April, 1955. Precisely, the beginning of its second half. Are present at Galaa HQ: Omar Ben Boulaid, Chihani, Adjoul and Abbas. Quite unusually, no one smokes. Smoking has been forbidden by the FNL since April 12. Chihani has affirmed: "Each cigarette is a direct help to enemy's war effort."

To my question, Adjoul confirms:

"Yes, I too stopped smoking. One more abstinence to be added to all others!"

Up to a few months before his death in 1991, Adjoul smoked fifty grams of tobacco daily, despite multiple hemoptyses.

Once more, Chihani brings matters up to date. He informs HQ members that from reports received, there still exist disputes between militants. He says:

"I have prepared a charter where I specify once for all each one's role. There will be the djoundi or armed militant, the tissal or armed militant, the unarmed civilian militant, responsible for collecting the *mouna* (66) and intelligence, both on enemy and population.

The six regions possess now precise geographical limits. The stock places are defined: Lachaath (Mountain 1017) in Kimmel, Henchir Ali Ben Othmane south of Taberdga with its numerous caves and underground caches.

To explicit his instructions and to check their application on the field, and, at the same time, install new leaders or remove others, Chihani sends his assistants in inspection tours. Omar Ben Boulaid and Abbas Laghrour are to control the west side of Aures, namely: Oued Taga, Chemora, Bouarif, Kasserou, Mestaoua, Refaa, Metlili, Djebel Lazreg and Ahmar Khaddou. Adjoul is sent alone to inspect the east side of Aures, starting from Tamza, namely: T'Kout, Mchouneche, Zeribet El Oued, Kimmel, Zalatou and part of Nememcha.

That is what he narrates about his tour:

"Chihani has endowed me with all authority to solve problems on the spot, insisting however on the primacy of revolutionary boldness. Chihani is a resolute enemy of immobilism."

A precision: Adjoul is a pure Arabic speaker. He does not breathe a single French word. He told me in Arabic Chihani's recommendations, *el awlawia lee el mubadara ethawria ala ettajmeed*. (Priority of revolutionary boldness over immobilism).

Adjoul continues narrating:

"We depart in two groups. We leave Chihani alone at Galaa and reach Tamza by the north east. We split up: Omar and Abbas continue their trek toward Mount Chelia by using riverbeds, less conspicuous to enemy. As for me, I start my job in Tamza, more exactly at Ziris, a little farther South. I dispatch two tissals to the chiefs of the sectors of T'Kout and Alinas, asking them to meet me at Ziris. The chief of the sector of Ziris is to join us too.

(66)Mouna: goods, such as food, medicines, clothing, shoes, money, oil, etc...

I hardly have time to accommodate about eighty fighters, thirty from T'Kout, twenty from Alinas and thirty from Tamza. I won't mention the extreme poverty which prevailed in those days. I hear so many things! First, the chiefs: they moan about the lack of food and ammunition. Malnutrition has reached a level so high that fighters refuse to obey. All of us at Galaa, we ignored it. The morale of the djounoud (67) is at its lowest. On the other hand, the population can't afford to give any food since it is on the verge of famine. More than once, guerrillas had to cover up to 100 kilometers in search for food. How, please tell me, talk of revolutionary boldness when the stomach is empty? I strike at the root of the problem. I order the evacuation of the sector of Tamza and its fighters be transferred to Alinas, under the responsibility of both Lezhar Cheriet and Abdelwahab Othmani. I declare Tamza a demilitarized sector, dedicated only to collection and sharing out of food supplies. After that, I enlist thirty civilians and command them to visit each corner of the neighborhood, collect food and stock it. In addition, I try to speed up collection and circulation of intelligence to prevent past errors. I select a group of ten tissal (three squads of three men each and a chief).” Adjoul leaves Tamza. Before, he tells Abdelwahab Othmani to wait for his return before attacking advanced French posts, then heads west to inspect Mount Zalatou. He finds there the same problems, a famine which, habitually endemic, has worsened since the French blockade. He uses the same procedure as in Tamza: he moves fighters out of Zalatou, and asks his two assistants, Mostefa Boucetta and Messaoud Ben Hadj to transfer them in the forest of Beni Melloul. He does the same for Kimmel and moves its men also to Beni Melloul.

Two days later, he summons groups' leaders to a meeting at Sidi Ali, east of Zalatou and informs them of his plan to set up a central supplies depot in Beni Melloul: Mohamed Ben Zahaf is directed to start digging the silos; the silos location is top secret; they will be filled and emptied only at night, under the protection of a reinforced guard. Both Messaoud Kheireddine and Ammar Abdelhadi will be responsible for the stocks management.

Adjoul is ambitious. He does not hide it. “I wanted Kimmel to become a model region, first to counter Messaoud Benaissa who boasted he would choke us, second to prove to Chihani that his faith on me was deserved. Better, to achieve my goals, I took upon me to transfer Abdelwahab Othmani from Alinas to Kimmel, replacing him there with Lezhar Cheriet.(68) Then, I appointed Othmane Kaabachi manager of tissals who by now had reached the number of thirty(three groups of ten); I enjoined him also to take care of civilian refugees who were in the bush and who were for most of them guerrillas' families. We had to feed them. ”

(67)Djounoud, plural of djoundi, which means soldier.

(68)One remembers that Lezhar Cheriet has been saved from death in extremis by Adjoul during the Chihani's cleaning operation of Nememcha on March 1955.

Remains the crucial problem: where to find food supplies? Adjoul sends two men, Zahaf and Hadj Abdessalam, southward, in a region largely under Messali's control. He commissions them to sow the good word and collect money *or* food supplies. It appears to be a success: in Touggourt and Oued Souf, populations do not skimp on giving money and food. Twenty days after, the warehouses of Sidi Okba, Tadjemout and Beni Melloul are full. For the distribution, Adjoul cheats: he gives the lion's share to the groups of Kimmel.

He goes even further. He specializes the militants in charge of supplies: those appointed to gather arms and ammunition, others food, still other medicines. He writes down on registers an exhaustive inventory of all stocks: food, medicines, sewing machines and rolls of cloth. He delimits portions of land where refugees grow vegetables with the uncertain hope of improving their every day fare.

Adjoul declares with a certain pride: "Thanks to the stocks we had built up, the Beni Melloul region was able to live in autarky during many a month despite enemy blockade. Something though I found hard to put up with is a question: how can it be that a freedom fighter refuses to accomplish his duty because he has not eaten? Not to be caught unaware any more, I increase the number of tissal and their rotations. Thanks to that, Kimmel will get now a minimum of 4 liaisons each 24 hours, becoming a pole receiving and dispatching not less than four groups composed each of 10 tissal."

On another register, Adjoul endeavors to adapt the Liberation Army's structures to the positioning of the French troops, between the regions of Aures and Nememcha. He draws up the list and size of all enemy posts spreading along the banks of Oued El Arab, thus learning among other things, that enemy's strength sometimes reaches the size of a regiment, i.e. several battalions led by a colonel.

He narrates:

"For a month, I kept on adapting our groups and reorganizing obsolete structures. I appointed new groups' leaders and fought off defeatists and pessimists who longed for French peace. Idleness prevailed everywhere and authority had virtually disappeared. For me, the most appalling thing was to note that, from hunter, the Liberation Army had become a prey."

Adjoul returns to Tamza, his starting point, and takes delivery of 180 war arms sent from down south, but without ammunition. He works out a plan of campaign with two aims: first, raise up the fighters' spirits, second recover arms and ammunition. Attacks will be carried out by half groups of six men, exclusively in the form of ambushes. For the first time, he requires that enemy's thorough study be made before any attack: time of reliefs, number of soldiers, frequency and timing of water duties, armament, soldiers on leave and their leisure activities (most of the time, football). Piece by piece, intelligence converges toward Kimmel and is exploited by Adjoul and his team.

May 11, 1955: the first attack takes place at Dermoun, 20 kilometers north of Zeribet El Oued, during an enemy water duty. The ambush plan has been carefully prepared. Its execution is entrusted to a half group consisting of 5 guerrillas and a chief. At night fall, three fighters are posted in reserve, near the fountain; two are chosen for the attack itself, a sixth is perched on a hill to keep an eye on the truck's movements. Enemy's posture has been thoroughly scrutinized: soldiers descend every day at the same hour in a 4-wheel-drive truck, fill up a barrel from the fountain under the protection of a heavy machine gun, manned by a shooter and two suppliers. The attack occurs during the barrel filling. One enemy is killed, the others captured. The truck is burned. The operation has taken place less than five hundred meters from the French post. The guerrillas recover a heavy machine gun, a Garand and two pistols. The attack has lasted less than five minutes. The fighters and their captives race straight toward enemy camp, then, about one hundred meters before reaching it, branch off into the forest. A helicopter takes off, circles over the area for several minutes. Adjoul asks the six prisoners, all from Oran, if they agree to enlist in the Liberation Army. They say no and plead with him until he accepts to free them. He forbids to mistreat them but orders to undress them, take away their clothes, watches and shoes. He gives them old rags to cover their nakedness and sets them free. All this under the population's intent look.

During that same day of May 11, the guerrillas carry through to success three other attacks: ambush at Kheirane (east of Ouldja), engagement at Tadjemout (north west of Zeribet El Oued) and harassment of road workers at Khangat Sidi Nadji. Two days later, something occurs on May 13, at Liana, south west of Khangat Sidi Nadji, in the stronghold of Serahna. Zahaf, the same man who has been commissioned to Oued Souf, is informed on an advance post of goumiers at Liana. The goumiers are charged with the protection of Legionnaires positioned 100 meters farther. Adjoul dispatches there a half group, led by Layeche Batsi. The six patriots who have put on large gandouras (69) over their uniforms, rush into the advance post, find about 12 native mercenaries playing cards and drinking tea. Their arms hang on walls. In a corner, the corporal is slumped on his rifle. He takes it and shoots. Batsi's son kills him with a single shot. Guerrillas hit goumiers with rifle butts and chase them out. They take their arms and push them in the direction of the mountain. The same scenario occurs again: the prisoners refuse to enlist. They are stripped of their clothes and set free.

On the same day, patriots invest the hamlet of Ain Naga, 40 km south of Biskra and attack Guentis, east of Taberdga.

Adjoul continues narrating:

“Just by trekking along the bed of Oued El Arab, I managed to take control of the entire eastern Aures. I also by the same token got in touch with goumiers who invited me to drink coffee in their homes. I offered them money and explained to them the goals of our fight. Ten of them defected from the French Beni Melloul post and joined the Liberation Army with their weapons.”

(69)Gandoura: large wool sleeveless robe.

May 16, 1955: France extends the state of emergency to the regions of Biskra and Oued Souf. Insecurity now lies in the French camp. Adjoul goes back to Tamza. Like Chihani, he is obsessed by results. For this time, his assessments are largely positive. In one month, the new self proclaimed region of Kimmel proudly cuts a fine figure with its modern armament, its silos, grottos and bunkers full of every kind of supply and its tissal network.

Let's listen to him: "Despite all that, I felt unsatisfied. Abdelwahab Othmani was not doing enough. I ask him to budge a little more; as chief of Kimmel region, he has to be an example. I tell him about the ten goumiers who deserted to the Liberation Army, just by the power of words. And he, what did he achieve? Three days later, on May 16, I take part in three ambushes: the first at Tamza, the second at Baghla and the third at Tardjalt with Lakhdar Oucifi. These three engagements proved fruitful beyond all expectations since we recovered three heavy machine guns and forty individual war arms. Hurt to the quick, Abdelwahab Othmani goes down from Beni Melloul to Ouldja where he successfully carries out four ambushes. The first one has an undeniable psychological impact: at Ouldja, the Legionnaires' post is situated across the village; the Oued El Arab flows in between and the Legionnaires have taken the habit to swim naked in its waters, displaying their Teutonic tattoos before the local washerwomen. Three guerrillas, among whom Abdelhafid Soufi, hide in palm groves, open fire at two swimmers, grab their clothes and arms and vanish. An action used as a medium to impress female onlookers. Two nights later, 70 goumiers desert with their arms; most of them have clanic affinities with Abdelwahab Othmani who has gained their adhesion through tribal links. Still at Ouldja, Othmani carries out two more ambushes."

June 18, 1955: There is an engagement at Oued Meriel and the village of Tadjemout is temporarily invested by guerrillas.

Once more, Adjoul returns to Zalatou, West of Tamza. He enrolls and equips new recruits. Soon after his arrival, Othmani joins him and both travel down to T'Kout where they settle a 20 fighters' squad led by Mohamed Salah Chankhloufi. Adjoul commands him to harass T'Kout and its surrounding, named El Khatt. Adjoul and Othmani continue their long march through Mount Ahmar Khaddou, stop in Tadjemout where they enlist a new group of fighters on whom they bestow a heavy machine gun. Adjoul explains:

"My plan was to surround Kimmel HQ with a safety belt made of advance posts in Tamza, T'Kout, Tadjemout, Ouldja and Kheirane, along the Oued El Arab."

May 19, 1955: Chankhloufi engages enemy paratroopers and inflicts losses on them.

By the way of tissal, Adjoul sends reports to Chihani where he tells him his successes and activities. Chihani, when he gets the news, becomes well aware that the conversion of Kimmel into a region will poison even further the already tense relations between Adjoul and Benaissa. By now, the latter has not given any sign of life since his hurried departure for Chelia where he assumes the command at Ammar Maache's place.

May 22: the freedom fighters engage a French detachment at Djebel Amrane. To escape, the French use for the first time US Sikorsky helicopters which attack the guerrillas' rear guard. That same day, fighters attack the village of Kheirane and the French retaliate with aerial bombing.

May 24: guerrillas lay an ambush in Souk Laadjadj with the aim of executing the French administrator of Tebessa's commune mixte. Harvest has not started yet and the wheat not mowed. At noon, the lookout perched on a crest, excitedly stands up to signal the enemy convoy's arrival. The French shoot him down. Guerrillas, hidden in wheat ears, dash in the direction of the road, open fire on the trucks, kill four enemy sergeants, the administrator and his bodyguard. A French lieutenant makes desperate efforts to man the heavy machine gun; he is shot down. Freedom fighters lose two men and capture 34 soldiers who are directed toward Ain Allig.

It is still spring of the year 1955. Algeria now is thrust deep in a state of war with:

1. Abolition of liberty of movement of persons, goods and live stock.
2. Requisition of any person in order to carry out compulsory works such as opening up dirt roads in mountains, fixing of poles sawed by patriots, wire fencing of concentration camps, forced enlisting in self defense groups. (70)
Suppression of homes' inviolability: search, arrests were carried out day and night.
3. Internment of suspects in camps, shooting on sight, extra-judiciary executions (Summary executions).

(70)Algerians were forcibly commandeered to fight guerrillas in what the French called self defense groups.

8

Hadj Kerbadou's affair.

On the beginning of June 1955, at Kimmel's HQ, Adjoul is aching all over. His left shoulder has been injured during the assault on Tadjemout. He is nursed by Abdelwahab Othmani, a novice first-aid hand who does what he can with the little available. Without any effect since, at least as far as his shoulder is concerned, heat, pain and swelling have not ceased to increase by the hour.

Gaunt-faced, much thinner than a few months ago, ailing Adjoul is now lying on an alfa mat, facing a tissal just arrived from Galaa's HQ. He checks the seals affixed to the letter, opens it and reads it at the light of a kerosene lamp. He pulls a face. Chihani enjoins him to head at once for Galaa. He narrates: "I was wounded, arm and shoulder nearly paralyzed, with a parricide's fever to a point I could hardly move! I answered Chihani: no, I won't come! But you, you could arrange to send me the nurse with medicines. That is what I wrote and sent back to him with the same tissal. The day after, I hear that Abbas Laghrour has passed through Tamza with his group. He doesn't pay me a visit, but it is all right with me: work prevails! Some days later, comes another tissal, this time bringing a letter signed by both Abbas and Omar Ben Boulaid and asking me to join them immediately at Galaa. What could I do? Of course, I had scented something serious had occurred. Since I couldn't walk, I had my men hoist me up on a mule and I made the trip in several stages (71). Imagine my surprise when, entering Galaa's HQ a little after midnight, shivering with fever and my shoulder and arm torn with pain, Chihani offers me a shouting welcome. He literally boils with anger: "A grave event has just happened. Hadj Kerbadou has killed the chief of the sector of Taberdga!"

Quite frankly, I was not moved in a way or another. Chihani has continued:

"Do you have any idea on the crime motivation?"

I answer:

"No."

Then before Abbas and Omar, he declares:

"If you ignore why, I must inform you that this is anarchy. We are at present dealing with a grave breach of discipline. Where are we up to if every one of us takes the law into his own hands? The punishment shall be exemplary. The time of a revolution good sort is well over. We won't be messed about again!"

He forgets that he is preaching a convert. Once launched, no one can stop him. After awhile, I did not listen any more, entirely concerned with my pain, exhaustion and relentless efforts to stay awake."

(71)The journey between Kimmel and Galaa lasts roughly six days. Just to have an idea: between Ahmar Khaddou Mount and Sra El Hammam, it is a one day journey, between Ahmar Khaddou and Djebel Fourar, a two day.

At dawn, Adjoul has no awareness of why his arm and shoulder don't ache any more. Maybe the *cheche* (72) used as a sling as has advised him the nurse? Now, he stands with Abbas, facing huge rocks through which exudes a humidity he feels more than he sees. He rolls with his sole valid right hand several pancakes, dips them in a very hot and sweet coffee and swallows without chewing. Abbas' face is barely visible in the darkness. Adjoul listens to his angry voice:

"When I arrived to Galaa from Tamza, I found Chihani out of his mind. Without leaving me time to breathe, he ordered that I return to Henchir Ali and bring back Hadj Kerbadou, dead or alive."

"Why? What happened?"

"Adultery. I personally think that Hadj Kerbadou is in his right. His honor has been blackened by Messaoud Ben Maache. Although, mind you, I think he should not have killed Messaoud on his own."

Adjoul mops up the soaked sugar in the cup bottom with a piece of pancake and questions:

"So, he knew? Why did he ask me for the mobile?"

"Who? Chihani? He is so ratty he does not know what he speaks of. We have avoided a major catastrophe by a hair's breadth. Hadj Kerbadou has refused to talk to me and getting conscious of the enormity of his act, he cut all contacts with Idara and assembled his men, breaking away, perhaps with the idea of joining the enemy. Who can tell what he had in mind? I follow him to Djellal. His men don't let me cross to his refuge. To see him, I had to put on civilian clothes and go to him alone and without arms. At long last, I convince him to accompany me to Galaa. Under my protection. I have to swear on the Koran that I won't kill him and that he will be tried fairly, yes, for murder but the judgment will be a mere formality since the right is on his side, albeit he should have submit his case to HQ instead of taking the law in his hands. He trusts me and here we are, waiting for Chihani's decision."

On the way back to HQ, Abbas decides to pay a surprise visit to Omar Maafi, chief of the sector of Sebach Khenchela. He unfolds the following story to Adjoul: "A tissal leads us, Hadj Kerbadou and me, to a comfortable looking farm, protected by a more than true praetorian guard. Sentries refuse to let us in. No problem, I force the way and inside, what a sight! The chief Maafi leading a great life, amid not less than four women, with hands and feet henna dyed. I admonish him: 'Is this the way you observe the rules of jihad? The truth is that you are not different from colonialism.' In the backyard, a front-wheel drive Citroen car which he probably used for errands with local enemy's blessing."

The fake squire had carelessly infringed the revolutionary rules. Without delay, Abbas executes him with his odalisques and guard, sets fire to the farm and car, appoints Tijani as the new chief and resumes his journey toward Galaa.

Chihani can't get over it! Two blows given to the revolution, almost at the same time! He listens to Abbas in silence, asks for a written report, and, last but not least, puts Hadj Kerbadou into custody in wait of his judgment.

(72)Cheche: piece of clothing 4 to 8 meters long used to protect one's head and face from cold or heat.

I ask Adjoul: “Si Adjoul, don’t you think that Abbas should have arrested Omar Maafi and have him tried by a judge at Galaa?”

“Yes, he should have, but Abbas is perhaps the only revolutionary leader who considers the revolution as sacred. He accepts no overstepping and becomes pitiless when it comes to punish perpetrators of what he takes as sacrileges.”

June 1955, Galaa’s HQ: All chiefs summoned by Chihani to attend an evaluation meeting (another one!) are present, except Messaoud Benaissa and Meddour Azoui. *During the year 1970, I got in touch with Omar Ben Boulaid and asked him for an interview. “Si Omar, I would like you to clarify some events that happened in 1955 and 1956.” He replied with a teasing tone: “I have already written a book on the revolution, as big as this (he delimits between his hands a virtual space of at least 20 centimeters), but President Boumediene has demanded that I don’t publish it. Time has not come yet.” I did not insist. In those days, there still existed other sources of information.*

Let’s go back to the June Galaa meeting. Adjoul has just finished talking about his inspection. Everything has worked out fine. He describes Kimmel before his control and after: the differences are here, huge, expressed in loud numbers: quasi trebling of guerrillas number and modernization of armament, a box of ammunition, four heavy machine guns, several light machine guns, food supplies stocked in hidden secret silos.

Chihani remarks:

“If I understand you, Kimmel has become an American fort!”

His shoulder’s ache reviving his memory, Adjoul adds:

“I intend to open an infirmary to take care at least of emergencies. Sometimes, death is better than pain!”

Chihani goes further:

“Why not a hospital? We have just received some surgical equipment from Batna.”

9

Omar Ben Boulaid's inspection of western Aures.

As for Omar Ben Boulaid and Abbas Laghrour, their tour has taken them westward down to Khroub, 20 km north of Constantine and to Bordj Bou Arreridj west, through the Mountains of Bouarif, Kasserou, Telmat, Boutaleb, Ouled Tebbane and Maadid.

Engagements with enemy have been frequent, all along the outward trek and return, but no arms are recovered. On one occasion, they fight a platoon of Moroccan Tabors of whom Abbas says that they combat freedom fighters with no mercy in their hearts.

Omar reports that he has reorganized the structures of the revolution in western Aures:

1. Effective separation of military and civilian tasks.
2. Requalification of tissal's role, respect of hierarchy channels, i.e. cell, sector, region and El Hara's HQ.
3. Division of the city of Batna in two between Tahar Nouichi and Hadj Lakhdar. Batna provides both chiefs with sufficient supplies thanks to the many very active civilians' cells.
4. To solve the problem of arms shortage, Omar declares he has ordered all chiefs to go out at French troops and get arms from them.

There are things spoken of, there are others hushed up. Omar is aware – or not – that Abbas has written down his own report on their joint inspection, where he claims that Omar's behavior has upset more than one chief of western Aures. For example, during the meeting at Foughala near the Mountains of Ouistili, not far from Batna, a violent disagreement looms up between Omar and Abbas. Beside the trio Omar, Abbas and Hocine Berrehail, are present Ahmed Azoui, chief of the commandos' squad, Mohamed Boulekouas, his assistant, Mostefa Reaïli, chief of the sector of Setif, Abdelhafid Toreche, chief of Barika, Ahmed Nouaoura, chief of Arris, Mohamed Ben Messaoud and Ali Baazi, chiefs of Mchouneche, Hadj Lakhdar and Tahar Nouichi, chiefs of Batna, Messaoud Benaïssa and Ammar Maache, chiefs of Chelia, Meddour Azoui, cousin of Ahmed Azoui and member of the commandos.

To understand the motives of the disagreement, one must go back to April 1955. *Omar Ben Boulaid has just been elected Commander in chief of Idara. Conscious of the fact that a real chief is endowed with a command mission, and that, to achieve this mission, he needs a credible strike force, he embarks upon creating, per fas et nefas, and without other Idara's members knowledge, a special detachment of 100 guerrillas, pledged only to himself. An opportunity arises. In the forest of S'Gag, south of Lambese, a partisan named Mohamed Boulekouas is appointed by both Chihani and Abbas to assemble and lead a roving platoon of commandos. The idea is to assist other groups, in case of difficulties anywhere and anytime. As commandos go around freely, without needing passes, many guerrillas wish to join them and take advantage of their special status, thus creating problems. In the period that concerns us, Omar Ben Boulaid who wants to place his henchmen, forces Boulekouas to give up his post to Ahmed Azoui, one of his most faithful followers. Beside, since the roving platoon's number does not exceed 24, he compels Ahmed Nouaoura and Messaoud Benaïssa to enlist, discreetly, new guerrillas. The two men manage to recruit about 60 fighters, but unarmed*

because of lack of weapons. The reason why Omar, during his inspection, insists, sometimes strongly, that local chiefs provide him with arms, even through disarming other fighters. Hocine Berrehail gets indignant. He expresses his displeasure. Omar puts him immediately under arrest, with the covert intention to execute him. Abbas intervenes. Violently, as usual. Omar is mortified; he whines: "I am not surprised. You, Abbas, from the Nemouchi clan (73), have not voted in favor of my election at the head of Idara."

Abbas retorts: "Omar, don't mix up things that are totally different! Your attitude is blameful. I won't let you do what you want." Omar compromises; his authority is at stake. He accepts a conciliatory solution: the case of Hocine Berrehail will be referred to Chihani's arbitration at the end of the inspection. In the meantime, he will be disarmed and tied up during halts.

Now, at Galaa's HQ, Chihani who knows Berrehail's loyalty toward the revolution, asks Omar: "Why is Berrehail disarmed and tied?"

Abbas is first to make a remark: "He is innocent. There is nothing wrong with him."

Omar protests: "He has been disrespectful to me in the middle of a gathering."

Abbas denies: "That is untrue. Omar, you have provoked him; he had to talk. He could not keep it in his mind."

Omar justifies: "I am his superior. He owes me respect."

Finally, Chihani manages to hear the whole story. Being a well bred psychologist and aware of the devastating effect of an act or a word done or said without a perfect control, he prefers to let things pass. Berrehail remains disarmed, under arrest for three days and released on the fourth.

To quench Omar's resentment, Chihani asks a restive Adjoul to give him arms for his detachment. Adjoul replies he has none as of now. Chihani insists:

"Give him what you have. Even an old stock will do! Sort it out!"

"Sort it out? How? No guerrilla will give his weapon, especially if he has won it in a battle."

He touches his front: "Wait! I remember: Mostefa Boucetta has informed me of something."

Boucetta's information proves true: Chihani finally presents Omar with 40 rifles and some ammunition. Then, he sends him away for a second tour, this time without Abbas. He exhorts him to attack French troops often and deliver as many arms back to Galaa.

(73)Nemouchi: member of Nememcha clan. In fact, Abbas is not a Nemouchi, but an Amamra.

Chihani ignores he has made a second mistake, this one fatal. Later, Abbas won't miss the chance to remind him how Omar has called him a Nemouchi, which actually he is not, hostile to the Ben Boulaid's clan and how he has kept on repeating that his brother Mostefa's legacy has been betrayed. Abbas will add bitterly that from now on, he is banned from the region of Arris. "The fighters luckily know me enough not to believe Omar's lies. They won't fall in his traps."

Chihani feels confident that he will entangle Omar's problems. "Omar must obey Idara's orders. Otherwise, he will pay!" Afterward, he tackles Kerbadou's case. He stands alone against all in requesting an exemplary punishment. Abbas, in a spontaneous move, comes forward as the murderer's defendant:

"Kerbadou's honor has been tarnished. He is a first hour militant, without reproach. His action is the result of a good intention."

Adjoul suggests he be disarmed for a few days, without further punishment:

"His affair doesn't deal with treason or something alike. Just the same, he should not have killed but it remains a sex case."

At first recalcitrant, Chihani yields to their views. Kerbadou is sentenced to go by without arms for ten days, after being solemnly warned that Nidham remains the supreme authority.

It is still the first week of June 1955. Omar Ben Boulaid, humiliated and wounded deep on his ego, departs once again, this time alone, to carry out a second tour of inspection and materialize the dire auspices of his destiny. He thinks and soon speaks out openly that his brother Mostefa has not picked up real trusty collaborators and that "all of us will pay the price of his error".

As for Chihani, business as usual, he resumes the proceedings of the meeting which eventually will last twelve days. He confirms Tijani's nomination at the head of Khenchela's sector and Sidi Henni at Tebessa's. Batna will have a bicephalous leadership: Hadj Lakhdar and Tahar Nouichi. Arris too with Nouaoura and Meddour Azoui. He points out that the region of Alinas will be shared out between Arris and Khenchela. For the first time in public, he evokes the rebellion of Messaoud Benaïssa. "He has deserted his post of El Hara without HQ consent. We will make him account to us."

He declares afterward that time is ripe for the nomination of political commissars. He defines their role as follows: "They will be in charge of propaganda and indoctrination of the population. They will send letters to goumiers, Tabors, tirailleurs and legionnaires to make them desert the French army. They will also take care of the ideological teaching of fresh recruits and enforce in them obeisance to basic revolutionary rules. They will take charge of all problems encountered between guerrillas and population. At last, it remains well understood that they will work under the military's authority."

10

Codification of the revolution

Chihani uses alcohol duplicators to print and run off hundreds of instructions leaflets in both Arabic and French and dispatches them through all regions. He makes up new standard passes, due for showing by travelling patriots. Any man, found without a pass outside his sector, is to be disarmed and tied up until the proof of his good faith. Meanwhile, akin to pots of an endless noria, tissals journey day and night, bringing to Chihani fresh intelligence, collected from all regions.

At that time, what is called the first zone comprises six regions: Aures Nememcha, Bordj Bou Arreridj, Setif, Khroub, Annaba and the frontier between Tunisia and Algeria, including Biskra and Oued Souf in the south. This first zone will later become the first wilaya.

Chihani suppresses the improvisation-side of ambushes and initiates a real systematization of guerrilla warfare. He writes down: "Ambush has nothing of a spontaneous operation that comes out of the blue. It is not either a suicidal military maneuver. It demands precise criteria, such as choice of terrain, hours of attack and opportunities of retreat."

Now, follows what Mostefa Boucetta has narrated to me in T'Kout, circa 1969. At the beginning, I found it hard to avoid looking at his face, devastated by the explosion that took Mostefa Ben Boulaid's life on March 1956. "At the end of the marathon meeting of Galaa, it was clear to us that Chihani had succeeded in gaining recognition as the supreme referee, without violence, while sparing every one's susceptibilities, eight months after the start of the insurrection, despite his young age."

"How old was he?"

"Oh! I would say around 25. He was the chief. His strength lay in his absence of prejudices. He stood up above clanic unruliness; for him, only imported militants' individual value and personal contribution to the collective effort."

Boucetta asked me whether I had already heard of the '*touiza*' or gratuitous help given to a Chaoui by other Chaouia when he harvests or threshes his wheat, when he builds a house, marries his child or buries a relative.

"The revolution was something like a *touiza*. All lend a hand."

"Yes, but Omar Ben Boulaid represented a danger for Chihani, didn't he?"

"At that precise time, no. He was tamed. As were Benaissa and the two Azoui. Of course, they were in a state of semi-rebellion, but Chihani had come back from Tebessa with the aura of his victory over unsubdued Nemouchis, of course much harder to tame than our agitators of Chelia. The future will prove us wrong, but who could have foreseen it?"

After the Galaa meeting, Adjoul wants to return to Kimmel where he says he has many matters to deal with. Chihani refuses to let him go, putting forward that he needs him. Adjoul gives in for some time and then renews his request, again and again, until Chihani, tired of

resisting, gives him a month leave. Not more. Abbas Laghrour too asks to leave; he requests permission to practice his favorite sport: war. Permission granted.

After their departure, Chihani remains alone to blow on the embers of the insurrection. Good news is rare. Like Mostefa, he contents himself with it. He spends much time dictating to his secretaries a draft of a genuine revolutionary code:

“1. The fight against France has gone on since 1830. Resistance has taken many forms, from the stubborn cramping to native tongues and religion, in spite of a strongly antagonistic and untimely colonial interference, till armed revolts.

2. The insurrection of November first, 1954, is the outcome of a long and underground process. The enduring capacity of the Algerian peasant is big but not limitless. The grounds for anti colonial action are to be looked for in daily colonial vexations.

3. Anti colonial action is not simply guerrilla war fare in mountains and terrorism in cities, even if it contributes to bring insecurity inside enemy ranks. Action represents above all control over populations and their structuring by revolutionary professionals. Amateurism and inconsequence are to be banned. Political labels are not important as long as revolutionary goals are respected. *The population must go all along with men who don't fear France.*

4. Infiltration of colonial administration must start at the lowest level. It is licit, with some prudence, to use the native constituent body, such as State and rural policemen, forest wardens, caïds, cadis (judges in Moslem law), prison wardens, generally all people having a foot in colonial system.

5. Militants are not necessarily well-trained heroes. Rather, they are discreet and patient. They work daily without rest and above all, without panache edging out. The revolution is the task of simple and tenacious people.

6. Sabotage, be it large or small has a direct effect on occupying authority. Not to pay taxes, not to smoke or chew tobacco, to saw a telephone pole or cut off a road, to stick revolutionary tracts on public walls, all actions aimed at weakening enemy morale. Chihani insists that population's safety must not be endangered. Like Mostefa Ben Boulaid, he refuses to expose people to collective punishment as imposed by the French. But on the other hand, he emphasizes that if enemy abuses have given consciousness to people who had none, their reprisals have toughened their stand and made them more prone to support the revolution and its program. Chihani often says that Algerians are not resigned any more to their colonial fate.

7. The Algerian Revolution is endowed with the task of destroying existing structures and replacing them with new ones. It does not demolish only, as the French pretend.

8. The Liberation Army is not an army of mercenaries but of men indignant at injustice.

9. Chihani strongly believes in North African unity. He stands for an all out war against France.

Here are the main ideas professed by Chihani. I have collected them from his companions. They have all agreed that he likes writing, especially tracts, by the dozens, in both Arabic and French and personalized letters to Legionnaires and Moroccan Tabors, where he exhorts them to stop participating in an unjust war.

Once, he duplicated a newspaper of half a dozen sheets of which he sent copies to Tunisia. (74).

Authorized by Chihani to leave Galaa and return to Kimmel, Adjoul journeys in the company of Omar Ben Boulaid who heads for a second inspection of western Aures. Adjoul stops at Kimmel, Omar continues toward Chelia.

On departing from Galaa, Adjoul is escorted by four guerrillas. When he reaches Kimmel, his escort totals thirty men. Adjoul affirms he wants to resume an in depth organization of Kimmel. One must admit he feels somewhat thick headed when he observes the work done in such a short time: Kimmel, his creation, has become a model region where guerrillas are genuine, well armed, well fed and gifted with a valiant fighting spirit. Beside, it may be considered the first liberated territory in Algeria.

Adjoul narrates: "Just imagine! Our strength was such that I did not hesitate one second to deliver an ultimatum to the French where I gave them a three day delay to leave Kimmel and the whole Oued El Arab. Otherwise, they will have to suffer terrible losses. And I kept my word! I attacked nonstop the posts of Zalatou, Ouldja, Lamsara, T'Kout and Tadjemout, practically all the enemy posts that were encircling Kimmel. (Schema!) Goumiers were deserting by the dozens and joining the Liberation army with their arms. An ambush at Kais had brought us two heavy machine guns and twenty light machine guns. I set up an advisory commission composed of Mostefa Boucetta, Abdelwahab Othmani and Othmane Kaabachi to deal with problems poisoning relations between guerrillas and population. One can say that at the beginning of the revolution, we were far from a peaceful coexistence between ANL and people, for different reasons, such as self esteem wounds, clanism, repression: people just did not understand why their homes should be combed and themselves thoroughly searched, starved, stolen, summarily executed by the French troops after an ambush or an engagement with guerrillas. After all, they were not part of the conflict! We had to explain to them that they were a party to the fight, like us, that we stood up against a common enemy, that we had a common destiny. It sure wasn't easy for populations to agree with our views."

(74)Chihani takes advantage of Amor Mestiri's departure to the Orient on June 1955. He charges him to tell Ben Bella in Cairo that he, Chihani, is now the boss in Aures-Nememcha. He commands him also to give him copies of the newspaper and a list of military equipment needed for the Liberation army. Unluckily, Mestiri is arrested by the French at the Tunisian frontier, at Bouchebka.

Adjoul appoints Mohamed Ben Messaoud head of the sector of Mchouneche, without the town of Biskra which he reserves for himself because he knows its leading families; they have always worked directly with him, not skimping on their gifts: money, printing paper, medicines.

At around the end of May 1955, the new chief of Mchouneche receives Ahmed Ben Abderzak. *Originating from Mchouneche, Ahmed Ben Abderzak appears to be a nuisance since he is well known as Messalist to the core.* He declares to Mohamed Ben Messaoud: "I have come from Algiers to enter the service of the revolution." Embarrassed and a little lost, Mohamed Ben Messaoud answers that he has no authority to enlist him in his sector and advises him to address his immediate superior, Mostefa Boucetta. The latter is absent, his assistant, Goughali, meets with Ben Abderzak who once more declares he is at the service of the revolution and offers him a set of new combat uniforms and 20,000 francs (old). Goughali accepts the gifts and sends him to Adjoul, already informed. Adjoul says: "Even for me, it was difficult to decide. So, I wrote down a note to Chihani to ask for instructions."

I tell him, admiring:

"Si Adjoul, it is truly playing it too fair!"

He replies:

"I always did. With everybody; don't forget I am a son of Nidham. For me, discipline is sacred. With the same tissal, Chihani orders me to enlist Ben Abderzak in the Organization, as a civilian. He has no right to leave the sector of Mchouneche, to interfere in military affairs or get in touch with any chief."

"Why?"

"Chihani has always been wary of Ben Abderzak, like all of us, Mostefa Ben Boulaid included, because he is a diehard Messalist. Beside, Chihani has not liked all those gifts to ANL which he takes as a charm operation."

But, to his dismay, Adjoul learns that Ben Abderzak has already joined Omar Ben Boulaid in Chelia Mountains. Both men get along like thieves. Ben Abderzak again offers equipment and money, promises more to Omar who does not hesitate a second. He informs him that he's been elected supreme commander of Idara by a sovereign assembly and that he appoints him general quarter master with immediate effect, endowing him with all power to trip not only inside Aures, but also through the whole country to collect arms and supplies. He has to report directly to his assistant, Mohamed Cherif Benakcha.

By now, Omar has begun to *uncover the blue* as they say in Aures of someone who exhibits hidden tattoos, henceforth revealing his secret plans. Not only does he reinforce his detachment which reaches the imposing number of 150 fighters, but he also dismisses all legal chiefs of sectors and regions and replaces them with Touaba, unconditional supporters. He roams the Mountains of Arris, Chelia, Ouled Fadhel, Foum Toub and Oued Taga, fostering excellent relations with Ahmed Nouaoura, Ammar Maache, Messaoud Benaissa, Ahmed and Meddour Azoui and Messaoud Belaggoune. A clever tactician, he manages to win Ahmed

Ben Abderzak's loyalty, a bold wager. For the time being, his defiant attitude toward Chihani has become shiftier.

Meanwhile, Adjoul hurries to warn Chihani, whose reaction is swift: he orders all chiefs of sectors of the region comprised between Oued Abdi and Oued Labied, up north till Oued Taga and Chelia, to cut off any contact with Omar and take their instructions only from Galaa's HQ.

Adjoul feels tired. His left shoulder aches. He decides to call it a day and take a rest at Dermoun. The wheat has ripened since at least a month and harvested since about ten days. Adjoul passes by without noticing the ears' sheaves drying in the sunny tiny fields. His pace is rapid, as mesmerized by the sulfurous breath of Hammam Chaboura where hopefully, the hot waters will quench his pain.

He stays there one night and half a day.

11

Ghabrouri's Affair

Adjoul narrates: "I remember my Chaboura bathing because, in my memory, it is related to Ghabrouri's affair. During my sick leave, Abdelwahab Othmani, chief of the sector of Kimmel, had put under arrest and tied up two guerrillas. Both were foreign to our region and had no passes. On my return to Kimmel's HQ, he informs me. I meet the two men, recognize them as Ammar Maache and Mohamed Ghabrouri. They belong to the sector of Chelia. I order their release. To my questions, they answer ignoring new regulations about interregional partisans' displacements and about passes as well. I offer them hospitality for two days. On the third, they ask me to deliver to them two safe-conducts, pretending: "We want to go up to Galaa for medical treatments." They don't look ill. Abdelwahab Othmani, just in case, injects them with antibiotics. I play it fair. I give them two passes and two mules for the journey."

The two men trek south east, cross Oued El Arab, go past Taberdga and ride through Nememcha, up to a hamlet, Lamra, last stop before Galaa's HQ. Actually, they are pinned down in Lamra for the night on orders of Chihani who, on next morning, sends down Abbas Laghrour to check with them. The latter, who does not suspect anything and who finds Chihani's mistrust out of proportion, questions them. They respond that they are ill and they wish to be examined by HQ's nurse. No problem! Abbas sends a tissal to HQ; the nurse comes down, consults the two men and concludes they are O.K. They are disappointed and show it:

"Why can't we go to HQ? Don't we have this right like any other member of the Liberation Army?"

Abbas' ear pricks up. He begins doubting their sincerity, but does not show it.

The day drags on. In the evening, under a tent, he serves them with the customary couscous. Ghabrouri eats and talks non-stop. Before guerrillas and civilian militants, he openly criticizes High Command and Idara. "The road marked out by Si Mostefa Ben Boulaid has been deviated. The revolution is in danger." Abbas gets annoyed. He leans on both hands to stand up and notes the presence of two hand guns hidden under the *meïda* (75). It is a grave infringement of the rules of etiquette. Hospitality laws have been transgressed: the two men are not entitled any more to his protection. He gets up in one jump and, like a scrum half, shoves away the two men, overturns the table and grabs the pistols. Partisans are hurried to search them and tie them up. Ghabrouri reacts most violently and threatens Abbas with direst punishment. They are taken to the sector's central command. Their rucksacks are emptied. Guerrillas take out three parcels of tracts. Each tract measures ten centimeters by ten. It is written down in Arabic, probably by Ghabrouri himself; he has used tracing paper to print about one hundred copies. At present, he is quiet and observes with a keen eye guerrillas while they approach pamphlets close to the light of a carbide lamp; an attentive Abbas listens to their laborious deciphering with anger and stupor.

(75)Meïda: small round table, around which people sit to eat or drink.

Stupor because the text says that he, Abbas, with Chihani and Adjoul, has betrayed Aures and has sold it off to Nememcha. That same night, Ammar Maache is locked up in a sector's cell, guarded by a certain Ahmed El Ghouh whom Abbas warns:

“If he escapes or anything happens, I will hold you responsible.”

As for Ghabrouri, he is transferred to Galaa's HQ where he is interrogated one day and one night, then executed without further ado.

A day after, on early morning, Adjoul reaches Lamra where he intends to rest a little before joining Galaa. At the sector's HQ, reigns a sullen atmosphere. A tissal informs him that Abbas is due to come soon. The chief of the sector, Moussa Reddah, looks intensely disturbed. He hugs Adjoul, takes him away from inquisitive ears and whispers:

“Si Adjoul, they have killed Ghabrouri. He is dead. Ammar Maache is here, tied and locked up.”

Adjoul does not comprehend. Moussa goes on:

“Si Abbas has shot him. He will kill Ammar too!”

Adjoul asks cautiously:

“Why?”

“I don't know.”

Adjoul reckons that Moussa knows perfectly what is going on, but refuses to talk out of Abbas' fear. He knows also that Moussa Reddah is a cousin of Ammar Maache. He decides to visit the prisoner. Ahmed El Ghouh recognizes him, leaves him alone with Ammar. During their confabulation, Adjoul hears about the tracts. Ammar denies everything outright:

“Si Adjoul, I have nothing to do with these tracts. Messaoud Benaissa is alone accountable for their writing.”

Adjoul promises he will intercede on his behalf with Abbas. However, before leaving, he adds:

“This problem is beyond my capacity. Ghabrouri and you have misled me.”

After lunch, the arrival of Abbas is announced. He has got his angry day bearings. Adjoul gets scared. He hastens to repent sheepishly. “Si Abbas, it is not my fault. I gave them passes in all good faith.” Abbas' reactions are sometimes unpredictable. He commands:

“Read this tract! It says that Chihani, you and I are selling off Aures to Nememcha. That is crazy! Have you ever heard such non sense? I swear I'll kill this Ammar!”

His voice sounds rancorous. Adjoul is relieved not to be Abbas' scape goat; he tries a diversion:

“Ammar Maache is not the only one involved. Omar Ben Boulaid and Messaoud Benaissa must be punished first. Leave the affair to Chihani. After all, he is the origin of all this mess;” Abbas hesitates, then nods approval. “Ghabrouri has confessed. He has denounced Omar and Benaissa.”

“What did he say exactly?”

“He has talked of a plan imagined by Omar, composed of three parts, according to him: 1. Psychological preparation of the revolt through circulation of tracts hostile to Command HQ

and appeals to Aures' ancestral dignity. The so-called betrayal of Mostefa's message is dramatized; so is the so-called selling off of Aures to Nememcha. It has become an emergency matter. The revolution is in danger. *Omar Ben Boulaid stands in for the absent father.*" Adjoul laughs. Abbas stares at him:

"There is nothing to be laughed at! Wait for the follow up: 2. Assassination of the three HQ Commanders: Chihani, Abbas and Adjoul who are not from Aures. You imagine! 3. Return of HQ to Arris, capital of Aures. This is grosso modo what confessed Ghabrouri."

Before leaving Lamra in pitch darkness, Abbas commends Ahmed El Ghouli to be vigilant: "Your neck is at stake should anything happen."

On the mule track leading to Galaa, he explains:

"After our killing, Chihani, you and me, Ghabrouli and Maache were to warn Omar Ben Boulaid, Benaissa, Meddour Azoui and Messaoud Belagoune, the new would-be chiefs of Idara."

A silence, then Abbas adds:

"Let them come! I will give them everything. I have not taken to the bush for power sake."

While the two men ride in the summer night, Chihani has not lost his time. He hastens to send an express tissal to Omar Ben Boulaid, ordering him to come at once to Galaa, accompanied by his three assistants: Messaoud Benaissa, Meddour Azoui and Messaoud Belagoune.

Abbas and Adjoul don't expect at all what is waiting for them at Galaa. As soon as he sees them, Chihani explodes. He flares up in anger and spells out a flood of grievances, recriminations and even insults before their incapacity to anticipate events.

"Where is your intelligence service? Zero. All the way. Because of your unconsciousness, the revolution is at risk. You never see anything. One of these days, if you don't watch out, goumiers will come and pick you up from your mattress. Just like that!"

His eyes, usually bubbling with wickedness are now dark. His right fist hits many times his left hand palm. Abbas keeps a guilty silence.

Adjoul narrates: "I had never seen Chihani lose his head this way. At one point, he has taken it out on me. 'How dare you deliver passes to counter-revolutionaries, without any security check up? Just imagine the outcome had they made it up to here. For a veteran like you, your fault is most serious.' Chihani had gone too far. I decide to take up the gauntlet. I say: 'You can talk. O.K! I admit having been careless and naïve, but you, what have you done? You have enthroned Omar Ben Boulaid as supreme chief of Idara, transferred HQ to Nememcha and forced me to hand out arms to Omar's groups. When I warned you that he was breaking away, what did you do?' I too had lost control on my nerves. I remember Chihani looking at me with astonishment, remaining silent for a long moment, then saying: 'Abbas and you, I have always made you partners in my decisions. I have always informed you about everything. Moreover, you always agreed with me.' 'No. We did not; when you established Omar at the head of Idara, you contravened Si Mostefa's orders. Abbas can testify.' Chihani's tone has somewhat sweetened: 'Well, what is done is done. Skip it! Don't forget, Adjoul, your quarrelling with people does not for sure arrange our things.' I cried out: 'I don't quarrel with anybody. Except for Benaissa. He is the only one who stands against me, this is well known.'

‘Anyway, I have sent a tissal to Omar and summoned him to HQ with his three accomplices.’”

Adjoul has an ironic smile:

“You are mistaken, Si Messaoud. No one will come, except perhaps old Belaggoune.”

Abbas goes further than Adjoul:

“Omar won’t come. He is not that crazy.”

Chihani retorts impatiently:

“We shall see.”

Adjoul continues:

“I say you have made a mistake by killing Ghabrouri. Omar will never venture into coming here when he hears of his execution.”

But, stubborn as nobody else, Chihani sticks to rules:

“Ghabrouri is guilty of rebellion, a serious crime. He has been judged and executed. Period.”

Adjoul insists:

“What has been done belongs to the past. Now, you should set Ammar Maache free and let him go back to Chelia with a message for Omar.”

Chihani declares: “Out of question!”

Abbas agrees with him; Ammar Maache is transferred to Galaa’s HQ. He is interrogated. He acknowledges his error, obstinately upholding having been lied to by Messaoud Benaissa. Meanwhile, during ten full days, Adjoul does not stop harassing Chihani and Abbas. They finally accept to free him and send him to Chelia with a message, always the same! ‘Omar and his companions must at once rejoin Galaa.’ But they refuse to comply, putting forward each time different excuses. Four tissals are sent to Chelia before setting up of silence, followed soon by a total break off.

The status quo lasts until the beginning of July 1955 at which time Chihani gathers all chiefs of regions and sectors at Galaa. He tells them:

“The situation is grave, because of some selfish and chauvinistic people. In Si Mostefa’s absence, it has become my duty to see to the implementation of his directives.” *When one hears his words, one gets the impression that he is trying to minimize Omar’s rebellion and take it as a simple chance mishap. At the same time, he refuses to admit his errors, particularly Omar’s nomination as head of Idara, despite Mostefa’s strong warnings, and his dismissal from Galaa’s HQ, followed some time later by Ghabrouri’s execution. Indeed, the transfer of HQ from Aures to Nememcha and the ensuing decline of Aures in the revolutionary process have caused confusion and some discontent among the Touaba, Bouslimani and Beni Oudjana. (76)*

(76) It is well to recall that Omar Ben Boulaid is the head of Touaba, Messaoud Benaissa the head of Bouslimani and Ammar Maache the head of Beni Oudjana, three leading clans in Aures.

Omar Ben Boulaid and Messaoud Benaissa have banked on this resentment and aggravated it by resorting to traditional tribal feud that Mostefa and the Party have always fought with all their might.

By sheer ignorance, Chihani has played with fire. I ask Adjoul:

“Si Adjoul, what was your role, Abbas and you?”

Here is his answer:

“I tried hard to limit the damage. Chihani has refused to listen to me. I was aware of Omar’s and Benaissa’s stubbornness. I did all I could to quell the fire. Mind you, without ever forgetting to reinforce my region. After Ghabrouri’s death, Chihani and Abbas have not dared return to Aures because of the risk of being killed by Benaissa’s men.”

12

Destitution of Omar Ben Boulaid

I continue asking Adjoul:

“What happened next in that meeting, Si Adjoul?”

“Chihani has appointed at the head of Idara in place of Omar, a certain Said Farhi from Tebessa. Quite a bold decision, aimed at evicting Aures’ people from the revolutionary command! Besides, he names Hocine Maarfi, one of his secretaries, chief of the second region of Arris. At last, he imposes a motion, rather a judgment, adopted unanimously, specifying that Omar and his companions are deprived of their title of members of the Liberation army. In conclusion, he orders Hocine Maarfi to use all means to bring them to Galaa’s HQ to stand trial.”

I say: “It is a war declaration!”

“Without much effect since Maarfi won’t be able to fulfill his mission. Omar and his lieutenants will continue journeying without problems between Chelia and Djebel Lazreg, protected by no less than 150 well armed fighters.”

In the meantime, the anti colonial war goes on unabated. It feeds itself, indifferent to internal feuds. Engagements and ambushes expand to Ichemoul, Alinas, Lamsara, Bou Hamama, Ouldja, Fom Toub, Mena, Lambese, Guentis and Taourit with batches of dead and wounded on both sides. Abbas and Adjoul manage to accumulate a fabulous booty of arms which Chihani dispatches all through Aures Nememcha and even beyond since he allows Abbas to present the Tunisian Salah Ben Youcef with sixty automatic weapons. Availability of weapons permits ANL to enlist daily new recruits till it reaches the number of 2,000 partisans roaming in both Aures and Nememcha.

It is still the month of July in the year 1955. The money raised for the revolution reaches forty millions old francs collected each month in the six regions. Seventeen millions come from the south. Chihani holds a strict book keeping. Monthly expenditures amount at thirty three millions and concern mainly family allowances, for ascendants and descendants of guerrillas: at the beginning of the insurrection, allowances were 750 old francs, then, 1,250 and, finally, 2,000 per person and per month. In addition to family allowances, a special fund of 1,300,000 old francs is instituted to take charge of civilian refugees in the bush; the rest is spent on sundries such as equipment and secretarial work. Guerrillas get no pay. Chihani gives permission to far away regions to spend collected money following their needs and to send remainder to Galaa’s HQ with justifications.

Money comes from different sources: citizens’ subscriptions, gifts and fines. Any fund raiser guilty of robbery- an extremely rare event- is executed.

Chihani, who stands by Mostefa Ben Boulaid’s principles, endeavors to open up Aures toward other regions of Algeria.

He starts by sending arms to northern region of Constantine. He asks people of Kabylia and Youcef Zighoud, chief of Conde Smendou, to send their men to Aures in order to stock up with arms and pamphlets since Galaa's HQ print regularly each two months, 400 kilograms of tracts, passes, instructions and letters. Zighoud and the Kabyles respond: "Yes, we need arms and pamphlets. We recommend you *send* us as many as possible!"

T'Kout, which rhymes with *mout*, death in Arabic, snuggles up shivering to the Chennaoura valley. Mostefa Boucetta does not seem indisposed by the arctic cold of that 1969 winter. I look up at the surrounding peaks and at the frost sparkling under the weak side light of a rising sun. I feel as if it were the end of the world and the beginning of a cosmic devastation.

I say: "I feel besieged by winter." Boucetta is not swift to react. Some time later, he retorts: "We are used to this weather." *I thought in myself that I will never get used to Aures Mounts, their climate, their people's hermetism and harshness.*

Boucetta starts narrating: "In fact, uneasiness began with Omar's rebellion. For the first time, someone challenges the authority of Si Chihani. You surely know the saying: 'when the ox falls down, the number of knives swells up!' Si Chihani is far from felled though. But there appears a breach in his armor. He has rightfully felt after Si Mostefa's departure and capture that the struggle for power would be merciless. In particular on the part of Si Adjoul, who refuses to play second roles and who, already by that time, has stood firm more than once against Si Mostefa. For that matter, Si Chihani is not big enough to hamper him."

I remark: "One must say that Chihani offered Adjoul the stick to beat him with."

"Yes. Si Chihani lacks experience. He has given too much value to superior interests of the revolution and has omitted petty jealousies and pride so important in our region. First, by leaving El Hara in Aures and transferring HQ to Galaa in Nememcha, he has opened the way for Si Adjoul to strengthen the region of Kimmel and place his men in key positions. Second, by humiliating and excluding Omar Ben Boulaid from Galaa's HQ, Chihani makes another mistake. He tries to offset Omar's ambitions via the charismatic name of Ben Boulaid, but the opposite result occurs: Omar gains to his cause the three clans of Touaba, Bouslimani and Beni Oudjana and sets them up against Galaa's HQ by using the crudest regionalism. He champions the cause of Aures, boasting about his being a Toubi, brother of the undisputed chief, Mostefa, and a rampart against *foreigners* such as Chihani, Adjoul and Abbas. Chihani evokes all that at the end of July 1955 meeting."

I say: "Another meeting! Si Boucetta, one gets the impression that Chihani spends his time in meetings."

"This time, things are serious. Hocine Maarfi who, as you know is a Toubi, refuses to lead the second region of Arris."

"Yes, I imagine; a good excuse for avoiding fighting another Toubi, namely Omar Ben Boulaid."

“Exact. He even declares himself released from the obligation of capturing the same Omar! Chihani counterattacks and taking up the new challenge, he once more lists his grievances against Omar: 1. Attempt to divide the ranks of ANL, as confirmed by Abbas’ testimony. Omar has upset officers’ morale in Western Aures by overtly doubting managerial capacities of HQ. In addition, he has used primitive regionalism to break unity and weaken HQ. In this connection, Chihani explains that regionalism is now obsolete and has no place in the Liberation war. Fighters and people all sail in the same boat and French killers don’t make any difference between a Toubi and a Nemouchi. 2. Beside his attempt to divide ANL, Omar has tried to kill its chiefs: Ghabrouri’s affair speaks for itself. 3. Omar has refused to comply with 4 summonses. If, as he affirms, he has done nothing wrong and if he really has faith in the revolutionary ethic, why doesn’t he come to Galaa and clarify things? Chihani adds he has learned that Omar doesn’t recognize passes delivered by the legal Idara, that he harasses tissal and fighters when they happen to cross Chelia and its surroundings. Worse, he permits smoking, thus enhancing enemy’s war effort. 4. Finally, the death blow: Omar has enlisted in his detachment Ahmed Ben Abderzak, a well known Messalist. For all these reasons, Omar and his companions, already deprived of their title of freedom fighters, are at present condemned to death. Let everyone know this judgment! And, if because of hidden or unspeakable motives, the second region of Arris doesn’t arrest them in the near future, the High Command will use all means to apprehend them and proceed to their execution.”

I ask Boucetta: “How did the other leaders react to this condemnation?”

“They were rather ill-at-ease and undecided. Above all, they refused to take side or dramatize the matter. Actually, they wanted to give time to time and put their whole trust in Si Adjoul and Si Abbas to sort out things.”

On the other side, in Chelia, Omar Ben Boulaid proclaims out loud that he represents legitimacy. As a genuine son of Aures, he has the duty to preserve his brother Mostefa’s legacy. Chihani’s threats are only powerless sprinklings.

By sheer chance, Adjoul nearly always was present during my talks with Boucetta. One exception though when I spent a night in T’Kout and Boucetta accompanied me when I returned back to Batna. It had rained profusely on the previous night. The river Chennaoura had flooded the road, blocking traffic for hours. While waiting, I ask Boucetta: “Si Boucetta, during the 1955 summer, both Abbas and Chihani are barred from Chelia.”

“Yes. Don’t forget Si Adjoul. He thinks in his mind he can control a weakened Chihani and take him away from semi-rebellious Touaba and Bouslimani. At first, Si Adjoul acts as tissal between Aures and Nememcha, giving or holding informations according to his interests. Well, things don’t turn out exactly how he wished since Omar Ben Boulaid quickly unmask him and forbids him entry to Chelia. Si Adjoul afterward turns to Hadj Lakhdar and, in exchange for his help, promises him to set up a new region in Batna, with Mostefa Reaïli and Abdelhafid Toreche. At the end, this scheme won’t work out either.”

Meanwhile, on the field, Adjoul maintains that the region controlled by Omar is beginning to suffer from the blockade imposed by Chihani. Indeed, since a few weeks, the central depots of Kimmel have ceased to deliver food or ammunition to Chelia, a fact which forces Benaissa's men to go on a constant prowl. Without much result because French troops don't go out on operations any more, due to the reigning insecurity. Guerrillas must cover greater distances in the hope of surprising the enemy. One day, around July 24, 1955, a platoon of Chelia's fighters reaches the hamlet of Ouldja, located very far from their base. They run into a local guerrillas' group from Kimmel. The contact is fraternal. Together, they join Kimmel's HQ where Adjoul welcomes them and briefly informs them that Si Chihani is the chief of the revolution, not Messaoud Benaissa. He treats them to a light meal, then directs them to Galaa's HQ where Abbas talks to them likewise, adding crudely though that Messaoud Benaissa is a traitor to the national cause. He concludes:

"I presume you've come here to fight. Get ready! We leave soon."

He takes them to a place called Taffassour, known for its steep narrow gorges, only a few kilometers south of Taberdga. They set up an ambush for a ten-truck convoy of the Legion Etrangere. As usual with Abbas, the engagement is rude. *Messaoud Belaggoune has told me one day: "Legionnaires are miscreants. They fight only when alcohol doped and, when they lie down on the ground to shoot, first thing we see are their round buttocks bulging out."* During the fight, 8 guerrillas are killed, among whom Hocine Berrehail. Many trucks are burned, about 70 weapons are retrieved. Back at Galaa's HQ, Abbas proceeds with their distribution.

The men of Benaissa, happily loaded with their shares, trek back north to Chelia, promising to return to Galaa. Abbas reports to Chihani who appears optimistic: "Abbas, you will see, Omar and Benaissa will soon come and pledge allegiance to me. They are not of the stuff chiefs are made of!"

Meanwhile, he puts the finishing touches to the organization of the regions till the month of August, 1955. The date seems to be of good omen since the revolution has now a safe haven composed of six regions and occupying the whole of Aures and Nememcha, from Oued Souf south to Oum Tboul north. It comprises the Tellian Atlas, High Plateaus up to Bordj Bou Arreridj, and the Hodna, including M'Sila and Bou Saada.

Militarily, the Organization works as follows:

1. Group or *faoudj*: 12 fighters and a chief.
2. Platoon or *firka*: made up of 3 groups.
3. Company or *katiba*: made up of 3 platoons.
4. Battalion or *failek*: made up of 3 companies.

Adjoul explains: “All these structures exist only on paper. They remain virtual most of the time. On the field, we rarely gathered guerrillas to the size of a battalion, except for the battle of Djeurf, because we would have offered the enemy too large a target, much vulnerable in front of a much stronger strike force. In most cases, partisans’ movements take place in groups or platoons to escape detection. When demanded by circumstances, groups split up into two or even three squads. In other cases, on the contrary, groups unite to build up a company, the essential being a total elasticity.”

I comment: “Really handy for hits and runs!” Adjoul approves: “As for ambushes, we have rules to abide by. First, intelligence. It is paramount with the collaboration of city and rural militants, who, you might say, are our ears and eyes. Intelligence implies a permanent interaction between the Liberation army and people. Second, briefness: an ambush should not exceed a few minutes. Engagement is quite different; sometimes, it is imposed by enemy and when retreat is impossible. We know how it starts, we ignore how it ends. If falling back is impossible, better advance toward enemy lines and escape mortar or aerial bombing. Well entrenched, a group can hold out against 2 or 3 enemy battalions for at least 3 days. One must always bear in mind the disproportion between ANL and French troops who dispose of signal corps, aviation, and mobile squads capable of concentrating in a given place a maximum fire power in a minimum amount of time.”

Adjoul continues narrating: “What happens on August 20, 1955, caught Chihani off guard. He does not understand why unarmed civilians are sent to death. Later, he gets hold of himself and says: ‘The action might be negative because of too many victims, but it will have positive fallouts because it symbolizes a final divorce from France.’ ”

13

Open House on the Revolution

As times goes by, Chihani notes an absence of empathy between freedom fighters and population. This fact is dangerous because it deprives the Liberation army of a popular cover and makes it vulnerable. On September 1955, he decides to arrange an Open House on the Revolution. He chooses the place, Djeurf, deep inside Nememcha, on Oued Hellail. *Djeurf is hemmed up by steep banks, riddled with numerous natural caves and underground galleries and topped by two huge adjacent rocks. Down, in the bed of the river Hellail, flows abundant water.*

I tell Adjoul: “Chihani is quite modern. An Open House is a new concept of public relations, much used nowadays.”

“He wanted the population to get acquainted with the Liberation army. To achieve his goal, he in fact puts on a big party for which he releases a large amount of money, about 2 millions old francs. He purchases meat, couscous, vegetables and all that is needed for a popular feast that will remain engraved in people’s memory. He also wishes to rebuff French propaganda that depicts ANL as a gang of desperados. He invites as special guests, Nememcha’s city and rural upper crest from Tebessa, Cheria, Guentis, Babar, Zoui, Taberdga and Bir El Ater. He plans their conveying till Djeurf in utmost secrecy and through different itineraries. Each guest, as is the custom in Algeria, brings an offering, taking care to publicize it: woolen carpets, *burnouses* (77), bundles of banknotes, gold, oil cans, and supplies of all kinds as habitually brought to celebrate a *zerda* (78). The security of the assembly is ensured by civilian militants.”

On September 25, 1955, Chihani has already sent to Oued Hellail the elite of ANL, about 300 crack veterans. The meeting itself is due to take place 10 kilometers north of Tarfaya, in a region hard to attain, where caves nestle in the middle of huge rocks and connect with each other through tunnels. Hundreds of meters below, flows Oued Hellail, amid stiff cliffs it has shaped since immemorial times.

The choice of Chihani is good. Militarily, the place is inexpugnable, thanks to its geographical location and its food and ammunition reserves, beside the abundant water of the river. On D day, at late dusk, freedom fighters greet their guests with just what is needed of self restraint and cordiality. Chihani stands in the middle, surrounded by other leaders, in the flesh, as large as life: Abbas Laghrour, Adjel Adjoul, Lezhar Cheriet and Sidi Henni. Chihani introduces Cheriet and Louardi Guettal as chiefs of Nememcha and asks for their honoring since the meeting is being held in their territory. Inside the large cave that serves as conference room, the guests now are seated on the woolen carpets brought as gifts. They listen to speeches, first of Abbas, Adjoul and Cheriet who actually open the way to a shining Chihani.

(77)Burnous: hooded cloak.

(78)Zerda: annual celebration to honor a saint.

His speech indeed is a masterpiece. As is customary, he starts with explanations of basic facts, clarifies, inquires and answers, full of strength and certitude. The audience is held spell bound. How could it be otherwise? How can one manage to remain unconvinced of the final victory? How can one have misgivings about people who dare hold a public meeting under mighty France's nose? Add to that the copious food with large pieces of meat, the soft laughs of arm-loaded partisans and the lunar scenery in that special autumn night, the feeling of security and invincibility, all things aimed at creating a unique atmosphere of a revolutionary communion.

Because, let us not forget, in those early days of the insurrection, people are not enthralled by guerrillas; they are on standby. Armed groups still remain a virtual and far away concept, all the contrary to aerial and ground colonial enemy forces which are well present and kill. At present, things are different. For the very first time, peasants are being called upon. Somebody thinks of them! Chihani has initiated new relations, leading to mutual understanding.

Adjoul comments: "Frankly, I was not keen on holding this prestige gathering. I suspected all guests. I was sure that French intelligence had infiltrated spies among them. I thought it a fault to mix civilians and guerrillas, but Chihani had decided and we were to obey. I had asked groups' leaders to show maximum vigilance and, when, three hours before dawn, the meeting ended and order of dispersal was given, I took a deep breath of relief! I ignored of course that the French, already burned by past August events (79), had encircled Djeurf within a 300 kilometers radius. My worst premonitions had come true. But it surely was not the time for emotion."

Dawn is not far. To speed up their dispersal, Chihani orders 50 fighters to leave Djeurf on horses and head for Meshalla, 50 kilometers south. Remaining men are to evacuate on foot, platoon after platoon.

One hour later, the first gone start pouring back in Djeurf. They say that French troops have encircled the entire region. Unworried, they get ready to fight. They have light and heavy automatic weapons, food, water and a natural fortress. What more could they ask for?

(79)On August 20, 1955, Youcef Zighoud decided to launch a civilians' revolt in north eastern region of Constantine. Unarmed people took to the streets, killed a few European settlers. There followed a huge massacre of civilians by French troops and settlers as well.

14

The battle of Djeurf

The battle of Oued Hellaïl (Djeurf) has been told to me by Adjoul and Bicha Djoudi. I have tried to render it as they both narrated with their own light.

Let us start with Bicha's account: "We had heavy machine guns, light automatic weapons, ammunition and food, huge quantities of them. We could have sustained a siege for many years if need be. We were God's fighters, invincible! One of the platoons gone on foot at two in that morning, comprising 35 men, had run straight on enemy and had tried to come back. In open terrain, they engaged enemy and were decimated to the last man after a five hour fight. We remained only 260 men, plus several civilians trapped with us and armed with shotguns. I must clarify things for you: Oued Hellaïl is chaotic, rocky, and full of ravines and holes. Two huge rocks stand on each side of the meeting grotto. Inside, we have plenty of food and water. Both rocks face each other above the river's bed, so close that we can jump from one to the other without problem. At their base, men can walk three abreast. All the chiefs are behind the Eastern rock. Around 13:00 hours, the French army has completed its encirclement. We see enemy soldiers moving in all directions. I can't give you a number. They are like grasshoppers. After the battle, someone told me they were 40,000, of all corps: legionnaires, tirailleurs, and paratroopers, with tanks, mortars, artillery, planes, smoke and you will get a vague idea of the thing. I'd say they were more than 40,000 if I had no scruples. We stay beneath the rocks, well protected. When French soldiers approach, we fire and they fall, dozens of them at the beginning, because they advance aimlessly, as if lost. They push half tracks ahead, we hit about 40. They give off a darkish thick smoke. Then, artillery goes into action and we tremble in unison with rocks, excited by smells of powder. We have a high morale. Hit by bombs, rocks crumble with sparks. Dust stifles us. We cough and retreat deep in the cavern, until a lull. After awhile, smoke screens fill the landscape. The French use them either to advance or to retreat. We ignore both movements: we just shoot at anything changing position and we don't care about other things. Afternoon goes by fast. Shooting diminishes, then stops altogether at night. The day after, we get a picture of what the French are up to: first, 20 minutes of artillery fire, second, the same time of 120 m/m mortar shelling, third, 20 more minutes of heavy machine gunning and aerial bombing, fourth, smoke screens supposed to conceal troops' movements. Regularly, Adjoul and Abbas, each in turn, sometimes together, enter the cavern and report to Chihani; he asks them about casualties. They answer there are none, no wounded or dead. The secretary of Chihani listens to news on a short wave portable radio. Chihani is calm. He keeps ordering his two assistants to avoid exposure: 'The revolution still needs you!' In the heat of battle, both men pay no heed to his warnings."

Later, in 1970, Adjoul has told me he reassured Chihani each time he reported to him, while feeling downgraded by his secretary's indifference. "His secretary has gone on talking with him in French without even looking at me." I ask him: "Where was Chihani?" "Sitting near the rock, at the entry of the cavern. He wore a thick wool burnous that covered him entirely. Face to him, also sitting, were Sai, Chami, Chaib Ali and Othmani." Adjoul mentions he saw Chihani and his secretary lying side by side under a blanket, talking in French, while the battle raged outside. Chihani had turned to him, asking how things were going and whether there was any friendly casualty. Once again, he had demanded that he does not expose himself to danger. Another time, it was Abbas' turn to report. He had found Chihani holding a portable radio against his ear. Abbas had rebuked the male nurse, Selmi Boubekeur, who was sprawled flat near a machine gun. "Why don't you go out and fight?" Selmi retorted he was ill. Indeed, he did not look well.

The second night of the battle, activities diminish. On morning next, arrive big tanks, really big. I had never seen tanks so big. They advance and grind stones under their tracks. After each hit, I feel the rocks shiver, like an earth quake. They shoot first and then spit a whitish cloud. We would run till the far end of the cavern. We hear the French cry out: 'Surrender!' We respond: 'Come here. We'll show you! We'll drink your blood!'

On the third day, tanks continue advancing, slowly, once I made out they covered a distance of approximately 200 meters in 4 hours. They aim at us and everything quivers. I have the impression that I am about to be buried alive under rocks. I remember the stench coming from corpses. The battle still rattles on with no casualties on our side."

Adjoul's narration:

"Now is the fourth night of the battle. At 21:00 hours, we decide to try a sortie. Of course, we could have held out but the tanks were getting closer and closer and rocks almost fell on our heads. We had not moved since too long a period. We needed movement. Beside, we had burned out huge quantities of ammunition. I personally had another argument which perhaps you will laugh at: I was convinced the French were on the verge of storming our position. During the briefing with Chihani, in the presence of Abbas and Sidi Henni, I proposed a get out for that evening. Chihani refuses. He forbids us to leave, repeating his leit motiv: 'Abbas and Adjoul, you stay here, with me. Appoint other chiefs to go out with the groups. You both are essential to the revolution.' Abbas disagrees but does not dare admit it openly. I do and plead our cause until Chihani assents, still insisting on our self protection. I move him, his secretaries and body guards in another cavern, larger and better ventilated, with access to water, and plenty of biscuits, tea and coffee. I make sure they won't lack ammunition in case of an unlikely gun fight. Once more, Chihani orders us to stay with him. At the end, he accepts my leaving, stands firm on Abbas remaining with him. Abbas refuses. For the breakthrough, we have assembled three platoons of about 50 fighters each. The first, which is

to open the way, is under my command and has only automatic weapons. The second, led by Sidi Henni, is armed with Statti rifles and has only a small amount of ammunition. The third with half a dozen heavy machine guns, 4 or 6, I don't recall, is under Abbas' leadership. The third platoon is to go out last. The rest of the fighters, armed with hand grenades, are to wait for an opening and rush through it. From the little we knew, the enemy encirclement is total, up and down the river Hellail and on each of its shores."

I have found a drawing of Oued Hellail battle, sketched out from Adjoul's indications. One can notice a river, two rocks hanging on its shore and overlooking its bed. Upstream, toward the North, many tanks and 75m/m guns, carcasses of burned half tracks and the letters FS(French soldiers)everywhere, forming a tight circle around the river.

Adjoul continues: "Toward the end of the first watch of that fourth night (I must not forget to remind you that our ordeal has lasted seven *ouadjabate*- 4 nights and three days), I go out at the head of the first 50 men's platoon. I remember a bright moon well visible above the rocks; it is hot. We progress very slowly and in complete silence, Indian file, toward the South. We are to shoot only if attacked. The French too, remain silent. About ten meters further, I stop our descent to the river, wait a few minutes. Still no signal. I decide to return to the cavern to warn Abbas: 'We better go out together, at the same time, and without delay. Enemy does not attack because they want to storm the cavern and occupy it.' Abbas never appreciates being jostled, but, this time, he readily accepts my suggestion. I leave him behind in the company of Sidi Henni and resume my advance downstream until I step inside the cold water with utmost precautions. The men follow me one after the other; now, we all are in the river up to the waist. We head downstream for about one hundred meters. I fell puzzled and stop next to an arm of the river on its right shore. I order to pass on the command: 'Fire at will!' A few seconds later, we start shooting. It sounded like the burst of wheat on a fire or the noise made by giant sewing machines. I don't know: we wade through the dark water while shooting nonstop when suddenly enemy sets off a flare and the night becomes day. As if we were naked or as if someone had removed a blanket from our bodies. I notice trees on my right, water flowing on and blowing bubbles against our chests. I see French soldiers standing by in the middle of the river and hear the staccato of a Hotchkiss on the shore. Trapped between their heavy machine gun and our automatic weapons, enemy soldiers fall in great numbers, reddening the water. The flare goes out."

Adjoul now is blind. He feels two or three shakes, falls down, thinks he is dead. After awhile, he stands up, straightens more or less, walks in the water, up or down, he ignores, finds himself amid French soldiers who shout: 'Oh la la! Oh la la!' Sometimes, he stumbles over a body, others, he is lifted up out of the water. He decides to let things go their way. He knows he is wounded. Everything is blurred. He does not know how, but something pushes him out of the river. The bustling rounds of bullets continue to rattle like grains on a fire. He returns inside the river, crawls in the dark.

Adjoul resumes his narration: “We were by now mingled with the French and no one paid attention to the other. The flare had revealed rocks upstream, with livid and distraught soldiers who gesticulate in the bloody water. I heard calls for help, cries of pain, moaning, in Arabic and French. Suffering is the same. Then, come as it may, I stand up, encircled by tracer bullets and flares that break up into luminous star-like bouquets. I fall on my knees and drag myself on my right side, I remember my left one ached. I don’t feel my limbs. I am cold. I have no dress, no undershirt, no tunic. I am barefoot. My trousers are torn. I remember having asked myself: ‘How did it happen?’ I focus again. Shooting has abated. I manage to stand and get out of the river. Near a bifurcation, I see a man standing near a mule. I walk closer, notice a heavy machine gun Bar on the mule’s back. The animal is wounded. I recognize Abbas; he looks KO. At first, he does not identify me. His right hand pats the animal’s neck. I ask him: ‘Where are the others?’ He says: ‘I don’t know. Everything is mixed up.’ The mule bends her head and licks her wound. One would have thought we were in a quiet oasis were it not for the renewed rattle of the battle. I say: ‘Let us go before enemy’s arrival.’ Abbas looks at me, shows the way: ‘Go ahead, we follow!’ I resume my nocturnal trek, look back after awhile: nobody. I am alone and feel desperate.”

Adjoul thinks he is walking. He is wrong. Actually, he is creeping on his hands and knees. His body aches. He stops. The moon has frozen above, between rocks. He listens for awhile to arms crackle, broken sometimes by heavy hammerings. He ignores what is going on and has no desire to know. Once more, he stands up, puts a foot before the other, and zigzags along the river shore. In a bend, he encounters two men lying in ambush. He identifies them at once: civilians who have attended Djeurf’s meeting; they come from Tebessa and possess each a shot gun. Frightened, they stiffen, staring anxiously at his right hand. He follows their eyes: his hand is tightly holding his 9 m/m pistol. So, after all, he had not lost everything. He points it on them, they lower their shot guns toward the ground. He talks: ‘Have you met fighters around?’ ‘No.’ He commands them to follow him. About one hundred meters further, they reach a hillock which hides an affluent of Oued Hellaïl. As soon as they pass it, they hear shots. Very close. Certainly, French soldiers on look out. Luckily for Adjoul and his companions, enemy soldiers crouch down and, for that reason, don’t aim correctly. Or perhaps, it is simply because it is pitch dark. He whispers: ‘How many cartridges do you have?’ They answer: ‘One and two.’ One by lifting a finger, the other two.

‘Well, you, with the two cartridges, you take position behind the French on the dune. You fire one shot and hurry back here.’ The man leaves. They wait for his shot. As soon as they hear it, they run south. The panting man catches up with them and all run together. Three or four hundred meters further, they stop. Adjoul decides to head west. They climb on a hill. Around, only darkness. He commands: ‘Each one digs a trench.’ They start digging. Adjoul observes the ground, remarks: ‘No one has come here.’ The two men agree. They seem worried. ‘We don’t understand a thing. All fighters must be dead by now. We better not linger around.’ Adjoul disagrees. ‘No. On the contrary, we are going to hide inside the trenches and wait for them.’ In his mind, he thinks there are no enemies downstream. He ignores that the

encirclement is made up of many rings. Shots are heard. They apparently come from the upstream hill. He explains: ‘These are fighters crossing enemy lines. Keep on digging!’ Adjoul is barefoot. He has lost his trousers, tunic and undershirt. He wears only a short. He puts his pistol on the ground, scratches the earth with his right hand, his left is wounded. All of a sudden, one of the civilians jumps on his back, grasps round his waist and shouts to his companion: ‘Go ahead. Shoot. Kill him.’ Adjoul gives himself a good shake, makes him fall and takes away his shot gun. He picks up his 9 m/m and aims at them, out of breath: “What is the matter with you?” “You are French. You want to dupe us.” After a moment, one adds: “O.K. Show us your penis. Show it to us and we will believe you!” “No. Wait! At Djeurf, I was the one who emptied oilcans and put their caps in a corner. You remember?” They do, or pretend to. “May God and you forgive us!” He gives them back their guns.

Adjoul narrates: “That night shall remain my longest night ever. I would have given everything to see the end of it. A little while after, arrive Sidi Henni and thirty guerrillas, the same who have been shot at by the French a few minutes ago. They have made it through. So, the fighters are not all dead. Survivors look exhausted and dazed. I notice that, like me, all are half naked. I ask Sidi Henni how things went for him. He declares: ‘We came out right after you. With our Statti, we opened fire for a short time, then swam in the river until the damned flare. I identified Algerian tirailleurs facing us. We yelled at them not to shoot at their brothers. Everything got mixed up and here we are!’ ‘How about the others?’ ‘I have not seen anybody. My men are all safe, except for one with a wounded shoulder.’ Fighters struggle to keep upright. Meanwhile, Sidi Henni manages to convince me to leave the battle field. I say: ‘O.K. We will leave, but at the end of the night. Let us wait some more time.’ Sidi Henni and his men dig trenches and hide in them. A little later, remaining guerrillas join us by groups of twenty, ten or less. They are tired out. Happiness lightens their eyes though. They too are unable to explain what happened and why they are still alive. They laugh when they recall the loss of items during their sortie: arms, tunics, shoes. In the still thick night, we see guerrillas crossing over enemy lines, guessing them in dissolve, thanks to a sixth sense exacerbated by exhaustion and an acute feeling of imminent danger. At the end of the night, we are around 160 partisans, three of us wounded. Only Abbas has not made it yet. At present, one could differentiate a white thread from a black one. The guerrillas notice they have saved plenty of hand grenades. A few ammunition boxes arrived here thanks to a strange miracle and at last, three or four mules trotted by, carrying each a heavy machine gun. Despite exhaustion, we have to hit the road again. The dawn has revealed that we had ended up in a naked place, barren and indefensible.”

Adjoul splits the 160 men into groups of 20, separated by an interval of 6 meters. Guerrillas progress in double file. The wounded at first are carried on comrades’ backs, then on mules after putting down the machine guns. The ammunition boxes, nobody wants to carry them. Finally, the conservation instinct plus Adjoul’s threats force some volunteers to carry them, at least at the beginning of the trek.

Adjoul orders the first group to head toward Chaabat Meriem, 20 kilometers west of Meshalla. Some guerrillas disobey though and take another direction.

“We observe that the group of Amor Bouguessa refuses to go to Chaabat Meriem and heads south. Frankly, we don’t care: they stay or go is the least of our worries. Out of habit, our feet, most of them bare or wrapped in old rags, continue to walk and for us, nothing is more important than to put a step before another. When we hear dogs bark, Si Adjoul stops us. Immediately after his order, we sit; a man is sent toward the hoarse voiced dogs. He returns in the company of nomads. They inform Si Adjoul: ‘French troops encircle the region.’ At that time, we are so fed up that our only desire was to go for them and fight no matter what. Si Adjoul says no. He asks the nomads to take care of our wounded, hide ammunition boxes in their tents and supply him with two guides. It is funny: I remember his stare and the movement of his lips when he talks. His tone is threatening. It is not daybreak yet; we resume our walk. After a kilometer or so, we hear shots in the far distance. Si Adjoul steps inside the river, listens carefully, concludes: ‘The shots come from Meshalla. Bouguessa is caught in a full daylight engagement with enemy. He has got it right in his face. At any rate, the French will remain busy for awhile.’ ”

Now, Adjoul has become suspicious and does not walk to and fro from the column’s head to its tail. He stops in the middle and runs quick back to the head. Despite his maneuvers, the mules and machine guns are lost. Luckily, the ammunition boxes are hidden in nomads’ tents. A good deal, as long as we don’t have to carry them. We continue advancing westward. We hear other shots coming from Meshalla. Later, Si Adjoul tells us that Abbas Laghrour and his group have engaged the French at Meshalla, fortunately without damage. Si Adjoul infers judiciously from these facts that the enemy has concentrated troops at Meshalla and decides to forge straight north.

At present, it is morning, period traditionally reserved for rest. Si Adjoul commands dispersal and complete silence. Each guerrilla must hide in a trench. In fact, we are too excited to rest and we champ the bit till evening. The nomads are camping north of Meshalla. Si Adjoul dispatches there two fighters to bring back the wounded on camels. Then, we depart for Oued Allig, 4 kilometers further.

Oued Allig is a depot full of food, medicines and all kinds of bandages. We dress the wounds but food remains intact. We are too tired to eat. *You know, comes a time in one’s life when one stops and wonders about the why of it. Bones and muscles don’t respond any more. Faith though is still strong because one can’t do otherwise. All bridges are cut off. Remains wide open the road to death. But death won’t have us as if it were sick of us, our hunger, and our exhaustion. Oh! I know, when I say exhaustion, the word doesn’t weigh much. We stared indifferently at the bread and dates we could not chew.*

In the propitious darkness, Si Adjoul orders us again to walk, this time toward the north east and Oued Jedaida, on the frontier between the regions of Tebessa and Khenchela. Too far for us! We refuse to go further than Dar El Gaïd because we really are near collapse. We say: ‘Si Adjoul, it is half way; for us, that is enough.’ He insists: ‘No. One more effort. Only one.’

Si Adjoul lies down on our side. He argues for hours, his hands gesticulate at random; his lips are swollen, chapped and open on his big front teeth. I see scabby blood on his shoulder and left leg. He talks, promises new uniforms and weapons, new pataugas. I observe his rummaging in his bag; he takes out a wet whistle, blows it. We all get up, thinking of an enemy assault.

Si Adjoul looks at our feet, swollen and bleeding, caws: 'Forward march! At once!' and we obey. Himself in as bad a shape as us, he manages to draw from himself enough strength to galvanize us. However, the night won't be sufficient to allow us attaining the refuge of Oued Jedaïda where we arrive after daybreak and enjoy a period of farniente which lasts several days.

A day after our arrival, we are joined by Abbas and his men. What a happy day, tarnished though by the absence of 85 comrades: 45 dead, 40 captured. Abbas is infuriated, mad with rage. He thinks it is too high a price for a prestige battle.

Fighting will go on for fifteen days, more or less violent. *Later, all will agree on the existence of an ante-Djeurf and an after. The battle indeed represents a turning point, first because it has taken place after the first official encounter between the High Command and the population, second because it has initiated a disproportioned reaction of the French who were determined to exterminate the Army of National Liberation, through all means: aerial and ground forces, with a massive use of napalm, rockets and poison gas. ANL's sneak away represents a miracle.*

15

Death of Chihani

Meanwhile, Chihani remains in hiding. For fifteen days, he is cut off from the world in a cavern in the company of Chaïb Ali, Chami, Saï and a certain Abdelhamid. His shelter is situated on the Eastern shore of Oued Hellaïl. The French leave the battlefield on October 4, 1955, Chihani on the 9th of the same month. He stops in Lamra which is the last post before Galaa's HQ. In the same evening, he meets up with his close collaborators, Adjel Adjoul, Abbas Laghrour, Sidi Henni and Lezhar Cheriet. The atmosphere is tense. The reunion has been awfully cold. Chihani does not seem to notice anything.

They all assemble inside the command post. For the first time and as if he wanted to assert his leadership, Chihani has pinned on the upper left side of his tunic the insignia of power, a magnificent gold eagle with open wings. Bicha Djoudi, who has constantly lived at his side since the departure of Mostefa Ben Boulaid, approaches and asks him, kiddingly:

“Si Messaoud, why this badge?”

His tone clearly insinuates the gesture is inappropriate. Chihani laughs:

“Why? You don't like it? O.K. I will take it off, just not to belittle your word.”

He declares the meeting open. Adjoul starts reading his report on the battle of Oued Hellaïl. The tone of his voice is sullen. He enumerates all episodes, mentions his misgivings about the meeting and the dangers encountered. He talks of the French spies who probably gave tip offs on the meeting to enemy militaries. He concludes:

“The outcome is negative. We have presented the colonial power with a golden opportunity to wipe out ANL's veterans, those who figure out its basic frame. The battle of Oued Hellaïl is no victory for the revolution. We have also lost many weapons.”

Chihani listens, writes down notes. A kerosene lamp bellied like a pregnant cat sighs and whistles in the center of the tent. Adjoul, his left arm slung to a turban, displays a dark face: all the world misery is depicted on it. *At the age of 32, he sees himself as the titular eldest before Chihani and Abbas whose both ages added are less than fifty.* Now is the turn of Abbas. He recalls the missing: “There are 45 dead, 35 at the beginning of the fight, 10 at its end, during the breakthrough. There are also prisoners who all are true *mujahidin*.” He recalls them with a sad heart because, since the start of the insurrection, he has mended their clothes, repaired their portable radios with trees' resin, carried their gears on his large shoulders, dressed their wounds or cured their diseases like a loving mother. *For, under a tough and pitiless mask, Abbas in reality is a sentimental.*

Chihani speaks: “I understand your sadness and grievances. The martyrs' sacrifice won't be vain. One doesn't make revolutions with an operetta's army. I would not go as far as to say that no one is essential. On the contrary, in our fight, we are all indispensable to one another.”

In 1970, Adjoul tells me about Chihani's speech after Oued Hellail battle. "He has tried to drown a fish. He refused to admit his error." I ask Adjoul: "Why did not you protest when he talked of organizing a meeting in Djeurf?" "To tell you frankly, it was not my problem. Since Ghabrouri's death, Chihani commands, I obey."

The truth is that neither Adjoul, nor Abbas are strategists or ideologists. When Chihani decides to put up a meeting at Djeurf, they don't quite understand its finality, which is to get ANL and the population acquainted with each other. Afterward, they are affected by their comrades' loss, which they deem as a useless prestige operation. They consider Oued Hellail battle an error because Chihani has offered ANL on a tray to powerful French troops who had plenty of time to prepare their deadly assault.

Anyway, for the time being, Chihani lets the storm go by, orders his assistants to return each in his region. The next meeting is to be held in one week time at Galaa's HQ. *Around October 10, 1955, the probability is great that Adjoul and Abbas have agreed to eliminate Chihani, his supposed homosexuality being only a pretext used a posteriori.* Chihani has sensed their resentment. He allows himself eight days to evacuate the pressure and prepare new measures to reassert his authority.

Chihani considers the situation so serious that he does something unthinkable: his assistants must swear for the second time allegiance to the revolution.

October 20, 1955: At Galaa's HQ, are present the members of High Command, plus Lezhar Cheriet. Sidi Henni, kept at Oued Chedida by some business, is absent. The leaders of regions and sectors, with the secretarial staff, are all here, vigilant. Very solemn, Chihani declares the meeting open. "I have spent much time thinking. I experience for now the greatest fears for the future of the revolution. Aures has taken a wrong path. Si Mostefa Ben Boulaid has entrusted me with the task of managing Idara. Up to this day, I remain the only depository of this legacy. Si Mostefa is our common father. I replace him until his return. Therefore, I request you take a new oath that you will respect his will."

They accept readily to pass this vote of confidence. Chihani ignores that his fate is sealed. Smiling, he puts his hands on the hands of Adjoul, Abbas, Cheriet and takes the oath. His assistants do likewise.

Now that they are bound by the oath, Chihani can move on to serious matters. He opens his register, looks at Adjoul: "Adjoul, you are leaving Kimmel. You are transferred to Tebessa." Impassive, Adjoul answers that he agrees. Chihani writes on the register at the date of October 20, 1955: Adjoul is transferred to the mintaka of Tebessa. He turns afterward to Lezhar Cheriet: "You, Cheriet, you move to Kimmel." Cheriet protests loudly. "I will get lost in Kimmel. There, I know nobody and no one knows me." "Don't worry! I'll make sure you get acquainted with your new mintaka in a short time. So, what do you say?" "I say yes." One more time, Chihani writes on the register. Comes the turn of Abbas. Chihani informs him that

he will join the sixth mintaka of Tebessa, with Adjoul, but with a specific task, namely the structuring of the frontier linking Tunisia and Algeria, essentially the portion comprised between Mountains of Medjerda and the town of Oum Tboul, the city of Annaba included. “As I told you before, the cleaning of this region is vital for the revolution. Abbas, I rely on you to do a good job. Do you agree?” Abbas also agrees. Chihani writes and pushes the register in their direction. In the most casual manner, they append their signatures.

From morose, the atmosphere becomes hearty. *Victim like any gifted visionary of his hubris, Chihani feels at the same time reassured and proud.* He eats a meal in their company. When arrives the time of dismissal, Adjoul approaches him:

“Si Messaoud, I would like you to do me a favor.”

Chihani replies, his hand on his heart:

“Ask! Consider me as your father.”

“Actually, I would like all of us to leave for Hammam Chaboura and spend there a few days. It would give Lezhar Cheriet a chance to get acquainted with the region and to meet the fighters.”

“That is an excellent idea. I’ll go for it.”

Let us go back and see what happened during the two week stay of Chihani in Oued Hellaïl caverns after the battle. No doubt that Adjoul has taken advantage of his absence to polish up his scenario and ward off any unexpected danger. Before the French troops’ departure from Oued Hellaïl, he already has dismantled Chihani’s protection platoon, transferred several group leaders elsewhere and appointed new ones more friendly to him. He wins to his cause Sidi Henni, Abbas Laghrour and Lezhar Cheriet who holds a grudge against Chihani since the Nememcha’s cleanup operation of January 1955.

After the meeting of Lamra on October 9, 1955, Adjoul finalizes his trap. During that meeting, Chihani, dominating and over confident, permits his assistants a certain freedom of speech with the evident intent to sound out their inner thoughts and anticipate their action. *Once more, the truth is that he is too much ahead of his companions. His mentor, Mostefa Ben Boulaid, has discovered his bright intelligence and appointed him as commander-in-chief before leaving for the Orient. Upon his capture by the French in Libya, he declares to Vincent Monteil, a French official, that the real chief of Aures is a brilliant young man.*

I met Bicha Djoudi in 1985 or 86. Adjoul had warned me he was a simple bodyguard and I had not insisted. While on summer holiday in Batna, I had, as usual, paid a visit to Adjoul. His health had deteriorated and he wore thick glasses to correct his sight troubles. As usual also, we had decided to ride up to Arris and look from there for another destination. Indeed, in Arris, he suggested we go to T’Kout. O.K for T’Kout. I thought he was going there for some business. In T’Kout, he made me stop in front the town hall. He said with a big smile: “I want to introduce you to someone.”

I was kind of lost. He went into the town hall with a faltering pace: his sight was hazy in spite

of the big glasses. I waited outside, facing the huge inscription on the frontispiece: “For the people, by the people.”

Adjoul came out a little later, escorted by a short man, thin and lean as a rake, head covered by a whitish turban and lost in a jacket and trousers too large for him. White espadrilles fitted his feet. Drawn up to his full height, Adjoul pointed a finger toward him and said:

“This is Bicha!”

Bicha shakes my hand, mentions that he has often heard of me by Adjoul and others.

“Welcome to the end of the world. How did you do to get lost in this barren land?”

As a matter of course, he invites us to drink a poor man’s tea, as he puts it. His sly eyes don’t let anything out. Polyuric because of his diabetes, Adjoul hurries to the café’s rest room. I take advantage of that:

“Bicha, we must talk!”

“If you like, but I don’t know much.”

“You bet! You’ve seen things, haven’t you?”

“For sure!”

He shuts up when Adjoul comes back. Adjoul asks me with a big laugh:

“So, what was he telling you, this small caliber chap?”

“Nothing, Si Adjoul, answers Bicha. I was just introducing him to T’Kout.”

A few days later, I buy a schoolboy’s notebook and drive back to T’Kout where I spend the whole day with Bicha. Let’s first listen to Adjoul:

“As I told you, I noticed something odd in Chihani’s behavior. His way of talking, even of kicking up with his secretaries, laughing all the time without reason, seemed to me unfitting for a guerrilla chief. During Oued Hellaïl battle, he went too far. Chaïb Ali came out to me, warning that ‘things were happening in the cavern.’”

“What things?”

“Ali has seen Chihani and his secretary commit an act against nature under a blanket. I told Abbas right away. He cried out: ‘I will kill them!’ I prevented him from doing so at the risk of my own life.”

“These things, as you call them, Si Adjoul, took place during the Oued Hellaïl battle?”

“Yes. Chihani has not gone out one single time, not shot one single shot.”

“Once you got out of the cavern, what happened?”

“I convinced Abbas to put Chihani on trial; he was eventually judged, sentenced to death and executed.”

“Who judged him?”

“I don’t remember. Abbas and others. Abbas was mad with rage. I tried to stop him from killing him, but to no avail.”

I observe Adjoul. He faces me. He gets prolix when he talks about events that bring out his personal qualities. As soon as I take up the case of Chihani or his own surrender to enemy on November 1956, at Zeribet El Oued, Adjoul becomes laconic. Oh, indeed, he does not rebuff my invitation but repeats the same arguments, again and again, and always in a placid way.

A few weeks before his death, I asked him, implying that perhaps it would be a last favor to me, to reveal the truth on Chihani's death. He answered:

“Chihani has committed an act against nature. Abbas has kept a close eye on him and has seen him. This seemed so incredible that he (Abbas) pricked his eyes with a needle.”

When Adjoul said that he feared Abbas' reactions, I did not believe him. I thought he wanted to lighten his responsibility and appear as a victim of Abbas' revolutionary violence. Now, I feel less sure. I know he mentally dominated and manipulated Abbas, a risky operation since the latter's reactions are often unpredictable, even lethal. I know also that Abbas wanted to project an ANL's image of unimpeachable morals.

Adjoul affirms that Abbas has spied on Chihani and that he has seen him committing an evil action. Where? In the cavern. When? During Oued Hellaïl battle. How? By hiding or pretending to be asleep. Adjoul is the only person to advocate this thesis. Benchaïba, Boucetta, Bicha, Hadj Lakhdar and Messaoud Belagoune, all witnesses I have interrogated many times, are unanimous: there was no homosexual act, especially during the Oued Hellaïl battle. Bicha Djoudi has cried out his indignation, in the face of guerrillas. According to Adjoul, Abbas has ordered Chaïb Ali to confirm Chihani's improper act. Chaïb Ali confirms but only after Adjoul's insistence.

In any case, it finally boils down that Adjoul has not witnessed Chihani's sin; he admits having sensed something abnormal and nasty after hearing Chihani joking in French with his secretary and the male nurse. *He had every opportunity to seed doubt and suspicion in the mind of Abbas.*

He uses simple and strong arguments to convince Abbas: Chihani is too scornful; he treats them as next to nothing, decides without informing them. He has imposed Omar Ben Boulaid at the head of Idara and appointed Messaoud Belagoune as its general secretary, contravening Mostefa Ben Boulaid's orders. He has moved Aures HQ to Nememcha and destroyed ANL in Oued Hellaïl. His management of many affairs has been rather muddled up: cf. Hadj Kerbadou, Ghabrouri, and Ahmed Ben Abderzak. He has acted as a fallible, irascible chief, who loses self control and unloads his anger upon his assistants. *One notes that Adjoul is often treated by Chihani as his preferred underdog, because he (Chihani) seems to fear Abbas' susceptibility.*

How about the supposed Chihani's homosexuality? I have questioned one of his high-school mates. They lived together at a boarding school in Constantine for three years. One knows how boarders are on the lookout for any deviation, particularly sexual. This schoolmate, Abdellatif G., is categorical: Chihani was not a gay. Could he have become one during the Oued Hellaïl battle, in the dim of bombs and the blaze of napalm and poison gas so generously poured by the French army?

Let us now take a look at Bicha's version: "After Oued Hellaïl battle, we remained tranquil like wounded dogs, licking our cuts while endeavoring to regain some strength. This was not true for Si Adjoul though, since he has not stopped moving around. He made an inventory of arms, ammunition and fighters, placing his men at key positions; he disbanded Chihani's protection squad and he set up new platoons devoted to him. I did not agree. He reassured me: "Don't worry! I will set aside a better protection for him." At that time, Chihani was still hiding in Oued Hellaïl. Si Adjoul took advantage of his absence to behave like a boss, refusing to listen to any dissenting voice. Abbas was under his spell. I caught them both many times in secret meetings with Lezhar Cheriet, but dumb as I was, I had no evil thoughts. Si Mostefa Ben Boulaid had warned me: 'Chihani is the revolution's bookkeeper. Should something happen to him, the revolution will crumble.' During Lamra's meeting, we all perceived the anger of Adjoul and Abbas, but we thought the abscess had been emptied and that things were going to resume their usual course. Chihani was too sure of himself. He took for granted that neither Adjoul, nor Abbas would break their promise to Si Mostefa and disobey his orders. He was off guard. I myself have lived a long time in Adjoul's company and had a chance to study him closely. Adjoul is a bottomless well, able to endure to achieve his goals. At the moment we're talking of, he is in an ascending phase. He is a winner, credited with ANL's preservation from destruction. It has first been whispered, then openly said that he deserves the post of supreme leader! One day, because of so-called security measures, he forbids me to see Chihani."

I ask:

"Bicha, what reasons has Si Adjoul advocated?"

"He hinted that it could be dangerous for me to meet Chihani. He said: 'Ali Kerbadou guards him. That is enough a protection.' I myself was the one appointed to assume the protection of Idara since the very beginning of the revolution. Then, I was replaced by Chaïb Ali, a sharp shooter who himself left his place to Hadj Kerbadou, you remember, the man who killed a platoon leader guilty of adultery and who nearly broke away with his men. At first dead set against him, Chihani came to know him better and offered him to become chief custodian of HQ. After some time, Hadj Kerbadou was named chief of a katiba and his young brother Ali designated at his place."

"Bicha, tell me what happened after the Galaa's meeting?"

"After the meeting, they all left Galaa on morning next. Chihani, Adjoul, Abbas and Cheriet were escorted by three platoons. I notice that Adjoul does not leave Chihani alone for a second. All the time with him! He pretends being anxious about his safety and he puts him in a kind of solitary confinement, preventing him to see or be seen by other people. Before him, he repeats: 'Si Messaoud, I am your tissal. Command and I will obey: your safety above everything!' He isolates him in a no man's land, leaving with him Ali Kerbadou to whom he recommends the most extreme vigilance: 'Ali, watch out! Si Messaoud is in danger of being killed by colonialism. Don't let anyone approach him!' Ali Kerbadou is young but steadfast. 'Don't worry, Si Adjoul.'

We made a stop at Lamra to take some food, then headed toward Taffassour, North East.

During that portion of our trip, Adjoul took me aside and told me about a supposed treason of Chihani and about a plan of his: ‘Bicha, I am about to disclose a secret to you. Before leaving for the Orient, Si Mostefa Ben Boulaid has informed both Abbas and me that Chihani has deserted right at the beginning of the revolution. Si Mostefa has brought him back by a hair’s breadth. He has forbidden us to reveal it to anybody. You see how much trust I have in you.’ Adjoul was telling this story to win me on his side. Myself, I was present from the very start of the insurrection and I had never heard such stupidities! Adjoul continued: ‘Chihani has done something grave at Djeurf. He is to be judged.’ I kept silent because, as a simple fighter, I had no right, for fear of death, to question a HQ’s commander. Mind you, I did not fear Adjoul. I respected him and, at the look of his eye, I felt a ride line not to trespass. He concluded abruptly: ‘Anyway, Bousenna, you obey my orders and steer clear, you understand?’ On the contrary, I did not steer clear. I spied on him and followed him without being spotted. The day after, both he and Abbas entered Chihani’s refuge where they stayed until late at night. The fear of being discovered by Adjoul prevented me from going and see Chihani. Adjoul would surely have reserved me a sad fate. Before dawn, I overhear a conversation between two sentries. “They plan to kill Ali first.” Heaven has fallen on my head. They, it can only be Adjoul and Abbas. At the risk of my life, I come closer to Ali Kerbadou who is pacing in the dark outside Chihani’s refuge. I tell him: ‘Ali, are you on your guard?’ He answers: ‘Yes.’ ‘Watch out!’ ‘If danger comes from colonialism, I am ready to face it.’ ‘No. Keep an eye on your surrounding; they want to execute you first, then Si Messaoud.’ Ali Kerbadou has a MAS 49 rifle. I move away, not very far. Sometime later, I see two men sneaking in the direction of Ali Kerbadou who now hides near the refuge. They cry out: ‘Come out here!’ Ali replies: ‘I am Ali. Who are you?’ A volley of bullets whistles in his direction. He fires back, then I hear him fleeing in the dark, abandoning Chihani. Guerrillas converge hastily on the refuge. I hear Adjoul ordering dispersal. *I vilify and curse myself: be damned, Bousenna, you coward, be damned as they pull out a terror stricken Chihani from his shelter and tie him up like a sheep.*”

I ask:

“Bicha, who did that?”

“Fighters. It does not matter; only brainless agents just fit to carry out orders.”

“Did Chihani say anything?”

“No. I only noticed fear and surprise in his look. Myself, I was all torn inside. If they had seen me, they would surely have killed me. I drew aside while two fighters went at him as he lay on the ground. I darted toward Alinas, where the sector is held by Sahraoui Bayouche, a cousin of Adjoul. He commands a 35 men platoon. I inform him. He starts crying. I stop him: ‘This no time for crying. I will kill Adjoul! We can’t let him go away with this. Si Messaoud is not from Aures. He does not belong to a tribe, no one will dare stand up to defend him. Don’t forget, Bayouche! Si Messaoud has been placed under our custody by Si Mostefa. He is our guest: we owe him hospitality and protection.’ Bayouche gets panicky. He mumbles in

my ear: ‘You want my death, Bousenna, say it that you want my death. Who am I to stand up in the face of Adjoul? Who! Tell me!’

This episode occurs on the evening of October 22, 1955. A dim dawn of October 23 lights up the rocks and peaks of Alinas, akin to a photograph turned yellow by age. Adjoul, his escort and his tied up prisoner are met by Bayouche whose eyes constantly steer away from the prisoner. All march at a swift pace when, suddenly, coup de theatre: Bicha, from the height of his indignation, stands up in the middle of the way, legs apart and rifle pointing ahead. He cries out and his voice is scratchy and gloomy:

“Stop! Why did you tie Si Messaoud?”

He does not address anyone in particular. Chihani, from far away, very pale, bends his head left and right in a desperate signal for Bicha to move. Bayouche intervenes:

“Bousenna, for God’s sake, don’t shoot! Si Messaoud is bound to die. Let them kill him.”

Bicha shouts:

“No. I’ll shoot.”

Bayouche insists with a voice full of sorrow:

“Then, you will be the cause of a general massacre and I won’t forgive you. Is that what you have in mind?”

Bicha notes a movement on Adjoul’s side. He turns around, cocks his rifle in his direction and roars:

“Get back!”

Adjoul aims his U.S carbine at him. Bayouche holds him:

“Si Adjoul, by God’s Face!”

Adjoul steps back a little. Bayouche slowly interposes himself between Adjoul and Bicha and, using his own body as a shield, moves away Bicha backward, little by little, along the path and leaves him at about twenty meters.

Now, it is daylight. The guerrillas have scattered in silence, each in a place. Bicha is desperate and dry mouthed. He swiftly digs a trench on top of the crest, builds up a stone low wall and lies down behind it, bullet in the rifle chamber. He waits with all his muscles end nerves, he waits. Around 8:00 a.m., a fighter comes up and gives him coffee and cigarettes. The drained sun does not warm him. Times goes by slowly.

At 9:30, two partisans execute Chihani and bury him in his clothes in the woods. His haversack has disappeared. (80)

In 1987, I ask Adjoul:

“Who ordered the execution of Chihani?”

This is the millionth time I ask the same question, in the hope of finding out a flaw and rush into it body and soul, like a damned, but it is like trying to tie together the four legs of a live cat.

(80)A register, the rubber stamp, a portable typewriter, a hand gun, correspondence and documents concerning contacts within and outside Algeria are hidden in a linen haversack, a fact that often has made Chihani say: “I carry all Idara on my back.”

“The court. Chihani has been judged and sentenced to death.”

“Who sat?”

“That goes back a long time ago. I don’t remember. Si Abbas was the one who took care of the proceeding.”

Once more, I find myself back at square one! I look at him and shut up because, after all, I owe him respect and I can’t go without it. *His repeated mania to put the whole responsibility of Chihani’s death on Abbas has been constant, down to his life last hours.*

Let us go on. A few hours after Chihani’s execution, prevails a strange silence, unusual, like the one observed after the Aïd’s redemptive immolation, when falls the tension with expiation of sins. Adjoul, Abbas, the guerrillas’ escort, including a devastated and hardly recognizable Bicha (*I wanted to shout, kill, lacerate myself, but no, nothing of that kind: I found myself walking with the others, back bent down and spine broken*) leave Alinas and head toward Dermoun, South West. They eat in Adjoul’s family bordj and have a ritual dip in Hammam Chaboura. Life goes on. *Answering my question while we are sitting up together near her comatose husband, Adjoul’s wife affirms: “All the meals we prepared at Dermoun bordj during the war have been paid with Nidham’s money. Adjoul who has always been frugal for himself has constantly insisted to feed the fighters decently.”* Before daybreak, Abbas and his men return to Galaa. Abbas wants to take advantage of ambient darkness to cross a region as naked as a hand. Guerrillas in daylight have to adopt absolute stillness for fear of enemy reconnaissance flights.

After his departure, Bicha once again challenges Adjoul, in front of assembled guerrillas.

“Si Adjoul, ANL is now fighting for your personal interests, not for the revolution.”

Taken aback, Adjoul commands:

“Arrest him!”

There turns up a kind of wavering amid the guerrillas. Bicha continues, this time aiming at them:

“You are witnesses. You know me. Who am I? A shepherd, an animal to whom the revolution has given a human face. Si Adjoul, I ask you one thing: tell the truth on Si Messaoud.”

Adjoul steps resolutely forward. Partisans slowly open a way before him. He says:

“Well! I will tell the truth and all of you, be judges. Si Messaoud has been judged and sentenced by the revolutionary tribunal because first he has stolen Nidham’s money, around 5 millions centimes. Second, because he has assaulted three women without legal marriage bonds.”

Bicha cries out, his voice choked with indignation:

“He lies! Don’t believe him.”

Adjoul bellows with fury.

“Kill him.”

There is no response from the guerrillas. No one moves. Bicha takes advantage of that absence of reaction and flees. Some days later, Adjoul dines with Abbas at Galaa’s HQ. Quite a feast! A tissal informs him that platoons’ and groups’ leaders are waiting for him at Kimmel’s HQ. They have been summoned to come by Chihani while he still was in Oued

Hellaïl cavern. Adjoul does not reply and holds them waiting for several days until they get exasperated. At long last, he orders them to return to their bases and wait there for new summons. He makes an exception though and allows Ali Benchaiba and Ali Baazi to come and visit him at Galaa.

Most of my conversations with Ali Benchaiba have taken place at his gas station in Batna, amid an odor of fuel and dirty grease. He narrates:

“We arrive, Ali Baazi and myself, to Galaa’s HQ late at night. The date? I could not tell exactly, but I would say at the end of October 1955. Chihani had summoned us to a meeting at Kimmel’s HQ but he has left us waiting for many a day. No High Command member has come to meet us. In the mean time, some local partisans have told me of Oued Hellaïl battle, without going into details. After a lengthy wait, we have protested and said:

“Leave us return to our bases. We have work waiting. Here, we are losing our time.”

Orders have come for all to join their bases and for Ali Baazi and me to head for Galaa.

16

The rule of Adjoul

At Galaa, we are met by both Si Adjoul and Si Abbas, radiant with joy, surrounded by about 150 freedom fighters. An atmosphere of jubilation and liberty, food in abundance and, miracle, a smiling Si Abbas. I become bold enough to dare ask about Chihani's whereabouts. Si Adjoul answers that he is on a mission in Nememcha. He adds:

“To morrow, I return to Kimmel; you come along with Hocine Maarfi.”

He talks about Oued Hellaïl battle of which we had no details. He tells that for the first time, ANL has confronted numerous colonial troops during four days, without cracking up. ANL has pulled out with honor. Si Adjoul even showed me his wounds.”

As planned, the day after, Adjoul, Benchaiba, Baazi and Maarfi leave Galaa and head for Kimmel. Abbas remains alone at Galaa. On the road, they stop at Dermoun and bathe in Chaboura. After the bath, while their bodies steam in a scent of sulfur hanging in the air, Adjoul unveils his plan. “I have decided to appoint Hocine Maarfi military chief of the mintaka of Arris, Benchaiba political chief and Tahar Nouichi intelligence chief.”

Benchaiba, whose nomination is after all a promotion, does not comment. It is not Hocine Maarfi's case: he pulls a sour face. As soon as Adjoul goes out, he tells Benchaiba that he will not accept his new assignment. “I have refused it in the past. I will do likewise today. In any case, I will wait for Si Chihani's return and he will settle the whole issue.”

Adjoul comes back. Benchaiba informs him of the reservations of Maarfi who adds on his own initiative:

“Si Adjoul, Arris' people will never accept me as their chief.”

Adjoul's reaction is violent. “This is an order! We are in a state of war. You know what happens to people who disobey?”

The threat works; Maarfi accepts. Later, Benchaiba explains to him that Adjoul, by naming both of them in the mintaka of Arris, wants to convey that as Touaba, they ought to return to their birth place.

Meanwhile, Adjoul has the nominations typed. He signs them and gives them to the two men. By the same token, he gives them Nouichi's. Tahar Nouichi is at present stationed at Bouarif Mountain, in the vicinity of Batna. In addition to the nominations, he hands them a wad of tracts and commands them to distribute them in the mintaka of Arris, informing them that Nouaoura, Hadj Lakhdar, Reaïli and Toreche support the tracts' contents. He adds that Tahar Nouichi will be more than happy with his nomination: he has all the time been keen to become a chief. He laughs:

“Now, he has got what he wanted, thanks to me!”

On their way back, Ali Baazi leaves Benchaiba and Maarfi and heads toward his region of Mchouneche. Maarfi does not feel at ease. It appears that he is not willing to get involved in the quarrel opposing Adjoul and Benaïssa. He declares to Benchaiba:

“Benaïssa will never acknowledge me as Arris’ chief since my nomination is signed by Adjoul. I am pretty sure that I will be banned from both the regions of Ain Touta and Chelia. There are places though where I think I won’t meet any problems, like Mchouneche, Arris, Barika, Setif, Batna and Bouarif.”

Benchaiba is anxious. If the men of Benaïssa search their bags and find the tracts, they sure will bump them off. Of a common accord, they decide to hide them deep at the bottom of their bag, meaning to show them only to trusted people.

Since the end of August 1955, the state of emergency has come into force throughout Algeria. French reinforcements have been brought in the country; now, more than 100,000 troops try to contain the revolutionary tide.

End of October, 1955. Almost a year has gone by since the beginning of the insurrection. From February 1955 till October 1955, Bachir Chihani has assured with great panache the command of Idara. When he dies, he leaves a structure, credible ‘because the most important thing in a battle is not the fact of falling on the ground, but to remain flat on it.’ At present, interim power lies in the hands of the pair Adjoul-Abbas. In fact, Adjoul is the real chief because Abbas, more keen for military action than for administration matters, spends his time waging war from Nememcha to Tunisian border and attacking colonial troops without rest.

To Adjoul then falls the administration of Idara from Kimmel’s HQ. In theory, he acts as a coordinator of military and political activities of the six mintakas. In practice, he commands only Beni Melloul’s region, Ahmar Khaddou Mount down to Biskra and Zeribet El Oued toward the East. Contacts with Abbas are rare since both Adjoul and Abbas have a tendency not to move far from their respective strongholds.

As for Omar Ben Boulaid and Messaoud Benaïssa, they control the western side of Aures, starting from Mount Chelia, including the region comprised between Oued Abdi and Oued Labied, up to Zalatou Mount. They live in autarky and don’t recognize Galaa’s or Kimmel’s authorities. They ignore Chihani’s death, idem for the regional chiefs of Foug Toub, Batna, Barika and Setif, who have not yet undergone the repercussions of their commanders’ rivalries and who continue to apply his instructions.

Conscious of the new balance power and anxious to join the closed circles of power, Ahmed Ben Abderzak, aka Si Haoues, gets loose from Omar Ben Boulaid. He takes an initiative all by himself and sets up a new region, which he calls region of the Sahara. He joins forces with Achour Ziani and manages to assemble a 700 rifle detachment. Sly and prudent, he attempts a rapprochement with Adjoul by sending him an envoy, Hocine Ben Abdelbaki, carrying a friendly letter and 30 millions centimes. Adjoul accepts to meet Ben Abderzak at one condition: his public repudiation of Messali. The envoy answers:

“I will transmit your message to Si Ahmed Ben Abderzak.”

He takes back both letter and money and leaves, promising to return soon with an answer.

Part Two

The second wind

1

Mostefa's journey to Kimmel

November 13, 1955. Mostefa Ben Boulaid escapes from the prison of Constantine. The news bursts like a taut steel cable. A silent joy lightens the partisans' eyes. Adjoul comments, in the presence of Ali Benchaiba and Hocine Maarfi:

"I know the prison of Constantine. It certainly is not a stable where one goes in and out at will. I think that either Mostefa is dead, killed by his jailers, either he has negotiated his liberation with the French, but I ignore under what conditions. In any case, Si Mostefa is a true patriot and he will never betray his principles."

When, 15 years later, Adjoul mentions Mostefa's escape, I have the impression that for him it is a non event. I ask: "Si Adjoul, were you happy?" He answers with another question. "What is happiness? Since his capture, things have changed, new men have come up. Knowing the French perfidy, I decided to put him in quarantine, a four month test as stated by revolutionary regulations. But things turned out differently." "Why?" "Because he has been manipulated by enemies of the revolution, namely his brother Omar, Meddour Azoui and Messaoud Benaissa."

In Adjoul's voice, no trace of bitterness or resentment, just a sheer statement of self evident facts.

Benchaiba and Maarfi feel comforted. Mostefa's return will give a new strength to the revolution. Adjoul and his group leave them at Tadjemout and move toward Kimmel. Benchaiba and Maarfi trek down in the direction of Mchouneche where they are welcomed by the regional chief, Mohamed Ben Messaoud and his assistant, Ali Baazi. The two men read the tracts, scratch their heads: "All these quarrels between chiefs are beyond us. We can hardly wait for Si Mostefa's intervention to clean things up."

All four agree that only Mostefa has the power to stabilize the situation.

Benchaiba narrates:

"We spend the night at Mchouneche. The day after, as we were to trip across Zalatou Mountains and Ichemoul where prowl about Benaissa's men, we took care to hide the tracts at the bottom of our bag. Ali Baazi has accompanied us as we climb in a North Eastern direction, up till Oued Abdi, between Arris and Baali. We are told that Si Mostefa is around, we ignore where exactly. We continue our journey west, cross Djebel Mahmel and the cedar forest of S'Gag and enter Ouistili. The fighters of my group want to celebrate Si Mostefa's arrival and demand that I buy with Nidham's money a sheep or whatever. Yielding under their pressure, I buy two goats which we eat on the spot."

In fact, Mostefa Ben Boulaid, after his escape, has reached Fesdis two days ago. Fesdis is a small village, 10 kilometers north east of Batna. After leaving Constantine, Mostefa has walked with a companion for about one hundred kilometers through fields and mountains. His feet are bleeding and swollen. At Fesdis, he asks an old man who lives in a house set back a bit from the road to give them some bread and water. The man complies. Mostefa questions: "Are there any French soldiers around?" The man answers: "Sometimes, yes, sometimes, no." Mostefa and his mate head south, cut through fields and enter Lambese where they stop for awhile in Mostefa's home. Afterward, they reach Ouistili where they are heartily met by the tribe of Beni Fadhel.

Meanwhile, the old man of Fesdis, puzzled, gives the alarm to local ANL chiefs. Straight after, comes the order to look for the two fugitives and bring back to Fesdis. Two days later, Hadj Lakhdar, regional chief of Batna, gets by express tissal a message from Meddour Azoui enjoining him to come to Ouistili with utmost urgency. That same evening, he meets Mostefa. He narrates what follows: "When I met Mostefa, I saw many people around him: his brother Omar, his nephew Mostefa Reaïli, Ahmed Nouaoura, Messaoud Benaïssa, Meddour Azoui, Ahmed Ben Abderzak and others. The Beni Fadhel have given him protection and shelter in the most decent way before informing his brother Omar and Reaïli, then regional chief of Setif. Mostefa has narrated us his sojourn in prison where he stayed nine months.

"A gestation time!" as he put it jokingly.

I ask:

"Si Hadj, have you noticed any change in him?"

"No. I have at once recognized his authority and put at his disposal my 160 freedom fighters."

For Ali Benchaïba, things happen differently. He arrives with his platoon in the vicinity of Mostefa's refuge. He is stopped outside the security area by finicky sentries. A guerrilla though confirms that Mostefa has indeed crossed nearby and gone for an unknown destination. Benchaïba is no fool. He gets angry, speaks out loud: "We are prevented from seeing Si Mostefa. He belongs to you alone. We have no right on him. You stop us from talking to him. Why? If we are traitors, come and tell us in our face. Si Mostefa is our common father." He turns back with his men and walk for about 100 meters before being caught up by both Meddour Azoui and Benakcha:

"Come back, Si Benchaïba. Si Mostefa is eager to meet you. He has sent us to fetch you."

In the night, under a bright moon, the big cedars spread their branches horizontally, akin to immobile wings. The reunion Mostefa-Benchaïba apparently is warm, despite the fact that Mostefa has always taken Benchaïba as an unconditional ally of Adjoul, since long before the insurrection. As soon as the hugging is done with, both men stand aside and Mostefa subjects his visitor to a questioning by the book.

Mostefa: Who appointed my brother Omar at the head of the Organisation?

Benchaïba: Si Chihani, maybe under Benaïssa's pressure.

M.: Yet, you well know my opinion on this issue. The others, how did they take it?

B: Some, like Tahar Nouichi, Meddour Azoui and Messaoud Benaïssa were in favor. Others,

like Si Adjoul, Si Abbas, Si Boucetta, Si Messaoud Belaggoune and myself we were against.

M: And Chihani?

B: He perhaps thought, wrongly, that Omar would content himself with a honorary post.

M: What a mess! Chihani will have to give me some explanation. Where is Abbas?

B: He does not come any more to Aures. He is stuck in Nememcha but I know he has kept in touch with Si Adjoul.

Mostefa's face looks tense while he stares attentively at Benchaiba. In the dubious light of the undergrowth, his features are sunken and aged, distorted by a pout, habitually derisive, at present sad. Benchaiba shows him Adjoul's tracts. He reads one, asks:

"Who wrote the tract condemning to death Omar ad others?"

"Chihani."

"One indeed must have quite a cheek to condemn to death a man of zaouia (64) like Meddour Azoui. Meddour, actually has been manipulated by evil forces. In court, I will be his lawyer and plead that he was misled, like old Messaoud Belaggoune."

Follows an unsteady silence, resounding with the long and smooth sonorities of Tamazight language.

Mostefa: "Where is Chihani?"

Benchaiba: "I don't know, Si Mostefa. It is said that he is on a mission in Nememcha."

At Medina, summers are hot. During that particular one, Benchaiba had taken me out to breathe fresh air and, at the same time, visit his orchard. He described the irrigation system and the many varieties of apple trees he grew.

Finally, he resumes his narration:

"When Si Mostefa asks me about Chihani and wonders why he has not come to meet him, I answer: 'I ignore where he is or why he has not come. People say he is on a mission in the east.' He looks surprised: 'What? A mission?' In those times, I dreaded Nidham. I was scared to talk too much and not shut up in time. But, tell me, how can one remain silent in front of Si Mostefa? So, I reply: 'I don't know. That is what they said. We were summoned to attend a general meeting but at the end, no HQ's men came. Si Adjoul had postponed it. I am not that impudent to ask questions. You know me, Si Mostefa. I was afraid to be executed like a traitor who has failed in his role of a discreet militant.' "

Benchaiba wipes the corners of his mouth with a huge handkerchief, which he folds back with great care, gives me a sidelong glance. *I suddenly felt like crying and laughing at the same moment. A discreet militant who could not ask questions. A man like Benchaiba leaves his home, his family, children and property and joins an ideal made of daily miseries, mortal dreams, lice, hunger, fear that churns stomachs and, with all that, sir, the only right he has is to shut up, be discreet because the Organisation-Ogre he has helped create at the price of hours of sufferings, because the Organisation is here, turning back its huge mouth to bite and take a chunk of his throat.* I ask:

“Si Benchaiba, what did Si Mostefa say?”

“Nothing. He never says anything. He just questions and records answers.”

Mostefa understands at once that the tendency for unity he imposed has not resisted the invincible wish of the Chaoui tribes to assemble in their own social groups. He has been told and now, he sees by himself Nemouchis grouped behind Abbas, Touaba behind his brother Omar, Bouslimanis behind Benaissa, Chorfa and Serahna behind Adjoul.

He steps ahead, meaning the end of the interview. Benchaiba leaves. Maarfi replaces him; the same questions more or less are put to him. As an ex secretary of Chihani, he is not without courage or self confidence. He tells Mostefa that neither Chihani nor Adjoul are unworthy of his trust. On the contrary! ANL has developed a great deal, in the right direction. Weaponry and supplies are in constant amelioration.

“The first of November 1954 is very far indeed, Si Mostefa. Adjoul has built at Kimmel a model region where the djounoud 10 move along freely. We even have a field hospital where more than 700 wounded from all regions are taken care of.”

Mostefa returns to his obsession:

“Why did Chihani transfer HQ to Nememcha?”

“ Only he can answer, Si Mostefa. From what I heard, he might have wanted to free himself from the hold of Omar and Touaba over him.”

“Non sense!”

After Maarfi, it is Ali Baazi’s turn to satisfy Mostefa’s curiosity. From the questions framework, one realizes that Mostefa refuses, through some kind of unconscious exorcism, to endorse Omar and Benaissa’s affirmations that Aures has been sold off to Nememcha and ostracized by Chihani, Adjoul and Abbas who don’t provide it any more with arms or supplies. Thanks to Benchaiba, Maarfi and Baazi, Mostefa is getting now a less partial image of what is going on. His brother Omar has told him of the will for power of both Chihani and Adjoul and their attempts to eradicate up to and including the name of Ben Boulaid. *Mostefa understands at last why men declared rebels by an interim command he himself appointed try now to warn him against that same interim command?* He stays apart from all others in a complete isolation for some hours, then returns to send a message to Mohamed Ben Messaoud, chief of the sector of Mchouneche where he warns him of his imminent arrival. Ben Messaoud hastens to inform Adjoul. Adjoul orders the chief of region to go at once and see Mostefa with precise instructions. He obeys and questions Mostefa:

“Si Mostefa, have you sent a letter to the chief of sector Mohamed Ben Messaoud?”

“Yes. I sent him a tissal. Why?”

“It is not legal. It does not fit with the rules book.”

Mostefa is appalled. He repents in public, admits being in quarantine, begs to be treated as a simple militant. (81)

(81)At that time, Adjoul has already strongly recommended all chiefs of region to disobey Mostefa’s orders. Except for the chief of the region of Mchouneche, all refused. When Mostefa dispatched a tissal to the chief of the *sector* of Mchouneche, he was blamed by the chief of the same region on Adjoul’s orders.

This repentance is strongly decried by his brother Omar, who affects being persecuted, he the man of honor who refuses, unlike Mostefa, to yield power to ‘foreigners’. Mostefa is exasperated. He is no more fooled since he realizes at long last that the struggle for power has well and truly started. The ox is not killed, yet all want to share its hide. Will his charisma suffice for untying the threads of the crisis?

Surprised by Ahmed Ben Abderzak’s presence in Omar’s group, he questions him; Omar hurries to answer at his place:

“I am the one who has recruited him. He has been very useful. He has obtained for us money and supplies. He has liberated us from the blockade imposed on us by Chihani.”

Mostefa smiles:

“I understand your intention. It might be praiseworthy but you must know that if I ordered to keep Ben Abderzak out of Nidham, it is for precise reasons. Seriously, the man is so shrewd he could eat you up without salt!”

Once again, Omar pretends to be misunderstood, retires alone in a house and orders his men not to reveal his hideout. As for Mostefa, he boils with questions: what is going on up in HQ? Why has nobody of HQ got in touch with him? What is Chihani waiting for? Where are Adjoul and Abbas? As in his habit, he decides to go forward and find out by himself. He asks Hocine Maarfi to accompany him; Omar and Benaissa follow him. He bids farewell to the Beni Fadhel of Ouistili who have put up with him, and heads south. He reaches Ain Touta. The regional chief welcomes him heartily and organizes an impromptu meeting where Mostefa speaks:

“I congratulate you and herald the coming of good things. The revolution has taken; now, it is rooted. We can only move toward victory. It is the only way. However, kiddies, I ask you to be vigilant. A mortal danger is looming over our heads: it is the will for power. I curse it three times. Let it be cursed three times. For if it appears, this would mean the end of the revolution.”

The freedom fighters don’t seem to understand the message. It remains an enigma but, for them, only counts their chief’s return to continue the journey together. Mostefa knows since a few days that Adjoul has put him in quarantine. He reaches Djebel Lazreg which towers above other mountains at 2,000 meters. Groups of guerrillas flock around him from every sector and region. He heads another meeting at Tibhirine where he stops for a few hours, just enough to talk with fighters and then resumes his race up to Kef Larous which overhangs the astounding canyon of Oued Labied and its dense foliage. He crosses Mount Ahmar Khaddou which takes on a purple tinge at sunset and there, learns of Chihani’s death.

He understands the motive of his silence. Alive, Chihani would surely have come forward to welcome him. He hides his emotion. He is aware that his young assistant represents the first victim of the struggle for power. To Maarfi, he recalls Chihani’s extraordinary behavior, his way of marrying pragmatism and ideology, his refusal, well before November 1, 1954, to believe in the policy of a MTLD eroded by internal rivalries. Messali himself had not satisfied his demanding romanticism of a young revolutionary, sickened by his Party, forced to join

CRUA in the hope of righting his elders' mistakes. Mostefa evokes his commitment to the armed struggle for independence, his daily sufferings before and during the revolution. Angry, he claims:

“And yet, I have well recommended to Adjoul and Abbas to protect him. They will have to tell me what happened!”

The brother of Mostefa, Omar, and Messaoud Benaissa, exult:

“You see, Si Mostefa, we are no liars. They have killed Chihani. They will kill you as well if you don't watch out.”

They worsen his feeling of helplessness and insecurity. In the evening, he dispatches to Adjoul a second tissal to inform him of his arrival soon. The days next, Omar and Benaissa leave him continue his trek alone, 'at the risk of his life' as they put it.

Escorted by Maarfi and his group, Mostefa reaches Terga, bypasses Kebach, then Tadjemout with its centennial galaa - high perched corn loft- still intact. The third day, he climbs up the Mount S'Ra El Hammam at 1,400 meters, 50 km east of Mchouneche. From there, he heads east until he attains the Plateau of Tedjine where he is met by Adjoul and a light escort.

2

The festivities of Tedjine

It is midmorning. The two men hug for a fairly long time, remain standing for awhile then Adjoul points his arm toward the bath of Chaboura. Leisurely, often stopping on the way, they approach little by little the bath. They reach the middle of an esplanade covered with bluish fragments of slate. Facing them, the falls of the Hammam spurt from a steep height and crash noisily on the sulfur whitened hot rocks. Adjoul shows me the exact place where he and Mostefa stopped before sitting down. Their talk lasted from 10:00 a.m. to sunset, when the giant shadow of the palm tree embraces the entire bath.

I ask Adjoul:

“What did you talk about?”

“Nidham matters.”

“Like?”

“I had to clarify for him the new organigram, as conceived by Chihani. He could not get over it! He declared: ‘So many things happened during my nine month absence!’ ”

“Was he hurt when doubts were put forward concerning his escape?”

“Yes. I frankly told him that I had myself expressed reservations. All the more so since I was only enforcing his own instructions: ‘Any militant, a fortiori leader, ought to be put in quarantine from the moment he gets out of enemy jail.’ He agreed: ‘Exact. I am willing to be isolated if you deem it necessary. Treat me like a simple militant, like any other. By the way, you are not alone to have doubted, Hocine Maarfi and even Mohamed Ben Messaoud have suspected me.’ I replied: ‘Si Mostefa, you should not feel hurt. On the contrary, Maarfi and Ben Messaoud deserve your respect.’ ”

“What did you tell him about his brother’s Omar election as head of the Organisation?”

“I, of course, explained to him how Chihani had given in to the arguments of Messaoud Benaissa, Ammar Maache, Meddour Azoui and Tahar Nouichi. All wanted him to propel Omar at the head of the Organisation. When he perceived his mistake, Chihani got afraid and displaced HQ from Aures to Nememcha. He could not manage the crisis and left a clear field to Omar. With Abbas, I tried to put him back on the right track, but he refused to listen. At last, I inform Mostefa that the thing he most feared, tribalism, had come back stronger than in the colonial era.”

“What did he say about Chihani’s death?”

“I told him that Chihani had been judged and sentenced to death. The drafts of the judgment were at his disposal. He asked whether I was present at Chihani’s execution. I said: no. He insisted: ‘Adjoul, do you have anything you want to add?’ I answered: ‘No. I have nothing

more to tell you. Si Mostefa, you know Chihani. He talks French all the time with his secretaries. Ask Chaib Ali. He will confirm.’ ”

Mostefa knows that Adjoul does not master French. Chihani and his companions are young, used to laugh like ordinary youth and tell each other crazy stories, getting out for some time of the surrounding misery. This is not of Adjoul’s taste because he does not understand the what and why of their laughs.

Mostefa goes back to the condemnation of his brother and his companions. Adjoul recapitulates the facts and affirms that the affair is Chihani’s entire responsibility. Mostefa asks:

“Do you think it is reasonable to summon someone at HQ to be executed?”

Adjoul: “I told so to Chihani. He spoke of a legal trial.”

Mostefa pulls a face: “How about the volunteers’ group?”

“An idea of Chihani which went astray.”

Mostefa looks annoyed:

“This group must be disbanded without delay! Another thing: you mentioned that Chihani has met the regional chiefs after Oued Hellaïl battle. Why?”

“He has not met them. He just summoned them while he was at Alinas. I ignore why. What could he have told them? Si Abbas and I bore a grudge against him because he nearly exterminated ANL in a suicidal prestige operation. We lost face before the surviving guerrillas and the population. No, Si Mostefa: Chihani has really gone too far. Look to what disaster have driven us your orders to obey him, no matter what!”

Mostefa remains silent and then says:

“I admit he has made an error by provoking enemy. He would probably have succeeded had he been more discreet. But, Adjoul, make no mistake, Chihani is a reliable militant, despite his youth.” *Adjoul does not reveal to Mostefa that he maneuvered to foil the meeting and thus prevent Chihani from being dubbed again by the groups’ chiefs. Bicha has confided to me that Adjoul had practically confined Chihani at Alinas; Chihani, feeling in danger, had alleged illness to hide in a secret place and prepare the meeting of Kimmel. But he was outmaneuvered by both Adjoul and Abbas who prevented him from moving, dismantled his escort and put him under house arrest, on the pretext of protecting him.*

Mostefa again, endeavors to understand:

“Adjoul, from your point of view, where is the truth?”

“It is what I told you, Si Mostefa. Power was in my hands. I did not use it for my interest. On the contrary, during many months, I served as a driving belt between the regions and Chihani. When he transferred HQ from Aures to Nememcha, I faithfully passed on his instructions to Aures command.”

Mostefa has a skeptical grin:

“You remember, Adjoul, when one day, you called the Touaba sectarians because they refused a Serhani the right to cross their fields and get access to his own, forcing him to make a long detour. You’ve always been touchy.”

“I remember. One must admit, Si Mostefa, that when things get serious, you trust only yourself or your allies.”

“Allies? Who are they? You have been the first I asked to remove my brother Omar from ANL. You know my disgust for tribalism. Aures luckily is not made up of Touaba only.”

It has often been reported that Mostefa Ben Boulaid had a great time sitting with old people of committees working on the renovation of mosques. These elders had warned him against traditional and mortal tribalism in Aures.

After Adjoul, Mostefa meets Mostefa Boucetta. He asks him the same hurtful questions.

“Why has Chihani moved HQ to Nememcha? How do you explain it, Boucetta? Let me tell you: I think he guessed Adjoul’s ambitions and wanted to cheek him by allying with Omar, Meddour and Benaissa. We’ll never know anyway. The brain of Chihani boils all the time with newer ideas. One argument in favor of this theory lies in what Omar has affirmed to me: Mostefa, I swear I did not ask for any post. I accepted to lead Idara to save the revolution. Adjoul has perverted Abbas and they killed Chihani.”

Adjoul narrates, 15 years later.

“Mostefa has questioned me, thoroughly. I did not pull a face because I have frequented him for so many years. Our relations have always been respectful. He has though admitted that the men he chose to start the insurrection were not up to it, Chihani included. (65) At the time of our meeting at Tedjine, I informed him of Ghabrouri’s incident. I showed him the tracts. That knocked him out. He got up, turned around in the tent, read the tract a second time and went out. I followed him, telling myself in petto I would gladly give five years of my life for a single cigarette. At last, he said: ‘You see, Adjoul, what I feared most has happened during my absence. But don’t worry: each will pay for his deeds.’ ”

I know by means of all the discussions we had in the past that Adjoul has toward Mostefa a complex feeling made of respect and condescension. He does not have an unlimited trust in his judgment which he deems too biased toward his flatterers. He does not trust either his ability to plan guerrilla operations.

Adjoul continues:

“To refresh Mostefa’s memory, I evoked Benaissa’s insidious undermining of our actions. I asked him to expel Ahmed Ben Abderzak from ANL and restore him back in civilian life. I reopened both Benaissa’s and Meddour’s cases: if they misbehaved, it was because of his protection.”

Mostefa gave tit for tat:

“I read the tract against them you’ve handed out. Your quarrel is internal. Why have you

publicized it? You've violated the Organization's secrecy."

"Si Mostefa, they started a war against us. You must know that Abbas was no more persona grata in the mintaka of Arris because the Touaba have threatened to kill him. Chihani himself knew about it."

At Kimmel, Adjoul shows Mostefa the HQ and its secretariat, well furnished with several type writers and alcohol duplicators. He shows him also supplies registers, arms and ammunition inventories and ready cash. In addition, he accompanies him down to the underground field hospital, capable of accommodating dozens of wounded. All this in the bush! No doubt. Mostefa is impressed. He is the more so when he visits the numerous underground blockhouses, the silos full of grain and reserve stocks, the sewing workrooms with their sewing machines and , at last, the vegetable garden concealing in its middle the entry of the armory where all kinds of weapons were repaired as good as new. Adjoul comments in a tone of false modesty:

"As you see, Si Mostefa, we have not remained idle in your absence!"

The same evening, Mostefa, not fearing redundancy, brings up again Omar's affair:

"Do you recall, Adjoul, the number of times I insisted that you keep Omar away from any command post and that you take good care of Chihani?"

Without getting flustered, Adjoul retorts:

"Things have changed, Si Mostefa, after Chihani learned of your capture by colonialism. Himself also changed under Benaïssa and Meddour's influence. I personally did not agree to appoint Omar as head of HQ. It does not mean I am against him. As a proof of my good intention, and for the sake of your own information, I refused to kill Omar when Chihani ordered me. Another proof I hold no grudge against your brother, I delivered two passes to Ammar Maache and Mohamed Ghabrouri, both men he had sent to kill Chihani, Abbas and myself, your interlocutor."

From this subtle mix of truth and deceit, Mostefa is well aware he will not get all answers. Omar, Meddour and Benaïssa have had plenty of time to feed him with their version of past events. He knows that Adjoul, full of his authority, would have, if given a chance, refused his reintegration in the Idara. One belief whirls in his head: Adjoul is led by his ambition.

Late that night, Mostefa meets Bicha Djoudi. As soon as he sees him, he puts his index on his mouth:

"Shut up, Bousenna, I know everything!"

He adds after a moment:

"All what Adjoul has showed me today aims at convincing me that he is rightly entitled to head Idara. Despite that, I insist with all fairness and humility that he has not failed a single time in his role of tissal between Galaa's HQ and the other regions. Do you agree with me Bousenna?"

Bicha, aka Bousenna, can't get over being asked to give his opinion:

"Si Mostefa, Oued Hellail battle has been the breaking point."

Mostefa recalls Adjoul's words: "Serious events have occurred at Oued Hellaïl. I held Abbas as long as I could. You know him, Si Mostefa: he has threatened to kill me before Chihani's trial."

The voice of Bicha quavers:

"There were no trial, no judgment. Adjoul lies. They've killed him. Cursed be they! His blood shall splash on them. They have executed him. Let them stop mess up his memory."

The day after, he accompanies Mostefa up to the entry of Hammam Chaboura:

"Go in and take a bath in safety, Si Mostefa. I will watch from the crest peak and burn whoever approaches."

Mostefa laughs:

"Still as crazy as before! You know something, Bousenna: what heartens me is if I am killed, you will avenge me. Unfortunately, the opposite is not true. I won't avenge you."

After the bath, Mostefa, Adjoul and Bicha go to Hassi Amsallem. They sit around the basin;

Mostefa takes a small sip of crystal like water, looks at Adjoul:

"Adjoul, you are my son. Keep in mind that Chihani is a martyr, even if he has been killed by his companions."

Adjoul turns his eyes toward Bicha. Mostefa grabs their hands and testifies:

"I take here the oath in your presence that I have not betrayed the revolution and that I will not betray it."

3

Mostefa Ben Boulaid again chief of Idara

A few days later, Adjoul arranges an imposing meeting in the centre of the Plateau of Tedjine. Take part some regional chiefs, such as Sidi Henni, Tijani, Benchaiba, Othmani and Guettal, respectively chiefs of Tebessa, Khenchela, Arris, Kimmel and Souk Ahras. Due to his close ties with Omar Ben Boulaid and Messaoud Benaissa, Tahar Nouichi has been deliberately omitted by Adjoul.

December 1955 points its frozen nose, but it feels warm in the fighters' hearts. They press around Mostefa, a human tide of 250 men who chat with him, show him their arms, explain how they got them on the battle field. Sometimes, the story is funny, they laugh and Mostefa laughs with them. And then, to speak truly, even if it not funny, they laugh all the same. Fighters fix a target about one hundred meters downward and ask Mostefa to shoot. He obeys, misses. The men insist: "One more time, Si Mostefa." He shoots again and the sentries up on top of the crests shoot also, while women break into long and joyful hululements modulated by their fluttering hand before their mouth. Mostefa keeps on shooting, this time hails of bullets. He wants to try all weapons, feels the weight of rifles and machine guns (a Bren heavy machine gun attracts his attention) and tucks his hands in snake-like ammunition belts.

Tens of white and green small flags tied to branches, dance in the winter north wind, climbing up to Ras Fourar's top, 1,600 meters high, along a valley covered by a canopy of crests and pegs. Further away north, through the fog, one guesses the snowy head of Ras Keltoum. Adjoul is an apt organizer. He gazes at the unexpectedly hearty reunion and, as a well advised man, he draws the appropriate conclusion. A French officer, Lieutenant Louis, captured by Abbas, is now in custody at Kimmel. Mostefa asks Adjoul to pull him out and permit him to participate in the festivities. (82) He is brought outside and he observes with an amused eye guerrillas mock fighting for food rations during a furious *khatouf* (83). 12 This time, at Tedjine, the battle stake is the orange and to get it, all tricks are permitted. Some guerrillas go as far as stuff the entire fruit into their mouth to escape the diverse holds.

In 1970, Adjoul admits having validated Mostefa's return to Idara only after consultation and agreement of the five regional leaders of Aures and Nememcha.

(82)The Army of National Liberation in Aures has set up the following code concerning war prisoners. A prisoner lives in the same conditions as a freedom fighter. If he is deemed dangerous or tries to escape, he is tied up. During engagements with enemy and if enemy approaches too close, the prisoner is executed. Third case: he is liberated for humanitarian or political reasons.

(83)Khatouf: a game consisting in stealing through ruse or force a fruit or cake from a comrade and eat it while loudly mocking him. (

The feast is at its fullest. Guerrillas, shivery with cold, march in close ranks before Mostefa. He looks surprised: “Are these men our freedom fighters?”

“Yes, Si Mostefa. They are your children.”

“I thank you, kiddies! It feels good.” He gradually is overcome by emotion. (84) At this moment, akin to a buzzing swarm, planes and helicopters cross the sky from West to East. Mostefa looks worried. Adjoul reassures him: “That is not much of a problem. We are used to them. Colonialism attacks us with all its might. We hold out against many battalions together!” Mostefa knows that Adjoul is no swashbuckler; yet, he finds it hard to believe him. Things have changed so fast during his absence. Adjoul continues: “An engagement is certainly going on in Nememcha, with Abbas.”(85)

The day after, at 11:00 a.m., in front of all chiefs and fighters, the bulk of ANL, Adjoul claims his *mea culpa*: “Si Mostefa, I admit having been suspicious about your escape and your good faith. I recognize having ordered, for the sake of the revolution, to quarantine you. I admit my mistake before all of you. From now on, I give back my full trust to Si Mostefa, the father of the revolution.”

From everywhere burst forth ovations. Mostefa is moved. Especially, when each in turn, the chiefs renew their allegiance to him. With an ostentatious gesture, Adjoul gives him the rubber seal (86). Conciliatory, Mostefa stamps some blank sheets of a notebook and returns it to Adjoul.

Life resumes as before. Mostefa dispatches liaison to the other chiefs who have not made it to Tedjine, namely those of mintaka 1, 3, 4 and 5. He summons them to a meeting at Nara (87), in Djebel Lazreg, some kilometers east of Mena. He declares to Bicha:

“This meeting is a turning point. The future of the revolution is at stake.”

At present reassured, he can rest for several days, between Adjoul’s family bordj and Hammam Chaboura. He often trips with Adjoul to the basin of Hassi Amsallem where the water is near freezing. Yet, he feels more and more uneasy. He hates being led by events; he adopts a low profile to untie the threads of the enigma without aggravating the existing dissensions.

(84)One anecdote that reveals an aspect of Mostefa’s character: the quarter master has distributed to each fighter, Mostefa included, an orange. Later, he comes back to Mostefa and offers him a second orange. Mostefa asks: “How about the other fighters?” “There are not many oranges left. Only 3 or 4. Not enough for all men.” “Then, I don’t want your orange!”

(85)It will be confirmed later that there actually was an engagement between Abbas Laghrour’s guerillas and the French at Guentis. Abbas was wounded, which explains why he couldn’t make it to Tedjine’s meeting.

(86)Hexagonal rubber seal, made up in its center of a crescent and a star surrounded by inscriptions: Army of National Liberation and Front of National Liberation.

(87)Nara is a ghost hamlet since its destruction by the French during the Chaouia’s insurrection in 1850.

He clashes another time with Adjoul concerning Ahmed Ben Abderzak. Adjoul refuses to meet him, demands first that he be stripped of his arm and uniform, in conformity with Mostefa and Chihani's instructions. He blames:

“Si Mostefa, you ratify an illegal decision of your brother Omar.”

Mostefa replies that each problem will be solved in due time and that nothing will distract him from his objectives. “Have no fear, Adjoul, I will fix each man's responsibilities and give him his due.”

For the time being, Mostefa assumes his brother's mistakes, as he assumed Benouana's fault when he shut his door to the first guerrillas, Boussaad's refusal to lend his truck to carry them to Batna, Nouaoura's memory lapse when he forgets to wake up on the first day of the insurrection, Maache's absence at Ain Silane near Khenchela on that same day, Benaissa's refusal to assure his guard duty or Mohamed Seghir Azoui's abandonment of guerrillas inside the maze of the streets of Batna. All this he takes upon himself, even the death of Chihani which would not have occurred if he were present.

Adjoul informs him of the presence of two Communist leaders at El Attaf, near his family bordj of Dermoun. He adds that they are treated as special guests of ANL. Mostefa knows one of them, Laid Lamrani, lawyer in Batna. He meets him; they chat for some time, and he understands that Lamrani is ready to open a new military southern front. Mostefa questions: “How do you spend your days in the bush?”

“Adjoul has asked us, me and my comrade Raffini, to help write tracts.”

4

Death of the two Communists

During the first week of November 1955, Laid Lamrani, member of the Central Committee of the Algerian Communist Party, leaves Batna with his French comrade Raffini. Thanks to the FNL's underground channels, they are given shelter at the regional HQ of Ouistili where they rest a few days in the company of Lamouri, Omar Ben Boulaid and another Omar, a house painter. They lodge in a certain Salah Idara's house who one day, comes back from Batna in a happy mood. He waves in his hand a newspaper, *La Depeche de Constantine*, bearing a huge headline: Mostefa Ben Boulaid has escaped. Guerrillas fire shots in the air, happy and worried about Mostefa's whereabouts. Omar Ben Boulaid, looking much annoyed, expels guards from his shelter and forbids them to sleep with him. He compels his closest ally to find him a secret hideout and not reveal its location to anyone.

Ali Benchaiba is given the mission to guide the two Communists up to Mount Ahmar Khaddou, then to S'Ra El Hammam. He narrates:

"Laid lamrani did not stop asking questions about the revolution, its strength and field of action. I told him that in the north, ANL had reached its full, but in the south, everything remained to be done. He declared that if HQ agreed, he would volunteer to open a front down south. At S'Ra El Hammam, Si Adjoul welcomes them and treats them as distinguished guests. To Lamrani's offer, he responds by asking them to give a helping hand at the secretariat. Lamrani talks a lot. He affirms his readiness to set up a maquis against France, under the auspices of the Algerian Communist Party. At first listened to, he notes pretty soon that his audience melts down like snow in the sun. He is gradually isolated and the chiefs keep clear of him. It is reported to Adjoul that Lamrani has drawn on the ground with small stones, a hammer and sickle. Adjoul yells at him and forbids him any drawing of Communist symbols:

"If colonialism arrives up here, it'll imagine the revolution is made by Communists!"

Lamrani smiles:

"What's wrong with that? I myself have fought colonialism since my early youth."

In 1969, Adjoul tells me Lamrani's act is not to his taste. He informs at once Mostefa. The latter gets annoyed and conscious of the danger. He wants to put an end to this situation: he summons Lamrani and requires from him to formally abjure the Communist party and join the FNL, since the Front embraces all political parties. Lamrani refuses the offer, puts forward with emotion his justifications and evokes similarities between Communism and FNL's program:

"Si Mostefa, we are engaged in the same struggle, side by side. The FNL needs support in and out of Algeria. We, Communists, can provide you with big support and make your task easier. Moreover, I must tell you that I came here to help on my own initiative. I swear I have not informed my Central Committee."

Mostefa replies:

“So, you have acted like an adventurer. Like me, like all partisans, as professed by Communists in Algiers.”

Lamrani’s French companion protests:

“It is sheer misunderstanding. Our comrades in Algiers have not seen what is going on here!”

Lamrani resumes his plea:

“Si Mostefa, don’t fall into the trap of agents provocateurs. The fight for independence needs all patriots and the Algerian Communist Party disposes of as many militants as the FNL.”

Mostefa asks:

“Which Communist Party are you talking of? The French settlers’?”

Lamrani enumerates names of Algerian Communists. Mostefa inquires:

“Where are they?”

“It is only up to you. If you want them here with you, they will come straightforward!”

“O.K! But under FNL’s banner!”

“Si Mostefa, the FNL’s base is weakened by many contradictions. A bourgeois does not have the same fighting spirit as a worker or a peasant. He owns properties and wealth. I tell you that class conflicts evaded during the Liberation war shall come up as soon as colonialism is defeated.”

Adjoul laughs and interrupts him:

“My father possesses a few hectares at Zeribet El Oued and some jars of dehane (88). For you then, he is a bourgeois.”

Mostefa smiles, so does Lamrani:

“Si Adjoul, I don’t mean you or your father. The Communist Party has a great proficiency in masses’ manipulation. It can help FNL keeping off a lot of mistakes. Besides, not far from here, at Biskra, we have some comrades who are veteran fighters of the Spanish war (89). They could help.”

Lamrani talks to a brick wall. His Marxist theories don’t awake any echo among patriots. Mostefa, Adjoul and, to a lesser extent, Chihani, don’t burden themselves with too complex theories. On the contrary, they would rather be suspicious of them.

Mostefa declares:

“We fight with the help of God. We are believers and, with His aid, we shall drive out the occupying power. Afterward, we will decide on the next move. Everything in its time!”

Adjoul told me that his annoyance grew stronger; Lamrani, sharper than a razor blade, argued every inch of the way. Aware of Adjoul’s incapacity to understand French, he speaks in Arabic: “Si Mostefa, do not forget that the Algerian Communist Party belongs to a mighty international family of revolutionaries, experts in wars against imperialism.”

(88)Dehane: salted butter conserved for years in earthen jars underground. It comes from cows’ or sheep’s milk and is used for cooking or pastry making.

(89)Lamrani certainly talks of Maurice Laban, a Communist who fought in the Spanish Civil war on the Republican side and now lives in the town of Biskra, about 100 kilometers south of Batna.

Mostefa abhors this paternalistic tone. He literally explodes. “The Front assembles all Parties, MTLD and CRUA included. Why not the Communist Party?”

Lamrani answers with a critical tone:

“The situation is different. Our Party is the workers’ party, those who are victims of colonial exploitation. Our Party stands up against racial or religious discrimination. It fights for equality. And, above all, it has deputies in the French National Assembly in Paris. These deputies take part in the elaboration of laws and decisions. Through this channel, our Party can come in useful for the Algerian cause, something it can’t do if it merges with FNL. Besides, we don’t favor individual and isolated actions of desperados that would only break the workers’ solidarity. We would rather privilege political fight because violence compels colonialism to jail our militants. In fact, Si Mostefa, nothing will come out of violence. We oughtn’t to replace a one-eyed horse with a blind one.”

Mostefa turns livid. He gets up, followed by Adjoul, and he stares at Lamrani, skinnier than ever, very fighting cock, stubborn till absurd! He says:

“Look around you! These villages bombed, razed to the ground by French planes, those innocent people killed or out rooted, what is it in your opinion? The truth is that you and I don’t belong to the same world. The Algerian Communist Party is obsolete, out of date. You stand against the tide of History. I repeat once more: if you are willing to join us, welcome. Under the banner of FNL.”

I ask:

“What happened next, Si Adjoul?”

“Nothing worth telling. Mostefa was angry. He said: ‘We have nothing more to do with these people. They hold the same language as Messalist and Centralist reformists.’ However, he tried another time to convince Lamrani by sending him his brother Abdelhamid. ‘Go and talk to him. Try and convince him. After all, he is your brother. We will see the outcome.’ ”

Abdelhamid, as expected, fails. His brother laid blames him. “Abdelhamid, despite our different careers, we are on the same side of the fence. You have chosen the MTLD and FNL. I am older than you and will never try to change your mind. As for me, Communist I am, Communist I’ll die.” After Abdelhamid reports his set back, Mostefa orders Adjoul to proceed with the Communists’ execution. Bicha, present during the kill, narrates:

“Both Communists were executed at Ksar Ouled Aïssa, on early morning. The first to die, the bearded French, refused to abjure his Party. He was asked by a guerrilla to cry: ‘Long lives the revolution!’ He cried: ‘Long lives the revolution! Long lives the Communist party!’ He was shot dead. Another guerrilla stands up facing Lamrani. He tells him: ‘You have Arab blood in your veins. What do you cry?’ Lamrani replies: ‘Yes, I have Arab blood in my veins. I cry like my comrade: ‘Communism will never die! Long lives Communism!’ ” (90)

Later, when the sun is high in the sky, a fighter stumbles over an inscription made up of stones on the ground that says: “Long lives the Algerian Communist Party.” He thoroughly scatters it with his feet. Two or three days after, Mostefa confides to Adjoul:

(90)Adjoul has told me that the French Communist, Raffini, had accepted to enlist in ANL and fight under the FNL’s banner, but Lamrani prevented him from doing so.

“I have not managed to convince Lamrani. His brother neither. Lamrani is a big size, a strong personality. He could have caused a big damage to the revolution in favor of his Party.”

Mostefa turns toward Lieutenant Louis. He asks Adjoul to photograph him and send his picture to his wife with a letter proposing his exchange with Amor Mestiri, captured by the French at Bouchebka on June 1955. (91)

Now, Mostefa tackles Ahmed Ben Abderzak’s issue. Obeying the repeated injunctions of Adjoul, he disarms him and expels him from the Army. Edged out, Ben Abderzak wanders about, like a lost soul, unsure of his fate. Mostefa has told him:

“For me, I always see you as a faithful Messalist. (92) You’ve entered ANL through a narrow opening, in a way I don’t appreciate. I will think of your case. You know that some time ago, I sentenced you to death, but fate has decided otherwise.”

Ben Abderzak has answered:

“Si Mostefa, I have joined ANL with an innocent heart.”

Mostefa takes off his cap, scratches his head and laughs:

“God will decide. One thing is sure: I won’t tolerate any more cheating from you.”

Ben Abderzak grabs Mostefa’s hands, causing the cap to fall on the ground, presses and kisses them, imploring:

“With this oath, I pledge a sincere loyalty to you.”

He gets up, offers Mostefa field glasses, a whole jute sack full to the brim of fatigue uniforms.

Later, Bicha teases Mostefa:

“Is it treason to side with Messali? As far as I remember, I have always been a militant of his Party.” (93)

Mostefa scolds him:

“Now, you talk politics, Bousenna! Don’t get me wrong: Messali has always been our father. We owe him respect, even if he has deviated.”

(91)Lieutenant Louis was captured by Abbas Laghrour in Nememcha together with a French warrant officer who died from wounds. Louis was sent to Kimmel to be kept in custody. Horrified by his filth, Abbas had ordered that he be moved to Chaboura’s baths for delousing and cleaning. Afterward, Louis writes a letter to his wife. She answers that his exchange with Mestiri was not acceptable to the French military.

(92)At Abbassa, few kilometers from Sidi Ali, in Serahna’s territory, Mostefa orders Bicha to execute Ahmed Ben Abderzak. Bicha pleads against the killing: “Since I know this man, he never came to us empty handed. He has helped the revolution in many ways: money, uniforms, and field glasses. Why not use him?” Mostefa has replied angrily: “Bousenna, you must know he on the contrary is dangerous.” Less than two months later, he will entrust him with organizing the southern region with the help of Ziani.

(93)On November 14, 1954, Belgacem Grine opens a meeting with militants of Batna by invoking the name of Messali. Militants at the time ignored Messali’s destitution and High Command had not informed them to prevent divisions.

One morning, a militant informs Mostefa:

“They said on the radio that your escape from prison amounts to setting up 400 elite troops.”

Mostefa cries out: “Only 400?”

He burns with the desire to go to Kabylia. He has been told that the French had established there self defense groups, dangerous for the revolution. Adjoul talks him out of going. The month of December 1955 is used by Mostefa to discover again life in the bush. Cold is bitter, water in rivers is frozen and hardly allows morning ablutions. Mostefa is back on command after a plebiscite by a majority of chiefs. He is conscious though that neither Adjoul, nor Abbas are totally behind him, especially the first one who has given him command only because he was forced to.

During our numerous conversations, Adjoul adopts a claim maker's attitude, declaring that, if the revolution has not fared well, it was because Mostefa has not chosen the right men and has not changed them, even knowing his choices were erroneous. He reveals that Mostefa has favored people of his clan and their clients, e.g. Ahmed Ben Abderzak. Benaissa and Meddour have bypassed revolutionary orthodoxy and snubbed bush constraints because they were he would back them. Abbas has abandoned Aures because of death threats from Omar Ben Boulaid

6

Battle of Ifri Lablah

Middle of January 1956. Mostefa is getting ready to leave Kimmel. He asks Adjoul to wait for him. He pays a visit to the wounded nursed in the regional field hospital. After, half teasing, half serious, he requests of Adjoul:

“Adjoul, will you permit Bousenna to accompany me?”

“Why ask, Si Mostefa? If you wish, you can take along the whole army, not only Bousenna.” Bicha, full of joy, could have flown just by extending his arms. Mostefa then tells him:

“You stay where you are. I don’t need you. Your head is too hard and this not much to my taste.” He takes Bicha’s rifle, weighs it in his hands and then returns it to him with a small amount of money. “Take good care of yourself. If I come back, we won’t leave each other. Otherwise, don’t forget to reveal what you know.”

Upset, Bicha retorts:

“Go back to where you belong, Si Mostefa. Your people are waiting for you.”

“Bear with me, Bousenna. Do you know the difference between us?”

“No.”

Mostefa then repeats what he told him once in Hammam Chaboura. Before his departure, Adjoul presents him with the Bren heavy machine gun he so much liked at Tedjine.

On his way south west and Mchouneche, Mostefa is caught up by a patrol at Ifri Lablah. It is a region crossed by steep canyons and Oued Ghassira, situated between Ghoufi and Baniane.

The patrol had missed him at Kimmel and had followed him at full speed till Ifri. It had come from the east, sent by Abbas Laghrour with as usual, plenty of good things carried by two mules: a sleeping bag and loads of ammunition. In a letter, Abbas apologizes to Mostefa for his absence because he is wounded. He promises to come and see him as soon as he gets better. Mostefa is reassured. He laughs while he unfolds the air mattress at once and for the second time, dubbed ‘Si Mostefa’s flying carpet.’ (94) He has the bags emptied: they are crammed with all kinds of ammunition, all calibers, thousands of them. He commands:

“Hide them!”

The men reply:

“To morrow, Si Mostefa!” He looks at them with curiosity. *Mostefa Boucetta explains to me: “Between Si Mostefa and guerrillas, no message got through. Communication you might say was cut. They were not on the same wave length.”*

Some fighters light a fire on the forest edge, at the feet of rocky peaks. Rapidly, they knead and cook a *mella* (95) which they eat with canned sardines. In the clear night, snow has taken a very pale blue color.

(94)In Arabic, *boussat errih*. One recalls how the first carpet was lost at Bougherzal on December 23, 1954, during the French attack on his refuge.

(95)Mella: semolina dough cooked in hot ashes in the absence of a cooking plate.

The morning after, Ifri Lablah is flown over by huge helicopters that come from the west. They take over the sky, wheel around for some time and disappear toward the north east, in the direction of Ghoufi. They are replaced by the habitual reconnaissance plane, much slower. Mostefa is nervous. He clearly makes out in the ice like luminosity of the winter morning, a group of tanks moving out of Tifelfel in the east. He instructs:

“Stay under cover! Keep watch on the plane!”

He commands Benchaiba to convey a message to Mohamed Ben Messaoud, chief of Mchouneche: each fighter is required to fill up his cartridge belt and rucksack with as many bullets as possible.

All men do, but still remains a big quantity of ammunition. Mostefa orders:

“Bury what remains. We will return this evening to pick it up.”

He squints up at the plane all the time. Mostefa Boucetta continues his narration:

“Mostefa looked worried. He yelled at some men who walked out of cover, indifferent to his orders and to the plane. At this moment, arrive the lookouts. They inform him that the valley is shut off from Baniane to Ouled Mansour and that the region is swarming with French soldiers. The partisans don't care. They gather around him, building a tight circle. A group's leader admits they are too exposed in their present position; they just have to move up in the mountain to be secure. No sooner said than done. They start climbing Ahmar Khaddou, heading toward its peak, Taktiout, which culminates at 2,000 meters. A few minutes later, come from out of the blue, appear planes that throw smoke grenades. Mostefa shouts: “Down, everybody!” A fighter replies: “No, Si Mostefa! On the contrary, we must get out of here, quick! The pilots have seen us. Look!” He takes aim with his rifle and fires at the planes. “We are used to this kind of war. We just have to stick to the enemy.” He resumes his ascension, leaving Mostefa lying on the ground. Smoke covers the landscape; guerrillas are not visible any more. The French begin showering the forest with artillery and mortar shells. Pilots now strafe and bomb to their hearts' content. Mostefa gets up, runs inside the thick artificial clouds and noisy bombs, crosses a field full of chippings and hides under a rock, soon followed by a fighter. The enemy barrage fire goes crescendo. Shells fall heavy and fast, projecting shrapnel mixed with fluffy smoke. Soon, jets bombers dive with a deafening scream. Nine fighters are hit, more or less seriously. Their companions hide them in the far end of a cavern, give each one a hand gun and run for their lives. The groups split up into small squads, disperse and climb without looking back. French troops are everywhere, dropped from helicopters or carried on trucks. They enter Ahmar Khaddou Mount from Mchouneche in a vain attempt to cut partisans' progression. A group of fighters succeeds in crossing enemy circle without shooting a single bullet. Another one, less rapid, is trapped inside enemy net. Patriots lie down at the top of a slope and fire at random a few hails of bullets. Then, as if pushed out of a cloud, well visible down on the river bed, appears the silhouette of a grey-haired enemy, leaning on a cane and walking nonchalantly in a little dog's company. He passes at about ten meters of the first partisans' line. Benchaiba aims at him. A companion prevents him from shooting. Another fighter, Hocine Maarfi, higher on the slope, opens fire. He is spotted and fired at. Bewildered, they all see a fatty bearded legionnaire crawl up toward him, grab his

rifle and return safely to his position, despite their sustained fire. Some time later, Benchaiba picks out the enemy heavy machine gun sharpshooter and shoots him.

The French go on shooting for several minutes, then fall back; while doing so, they find themselves caught between two fires, Benchaiba's group uphill and Mostefa downhill. The latter declares afterward having hit 8 or 9 enemies. The engagement lasts the entire day. At sunset, the mountain goes pink and the fighters are down in the dumps because Mostefa has disappeared! They look for him in silence. Meddour Azoui takes off his noisy hobnailed boots and barefoot, goes searching for him through beaten tracks. Partisans know that the French are waiting in ambush and make no noise.

Meanwhile, in the unsure night, Mostefa trudges along with three comrades, heading south west. They walk on the main forest path that ends in Baniane. They are ambushed by the enemy who wound two fighters, one on his foot. Mostefa turns back, crawls for an unspecified distance, reaches Louestia more to the north where he spends the rest of the night. The morning next, he meets most guerrillas at Sakiet Cheurfa, east of Louestia, one of the preselected fallbacks.

Assessment is rapid: 12 patriots are missing. (96)The mules sent by Abbas have gone astray. During the day, however, one of them comes back alone to Sakiet Cheurfa, to the partisans' delight. Later, as if they guessed the presence of a big game, the French set up a large combing, starting from Oued Abdi and Arris.

In an infernal carrousel, seven bananas-like helicopters fly over Sakiet Cheurfa, drop paratroopers in several rotations till midday, then, bellies empty, leave room for the habitual yellow spy plane which draws in the sky large idle circles. Mostefa is angry. He orders to extinguish a fire lit to cook a *mella*. The sky empties. It fills up again with hysterical jet bombers and furious T6 planes which bomb and machine gun. They escort other bigger planes that drop huge bombs. A fighter jumps out of bushes, aims at the sky and fire short hails of bullets. The planes fly higher. Other fighters come out and fire in the air. A big bomber is hit. It suddenly adopts a languid posture and begins a smoke-filled descent westward.

Mostefa can't get over it:

“This is great, kiddies! But return to cover! Don't underestimate enemy!”

The planes now fly very high and disappear. A tissal informs Mostefa that the French have broken off a combing at Khangat Sidi Nadji in order to move to Sakiet Cheurfa. Enemy machine gunning and artillery shelling go on non-stop till sunset.

At nightfall, Mostefa orders patriots to break enemy stranglehold and fixes them rendez-vous at Baniane, 50 kilometers west. He requires the help of local civilian guides. Enemy has established alarm bells on checkpoints along all paths and lies in wait in a tomb-like silence. The partisans split up into half groups and follow the guides in a single file.

(96)The nine wounded guerillas hidden in a cavern are found by the French who kill them on the spot.

They manage to get out of the noose and lose only one man. They need however an entire night to cover the 30 kilometers which separate them from Kef Larous, 20 kilometers away from Baniane.

It is still night when at last, they reach Kef Larous, one after the other, and slump on the ground, exhausted and short-winded. A freezing breeze stiffens sweat on their faces. Mostefa commands:

“Well, kiddies, one more effort. We must cross the valley before dawn.”

They reply:

“We are safe here. Let us take some rest. God will help us later.”

Mostefa boils with anger.

“Ah! That is the way you want it. All right! Stay here. Me neither, I won’t budge. In fact, I won’t go anywhere!”

He hastens toward a tree, pulls his cap well down over his eyes and lies down on the moss, resting his head against the trunk, a few centimeters from the ground. One by one, the regional leaders take turns to explain to him the guerrillas’ state of mind and attempt to soothe his anger. “They still don’t know you, Si Mostefa. Give them some time. They have to get used to you.”

He won’t listen and stops his sulkiness only at day break when they finally cross Ghassira River, the hamlet of Eddissa and enter Djebel Lazreg at midday.

Morale is high. ANL’s resistance against the French deluge of iron and fire is another proof of its warring capacity.

Mostefa spends February and the first week of March 1956 preparing the meeting of Nara.

Tirelessly, he tries to catch up with the huge backlog accumulated during his absence.

Through all channels, he gathers information, solves the most urgent issues, and leaves the others for later. His secretary, Abdelhamid Lamrani, aka Khalis, very much in demand, helps as he can.

As mentioned earlier, since his escape, Mostefa is hounded by time. He wants to dissect and solve problems of what is called now the first zone. *Adjoul who was forced to relinquish power, is dogged by ill luck. After getting rid of all would be commanders, such as Chihani, Omar Ben Boulaid, Messaoud Benaissa and managing to send away Abbas Laghrour to Nememcha, lo and behold, he gets caught up by Mostefa who, unexpectedly, escapes from prison.*

Mostefa meets in the zone a demanding and full of himself Adjoul; he follows the movement and publicly promises to punish all culprits. Twice he summons Abbas to come; Abbas replies he is wounded and unable to journey. Which is true since he’s been wounded several times in the battles of Guentis and Lamra of February 1956. What happened before this battle? Abbas reads Mostefa’s message inviting to come. He talks with his assistant, Ahmed El Ghoul: should he go on preparing another battle of Lamra or obey Mostefa’s summons? El Ghoul

stands for the battle. Not surprisingly, Abbas does too. Let Mostefa wait! Not for long since he will die a month later. Abbas anyway won't hear of his death because he is too busy fighting the Foreign Legion, between Guentis and Oued El Arab, at Djeurf, Saiar and Boukhadrane. Born for war, Abbas disobeys Mostefa's orders, but presents him with two mules loaded with ammunition and an air mattress, as a token of allegiance. Many have insinuated that he feared Mostefa's anger after the execution of Chihani. Nay! Abbas puts too much emphasis on the holiness of his fight and apprehends no judgment, be it Mostefa's. He thinks of himself as God's sword. He has proven it by killing the 8 tirailleurs volunteers in the French army, by executing the local squire and his 4 wives at Khenchela, by eliminating Mohamed Ghabrouri at Galaa; and last but not least, he proudly assumes Chihani's assassination, revealing to where can lead his holy fire. For him, Chihani is no warrior but a Party man, ideologue and planner who has not taken part in any battle and has not fired a single shot, guilty though of the unforgivable loss of 85 freedom fighters at Oued Hellail.

The military skill of Abbas was revealed after his departure from Aures at the end of October 1955. He feels at ease in the wild tormented Nememcha and takes his quarters along a quadrilateral limited roughly by Guentis and Djeurf east, Taberdga and Saiar in the centre, Taffassour and Djellal till Khangat Sidi Nadji west and south. Like nomads, he moves here and there without permanent HQ. He challenges the French:

"I am in such-and-such place. I wait for you."

The enemy rarely accepts his invitations. After some time, he manages to control a portion of the frontier with Tunisia, at that time still under French occupation. At his disposal he has a troop of about 700 men, more or less armed. One hundred of them dispose of automatic weapons and 4 heavy machine guns, the manning of which poses a serious problem due to a lack of machine gunners! If one considers he is confronting a well equipped French army, one can affirm he comes through all right. The battles he fights at Djellal, Lamra, Taffassour, Zoui, Cheria and Zeribet El Oued up to the Tunisian frontier are propitious to him and allow him to glean plenty of arms and ammunition. He dispatches part of them to Kimmel and Arris to feed the Liberation war.

So, Abbas has not seen Mostefa. He reasons that he will come to inspect Nememcha where problems exist in great number. After awhile, he learns of his death at Djebel Labied, near Tebessa where he is being nursed for new wounds. Life must continue as before. He and Adjoul assume control of HQ, he for military affairs, Adjoul for administration. Adjoul takes advantage of his position to appoint his people at key posts and administers with an iron hand. Any mistake equals death, as simple as that! Mistakes run from disobedience to orders, meeting a civilian, absence of passes or orders for missions, to biased speech or unclear behavior.

Adjoul doesn't skimp. He is authoritarian, tyrannical and cruel. A few months of his sway make his men flee and revolt against him. He rarely meets Abbas and no one takes offense at that because both face many arduous problems. Up to the end though, they remain faithful to each other. This definitely has not been the case of Lezhar Cheriet, an exceptional war leader

who rejected both Adjoul and Abbas. One remembers that Adjoul and Chihani meted out repression in Nememcha with a heavy hand.

By now, a few months after Mostefa's death, Abbas is waging a pitiless war against enemy elite troops: legionnaires and paratroopers inside a zone bounded by the Rivers Gharghar, Boudoukhane and Ouazzane, more to the east. The battles are deadly for the French. With Lezhar Cheriet, Abbas makes up a formidable duo. Partisans follow them blindly; one of them, an old fighter from Nememcha, has narrated me the battle of Bekkaria: *"Toward the end of November 1956, we used to trip around between Tunisia and Algeria, like wolves' packs. One evening, Lezhar Cheriet ordered us to stop. He said: "Yeah, brothers! Si Mostefa Ben Boulaid is dead!" Some of us, always the same, had sat down. I remained upright, stiff as a stick; I hear that Si Mostefa has been killed by a radio set transformed into a booby-trap and dropped from a plane. Cheriet continues his speech: "We must avenge him and attack with all our might. Today, our objective is Tebessa. We will show them." For me, despite my age, I was willing to show them. We were around 140 fighters, well armed with even two or three heavy machine guns. Night fell, trees started telling each other diurnal events. We ran down to Tebessa like Indians, chest ahead. Anyway, we could not have done otherwise: Lezhar Cheriet attracts fighters like a magnet. The French fired at us, killing five and wounding ten. We crossed back to Tunisia and stopped between the black and white rivers. We hid our dead under branches and hauled up the wounded on mules. On morning, B26 planes spotted us. We crawled, so did the mules. The blind bombs blew astray. Under the forest cover, we tripped the whole day, till dusk. I remember the napalm and Salah Ben Ali ordering us to return to Boukhadra. I hear: "Gets some sleep! We'll wake you." I fall on the hot ground and sleep. Some one hit my ribs, I wake up. The sun equals a man's height. I fire, the butt hurts my shoulder; I see two jeeps, a truck and fleeing enemies. I fire, cock, fire: they must not reach the bottom of the river. A striped soldier hides behind a jeep, fires at us several hails of bullets. He stops. We race down the slope at full speed, pick up 8 rifles, 2 machine guns and 1 heavy machine gun without stakes but with 6 magazines, the others have been fired by the striped soldier. Shortly after, goumiers fire at us with 35 m/m cannons. At dusk, is heard the crackle of burning trees and explosion of napalm barrels. We keep away from embers, cook a mella and it burns our mouths. Salah Ben Ali is wounded, but still in command. We head for Bekkaria in the moon lighted night, walking in two parallel lines. The wind blows, cold when in front, warm and smoky when behind. Not far, two riders trot in our direction, one on a white horse, the other on a black one. Abbas surely rides the white horse because only white suits the pure soul of a God's fighter. He commands: "Turn back! We attack!" We obey, hot fumes blind us, our eyes smart, we cry on our fate. I wish I were dead. Abbas calls the other platoons. We stumble over enemy on a talus; we fire, killing at least 15. I see goumiers rushing on us from the left. We pull back. Abbas hates it. He looks annoyed. He orders me to cover him with 5 men. I stay behind more than 20 minutes in the river bed, firing all the time. Then, we retreat quick, leaving the smoke behind and millions of sparks flying under our feet."*

Lezhar Cheriet chooses this time to rebel against Adjoul. He gathers his troops and endeavors to attack Adjoul, but Kimmel is too far. So, he'll attack Abbas instead. After all, they are allies! He encircles his detachment at Djebel Labied. Abbas knows Cheriet's pugnacity. He hastens to send a tissal to Adjoul asking for help. Adjoul immediately assembles a battalion of Serahna and Chorfa, armed entirely with automatic weapons and crosses Oued El Arab and Saiar. After a three day trek, he arrives in Djebel Labied. For the first time in his life, Lezhar Cheriet stalls. In the not too far past, he had boasted that, should he meet Adjoul, he would gladly kill him. This time, a phony battle lasts less than two days and stops by itself, without conclusion. Later, Adjoul makes it to Abbas. He compels him to go to Tunisia in order to sort out regional problems of the frontier once for all.

Lezhar Cheriet also heads for Tunisia where local authorities offer him a warm welcome because of his participation in the Tunisian freedom struggle against France.

Adjoul remains alone in Nememcha. He tries in vain to tackle its numerous problems. His word amounts to nothing since the spreading of rumors asserting he had killed Mostefa Ben Boulaid and Chihani, plus his inhuman treatment of Nemouchis. A few weeks later, he returns to Kimmel where at least he is at home and secure. By now, after Abbas' departure, he is the only leader, locked in Kimmel. He is isolated; he receives no visitors, no tissal to transmit his orders or to inform him. He spends most of his time in the family bordj of Dermoun. He is still feared. His men now flee him because he accepts no criticism and his reactions are harsh. He has no relations with other regions such as Batna, Bouarif, Ain Touta, Barika, Setif or Chelia, which all live in complete autarky, ignorant of what is going on in Kimmel.

6

Djebel Lazreg's meeting

On March 11, 1956, Mostefa holds a preliminary meeting, commonly called Djebel Lazreg's meeting. Are present Abdelhafid Toreche, Tahar Nouichi, Hadj Lakhdar, Ali Baazi, Mohamed Ben Messaoud, Mostefa Boucetta, Mostefa Reaïli, Messaoud Benaïssa, Omar Ben Boulaid, Ahmed Nouaoura, Mohamed Cherif Benakcha and Abdelhamid Lamrani. Ahmed Ben Abderzak still on probation is not permitted to assist.

Mostefa says of him: "He is dangerous, but I am certain he won't betray his promise to me. I shall appoint him to the Sahara. He has proven his utility to the revolution."

He continues his informal speech before the regional chiefs:

"The French admit now that ANL is able to carry on operations at the battalion's level. I can testify this statement is true. I have with my own eyes seen a bomber crash after a hit by our fighters. What more can we ask for?"

Mostefa Boucetta has told me years later that during the meeting the emotion was great. All participants were convinced that victory would come. "The return of Mostefa was for us a miracle. Quarrels had ceased, replaced by a quiet euphoria. He warned us: 'Watch out, kids, the present leaders of the revolution have become so only through a combination of circumstances, good or bad, the future will say. The result is that out of 19 chiefs, 11 are Touaba. (97) This must change. The revolution is no property of a man or a clan. Each region and sector will choose its own leader, according to his merits.' Mostefa is the only one to confront problems of tribalism without hypocrisy. After that, he introduced to us two Algerian sergeants who had just defected from the French army: 'Welcome them as brethren and give them a good reception. They are heroes.' Then, he goes back to the oncoming meeting and adds there is no agenda because for now, the thing of paramount importance dealt with resuming contact with all regional chiefs. The afternoon, he receives with plenty of consideration a certain Ziane, a Messalist from Oued Djellal who joined the revolution with a detachment of 700 armed combatants. 'Our brother, Si Ziane, I announce it to you publicly, has joined ANL. From this day on, the revolution accepts him in its ranks and entrusts him with the care of both regions of Bou Saada and Djelfa.' The actual meeting starts late that night. First item on the agenda: census of the partisans' families and estimation of family allowances. The meeting secretary inquires about each present leader's family status.

-Si Mostefa, are you married?

-Yes.

-How many children do you have?

-Wait let me count.

(97)Touaba, plural of Toubi, who represent the preponderant tribe in Aures. Mostefa himself is a Toubi.

His brother Omar stops him laughingly:

-Beware! Don't dare count Abdelwahab! He is my son, not yours! (97)

After the families' census, the second item is the volunteers' corps dissolution. Mostefa explains: 'ANL is made up of volunteers. They enjoy the same rights and duties. It is out of question to favor fighters because they belong to a special detachment. We all run the same risks.' The corps then is disbanded. Third item: The reorganization of *mintaka*. Mostefa quite frankly admits that he needs more time to make up for his present ignorance of the situation. He evokes the jumbled up problems of each one's responsibilities in the revolution, of 'who does what?' He remarks that the region of Arris is too big to be manageable. (98)He says it must be split up into two regions. Finally, he asks that personalized letters be sent to German and Moroccan soldiers serving in the French army, advising them to desert.

(98)Abdelwahab, the son of Mostefa Ben Boulaid, has been assassinated on March 1995, on the road Algiers-Batna by armed men while he was on his way to Nara to celebrate his father's death anniversary. Mostefa, after his escape, had refused to see him for security reasons.

(99)At that time, the region of Arris comprises 8 sectors: Barika, Setif, Batna, Ain El Ksar, Chelia, Arris, Mchouneche and Bousaada.

7

Kimmel's meeting

On March 13, 1956, Mostefa sets out again on his inspection touring and heads back to Kimmel where are waiting for him leaders of 5 *mintaka*: Louardi Guettal of Souk Ahras, Tijani of Khenchela, Sidi Henni of Tebessa, Boucetta of Kimmel, Benchaiba and Benakcha of Arris. His brother Omar and Messaoud Benaissa don't accompany him.

The meeting starts that same evening. Mostefa is in a hurry. He feels pressed by deadlines. Disagreement simmers between him and Louardi Guettal.

First problem: fate of the weapons sent from Tunisia. He declares:

"Distribution of arms should be fair."

His words are backed by a murmur of approbation. Abdallah Nouaouria, assistant of the chief of Souk Ahras, asks for the floor:

"We prefer that each *mintaka* comes to the frontier and fetches its quota of arms and ammunition. We just can't carry out their deliveries."

Mostefa agrees:

"Let each *mintaka* send men to the frontier and take its share."

Second problem: number of guerrillas. Each leader gives a number, inevitably approximate. Mostefa looks skeptical. The number mentioned by Louardi Guettal of Souk Ahras seems excessive. He asks:

-Si Louardi, tell me, are all your men armed? (91)

-No, Si Mostefa. We actually have at our disposal only 400 arms, many of them shotguns.

-Then, why enlist so many recruits? This can only favor the introduction of traitors and Messalists in our ranks.

-Si Mostefa, most of the men are militants wanted by enemy.

-In this case, you should require they come to the bush with their arm. By the way, tell me, smoking is still forbidden in Souk Ahras?

-Yes, Si Mostefa.

-And smokers punished?

-Yes. We chop off their nose. If they do it again, punishment is more consequent.

-I have heard that you smoke publicly, in front of those same people you have punished. A chief must be an example.

(100)Number of fighters in the Aures Nememcha maquis on March 1956:

Souk Ahras	1,400
Arris	1,200
Kimmel	450
Khenchela	350
Tebessa	350
Eastern Base	150

Mostefa now is reminiscent of the spiteful behavior of Nemouchi fighters with civilians at the beginning of the revolution on February 1955. He temporarily dismisses Louardi Guettal and replaces him with his assistants, Abdallah Nouaouria and Amor Djebbar. He appoints also a commission to investigate Guettal's misbehavior. Later, he informs Nouaouria that he should get things ready for an interzonal meeting in Souk Ahras. Mostefa Boucetta recalls his words: "Time has come to plot our position. Tinkering about and amateurishness are out. There exists disagreement between regions. It must vanish, because our mission is great. It surpasses us." In those days, anarchy prevailed inside the strategic places positioned between Tunisia and Algeria. *Courage does not replace ignorance.* Mostefa wants by all means to prevent Nememcha from splitting up, without actually going there. The March 13, 1956 meeting takes place in Kimmel where security is assured. Out of the five regional leaders, Louardi Guettal is the most questionable. After the Oued Hellaïl battle, the region comprised between Annaba and the Tunisian frontier becomes essential. It is headed by a certain Ahmed Laurassi, helped by Amor Djebbar and Louardi Guettal.

Louardi Guettal who has survived the Oued Hellaïl battle has been named by Chihani assistant of Laurassi. *One must recall at this point that Amor Djebbar was the first to start insurrection in Annaba at the head of a ten men group, armed with shotguns.* Mostefa Boucetta goes on narrating that Amor Djebbar informed Mostefa Ben Boulaid on Guettal's misbehavior. Learning that, Guettal retaliates by reporting to Mostefa that other chiefs have stolen sheep and cattle of the population and that Amor Djebbar has had illicit liaisons with women. Mostefa does not believe him and appoints a commission to investigate all supposed crimes. He relieves Guettal of his command and appoints Amor Djebbar in his post. Some days after Kimmel's meeting, Mostefa dies while manipulating a booby trapped radio. Louardi Guettal takes advantage of his death to execute Amor Djebbar who was on his way back toward Souk Ahras. *In these regions, revenge is a meal taken hot.*

Let us go back to the March 13 meeting. The agenda is exhausted little before daybreak. Before leaving, the participants eat a quick snack. One of them criticizes the upgrading of Kimmel to zone, a pernicious attack against Adjoul. Mostefa's reaction is severe: "In fact, the zone of Kimmel is organized as it should be. It represents a model to be followed by all. I tell you something: I intend to transform it into a central warehouse which will eventually supply all zones and open a larger field hospital and rest centre for our djounoud."

On March 14, Mostefa leaves Kimmel and heads westward, crossing villages burned down by French planes and emptied out of their residents. Only half starved dogs wander aimlessly amid ruins. Everything is devastated: the Aures hanging gardens, result of a many centuries hard labor, palm groves and orchards destroyed, corn lofts smashed open, stone houses crushed, beheaded, unveiling their pitiful undersides. Even cemeteries have not been spared and have received their share of napalm.

Mostefa is escorted by Boucetta, Ben Abderzak, Abdelhamid Lamrani and a platoon of about 40 patriots. He tells Boucetta:

"I am annoyed with Abbas' absence. Twice, I have sent for him. To no avail."

Omar Ben Boulaid and Messaoud Benaïssa have repeated to him that Abbas won't dare come because he has killed Chihani.

Mostefa is an ardent adept of pragmatism. He won't be distracted from his objectives, namely:

- putting out motives of rivalry between leaders
- expansion of the anti colonial struggle to other regions of the country

For the first aim, the cornerstone remains the quarrels first, between Adjoul and Benaïssa, then between Omar Ben Boulaid and Abbas Laghrour. Mostefa is paying his past prevarications. For now, though, he won't have the time to cut the Gordian knot since he is to meet death in a few days.

For the second aim, he has said many times to Adjoul:

"I must imperatively go to Kabylia and North Constantine region. They have problems. We must coordinate our action."

Adjoul has told me his answer:

"I strongly advised him against going to Kabylia. I said: 'Solve first our problems and after, you might go.' Mostefa has always thought big. To soothe him, I proposed he sends Abbas and me. He of course, replied that only he can convince the Kabyles since he knows them personally. Between brackets, I must reveal that Si Mostefa has always wanted to do things himself. Even before the insurrection, he monopolized the information; he alone attended meetings in Algiers or abroad, leaving us on the side line. As if he trusted only himself.' "

I remark:

"Si Adjoul, except for you or Chihani, don't you think he acted wisely, considering the militants' mediocrity?"

"Humanly, he could not do everything, i.e. choose car drivers and militants, pick out targets, select chiefs, and decide who would do what, without consulting. By the way, that could explain the fiasco of the first of November, 1954."

Adjoul smiles and multiples wrinkles appear on his eyelids, saying: *Rakba meïla*. (99)

At present, Mostefa and his escort are proceeding toward Nara, in Djebel Lazreg. Ali Benchaïba has been left behind to supervise the desertion of 12 Moroccan soldiers from the French advanced post of El Hadjadj, a few kilometers East of Arris. At Tafrent, above the hamlet of Baloul, known for its tradition of resistance against the French, Mostefa is met by Messaoud Benaïssa, Benadji and Ammar Maache. Benaïssa introduces him to 4 deserters: 2 Algerian sergeants and two Moroccans, a warrant officer and a soldier. They have joined ANL with a heavy machine gun and 4 rifles. Mostefa's face radiates. He talks at length with the newcomers about the unity of the Maghreb.

(101) *Rakba meïla*: said of someone who rides his horse askew, in disharmony.

In the evening, arrives at Tafrent, a very happy Ali Baazi.

“Good news, Si Mostefa! The French have just offered us a brand new transmitter-receiver. For free.”

“Explain.”

“Their plane has dropped a parcel intended for their post at Ouarka, but it missed the target. The parcel has fallen far from the post. A militant has picked up the parachute and brought it to me. I opened it and found letters and a gorgeous transreceiver.”

Mostefa smiles and commands:

“Hide it! Don’t tell anybody. We will test it at Nara. It is certainly the fog that mixed things for them.”

He continues to wear himself off and prepare the meeting of Nara which we remember he has qualified as capital for the revolution. To Bicha, he had said:

“The fate of the revolution is at stake.”

From Tafrent to Nara, he sends many messages, calling ruthlessly upon his team’s services.

8

Death of Mostefa Ben Boulaid

On March 21, 1956, Mostefa is at Nara. The refuges are already for most of them occupied by delegations. They have been supplied with fire wood, water, sleeping equipment and carbide lamps. Security in and out the meeting place has been reinforced. Secretarial staff and typewriters are ready to start their work, in a strict bureaucratic allegiance, as passed on by Chihani.

Mostefa is very much in demand. He wears a thick khaki coat and his head is covered with a woolen cap carrying a badge with the words 'military command' surrounding a star and a crescent. He is on the move, followed by Abdelhamid Lamrani, stopping before every house to welcome guerrillas and constantly caught up by those tireless neurons, the tissals, who feed him new information and collect his instructions. He often asks Lamrani to take notes or to remind him some details.

Meanwhile, fighters, after recognizing and greeting each other, scatter in the woods, abiding by strict camouflage rules: no fire is lighted, no cry is heard. At dusk, Mostefa imposes a curfew. Each group must stay in its shelter. Meals are served. Later, the nocturnal silence is only now and then broken by forest dwelling animals, looking for food.

The refuge of Mostefa is a room of about 6 square meters, the roof of which is supported by 4 juniper trunks; a fire burns in the middle and, near the door, stands a naked weaving loom, as in wait. Inside, with Mostefa, one recognizes part of his closest assistants: Mostefa Boucetta, Ali Benchaiba, Ali Baazi, Mohamed Cherif Benakcha and Abdelhamid Lamrani. A deserter, sergeant Mahfoud, has been admitted in their group.

Mostefa is lying on the floor, leaning on his left elbow. Big logs finish burning in the hearth; a sweating man on his knees is strongly kneading a huge brown dough. When he finishes, he gets up, grabs a stick and disperses glowing embers. Mostefa asks:

"Where is the radio?"

Two guerrillas take it out of a bag filled with letters, lift it gently and put it on a stack of tracts in front of Mostefa. Ali Baazi comments with admiration:

"It weighs at least 40 kilograms."

As a well-informed pyrotechnician, he dismantles it before the assembled men. It is empty, made of nothing more than two yellow plates connected to each other by thin wires.

"I have not seen so basic a frame!"

The transreceiver is fitted with a long antenna and a receiver like an ordinary telephone. On its façade, Baazi has counted not less than 14 knobs. Mostefa asks sergeant Mahfoud to examine it. He answers:

“The French army has many sets like this one. I have also seen them in Vietnam.”

“How does it work?”

“With a battery or small dry cells.”

Mostefa commands:

“Put the antenna in the corner, not outside.”

Baazi declares:

“It is surely a German set, Si Mostefa!”

A murmur of approval is heard stemming from guerrillas.

“A German set, good stuff, come from a country which has so often thrashed France.”

Outside, in the sticky air, hangs a thin rain at a standstill, as if frozen between trees. The night is dark and smells a heavy odor of earth and undergrowth. Mostefa opens the bag, picks up a letter, reads it on the light of carbide, smiles:

“Here is a woman who writes to her husband. She even kissed her letter. Admire!”

He lifts up the letter for them to see on the paper the red print of two fleshy lips. He talks to the woman, as if she were close:

“Come and visit your husband here. You will see he is right in the middle of a real war.”

Ali Baazi pulls out of his pocket a big electric torch, Boucetta takes it away from him, tries to remove its batteries, with no success. Mostefa manages to do it. Baazi adapts a battery on the transreceiver. A tissal comes in, whispers in Mostefa’s ear. Mostefa gets up and in the company of Lamrani, goes out to welcome the group of Batna who has just arrived. As it is late, there are no hot meals left. Messaoud Benakcha gives them bread and sardines.

Many years later, I question Hadj Lakhdar:

“Si Hadj, why were you late?”

“Because we had not yet finished collecting the money of cotisations. I did not want to arrive empty handed to the meeting.”

“Did Mostefa tell you about the radio set?”

“Yes. He informed me that colonialism had dropped it in error. He even added that this set would make up the embryo of future transmissions. Then I recalled what he used to repeat to us months before the revolution: ‘If by chance, you find something on the ground, even a fountain pen, beware, don’t take it: it might hide a bomb!’ I have not hesitated a second and warned him: ‘*Makida*, Si Mostefa!’ (102) He and Lamrani I remember stared at me as if I were ill and reassured me: ‘Don’t worry, Hadj! Everything is under control.’ They left and I went back to my men inside our refuge to rest; the trip had been exhausting.”

Mostefa returns to his refuge, stretches out again on his left flank and looks a moment at the amateurish baker while he clumsily turns the bread on embers. A good odor of warm bread spreads around. “Well, kids, let’s eat first!” “No, Si Mostefa, let us try it now!” Baazi boils with excitement. All come closer and want to touch the set.

(102)Makida: Arabic, means trap.

Baazi holds the carbide lamp in one hand and pushes for a place between Mostefa and Boucetta. The latter gets angry. He has to bend down and observe the manipulation from under. Mostefa pulls the wires to check their tying and, holding the receiver in his left hand, he turns the knobs with his right hand, click, click, until the silky dazzle.

The explosion brings about a start of panic. Partisans rush out of the houses, only a few dozen meters away from each other. The first panic gone, all hurry and converge toward Mostefa's refuge. It was gone! At its place, a huge black hole and a strong odor, irritating, made of dust and moist earth. The men choke; their coughs and cries are audible in the night and drizzle now in turmoil. Bodies, among whom Mostefa's, the top of his skull taken off till his occiput, are recognized and returned back to earth. The wounded are shocked. They lie, blind, without skin or hair. They are moved away. (103)

From a distance, Hadj Lakhdar yells: "Don't touch anything! Everything is booby trapped!" Tracts and sardine cans are found at more than one hundred meters from the crater. Here is what narrates Hadj Lakhdar: "Knowing the enemy's perversity and immorality, the booby trap in the transreceiver being a striking proof of that, I was certain that we were to be attacked soon. At a short notice, I put my troop in a state of utmost alert and went deep in the forest, in darkness and silence. I remember it as a long night waiting for an enemy who finally stood us up. In the morning, patrols inform me that there are no abnormal troop movements. I don't believe them. In fact, I trust no one and check by myself."

The other leaders recover their self control and order the djounoud to hide Mostefa's death, on pain of execution. (104)

I take my courage with both hands and ask:

"Si Hadj, were you annoyed by Si Mostefa's disappearance?"

He looks at me, a sad grin on his face:

"Of course, his death affected me. But I did not take to the bush in order to think of death, mine or others'. I knew there was a price to pay, that was all."

Ali Benchaiba declares having suffered a great deal from numerous hemorrhages and especially blindness:

"I bled from everywhere, my nose and ears. The day after, though, I regained my sight and was able to observe the right side of my fractured skull cave in, my smashed eye, my hair and skin gone away. I waited for Si Mostefa's visit; someone told me: 'God rest his soul!' The following night, with a military escort, we were taken on mules up to the Beni Frah Mountains where we stayed 27 days."

(103)Are dead: Mostefa Ben Boulaid, Ali Baazi, Abdelhamid Lamrani, Messaoud Benakcha and sergeant Mahfoud. Are gravely wounded: Ali Benchaiba and Mostefa Boucetta.

(104)An order well obeyed since Mostefa's death will be known to the French only many months later.

9

The meeting of Taghedda

On April 14, 1956, the delegations leave Nara and head up for Taghedda, a mountain culminating at 1,900 meters and located ten kilometers east. The leaders present are: Omar Ben Boulaid, Messaoud Benaïssa, Hadj Lakhdar, Meddour Azoui, Ahmed Azoui, Tahar Nouichi, Mohamed Cherif Benakcha, Abdelhafid Toreche, Mostefa Reaïli, Ahmed Nouaoura and Hocine Ben Abdeslam. They are all here, looking at each other, undecided, upset, feeling survivor guilt, at least for some of them, and resenting the loss of an irreplaceable chief. They ignore how to start, what to say, what to do: they are an axe without handle.

The spring breeze is cold. Slowly, they escalate slopes covered with cedar trees and green oaks, Phoenician junipers and white poplars, yews gone into mourning with their dark color. Nothing has no longer any taste. At their arrival, Hadj Lakhdar waits for everyone to take a seat. They have found shelter in a house at the peak of the mountain. Its rear lies directly on a huge rock. Hadj waits again, this time for someone to speak. No one moves. Hadj takes it upon himself to open the meeting; after the purifying 'In the Name of God', he declares: "Now that Si Mostefa has left us- may God bless all martyrs- we have the duty to show that we are worthy of him. First thing: we are in dire need of a leader."

To my question, Hadj has this answer: "Yes, I had a name. None of the persons facing me had the necessary scope to continue Si Mostefa's mission."

Omar Ben Boulaid gets up and leaves the room. Hadj calls out to him: "Where are you going, Si Omar. Stay with us." "I will come back, Hadj. Proceed without me." There is a wavering. A resolute Hadj steps toward Benaïssa and, in a dramatic though humble gesture, bends down before Benaïssa, puts his hand on his foot and proclaims: "Si Messaoud, I am ready to kiss your foot if it can achieve your reconciliation with Si Adjoul." Benaïssa's face turns crimson. He gets up immediately and roars: "Never! You hear? Never!" His voice is hoarse with anger and his fulminant eyes shine spitefully. Meddour Azoui intervenes: "Si Messaoud, for God's sake! Get in touch again with Si Adjoul. We'll act as guarantors for honorable proceedings." Without a word, Benaïssa leaves the room. Hadj Lakhdar does not lose countenance. He proposes that the assembly installs Adjoul at the head of Idara, pending future elections to ratify his nomination. A freezing silence follows his proposal. Embarrassed, he loses his self assurance. He confesses to me:

"I felt as if I were facing hostile foreigners. I told them: 'Since my proposal does not suit you, I will go back to my region and each one will do as he likes.' At this moment, Meddour Azoui calls back Benaïssa and, once more, begs him to reconcile with Adjoul. Once more, he meets with a rebuff. I take Meddour Azoui apart and tell him that Benaïssa's stubbornness is evil for

the revolution. He mixes revolution with hatred of Adjoul and this is wrong. He has no right to do so. Meddour informs me that the misunderstanding between Adjoul and Benaïssa has started years before the insurrection and that even Si Mostefa has not been able to extinguish it. After that, he invites me to try and convince other leaders, while he would take care alone of Benaïssa. I then open a dialogue with, one after the other, Tahar Nouichi, Ahmed Azoui, Ahmed Nouaoura and Abdelhafid Toreche. I implore them to behave like responsible and sensible persons and accept Adjoul as head of Idara. I conclude by asking them to at least think it over and give their opinion. ”

They consult each other for a long time and declare their opposition to Adjoul’s nomination. Sometime later, Omar Ben Boulaid and his nephew, Mostefa Reaïli, come back. Meddour Azoui has called them in. Hadj Lakhdar strongly advises Omar to bury the hatchet and come to terms with Adjoul, without preconditions. He refuses: “I would rather surrender to colonialism!” Sickened, Hadj Lakhdar declares in Tamazight, his native tongue: *Imira assoussmagh! Oudh ernigh akedh oua oua!* (Now, I shut up and won’t say a word.)

Afterward, he ignores them all, draped in a superb bad mood, as if his not concerned any more. Silent as a grave, he hears them bicker like **fishwives for the leadership of Idara. Particularly Omar who lectures his allies and moves away, keeping a watchful eye on all proceedings.**

At long last, after lengthy never ending idle talk, they neutralize each other and agree to appoint a headless managing committee. This committee comprises 11 members, including Hadj Lakhdar. They are: Omar Ben Boulaid, Meddour Azoui, Ahmed Azoui, Tahar Nouichi, Mostefa Reaïli, Mohamed Cherif Benakcha, Ahmed Nouaoura, Abdelhafid Toreche, Hocine Ben Abdeslam and Messaoud Benaïssa. That same evening, still at Taghedda, they decide to transfer HQ to a place named Ouistili, south east of Batna.

On Hadj Lakhdar’s proposal, Meddour Azoui is appointed secretary general of Idara. For the time being, he will have to inform chiefs of Arris and Batna of the new address of Idara and summon them to a first meeting.

Omar Ben Boulaid does not sit idle. He now has a clear field to play with conservatism of his tribal fellows, Touaba and Bouslimani, and weave a spider’s web around Adjoul. He inveighs against Abbas as well:

“If arms don’t arrive from Nememcha and the Tunisian border, it is their fault. Both Adjoul and Abbas have always stood against Aures.”

He repeats tirelessly that Adjoul is thirsting for power and that he has killed both Mostefa and Chihani. Messaoud Benaïssa too does not remain inactive. He starts an undermining action, so intense and efficient that soon, the freedom fighters are convinced that Adjoul is the origin of all their problems.

10

Omar Ben Boulaid, chief of Idara

It is still the year 1956, at the end of May. Ali Benchaiba, wounded in the transreceiver explosion of March 1956 and correctly nursed by the Beni Frah during a month, has gone to visit Adjoul at Kimmel, in the company of old Messaoud Belaggoune. He narrates: "I stayed in Si Adjoul's zone till mid May 1956. I continued my nursing in the field hospital of Kimmel. My vision and hearing had diminished a lot, but on the whole, I felt well. Si Abbas and Si Adjoul did not stop at that time to claim their posts of first and second assistants of HQ chief. They had written two authentic procurations and given them to Messaoud Belaggoune in order for him to speak on their behalf in any future meeting. At the same period, Omar Ben Boulaid, still in Ouistili's new HQ, situated in Hamida Ben Maache's sector, endeavors to win to his cause a handful of leaders, such as Ali Mechiche, Hadj Lakhdar, Tahar Nouichi, Ammar Maache, Mohamed Cherif Benakcha, Mohamed Ben Messaoud and Messaoud Benaissa. He clearly lets them know of his strong desire to take his brother's place. They easily pledge allegiance to him. Except Hadj Lakhdar who refuses to submit to his demand and retires at S'Gag, in the forest of sweet smelling cedars, after having openly denounced the 'thirsting for power', in Arabic *Houb Erriassa*, an allegation which in fact, does not upset Omar at all!

In the forest of S'Gag, Benchaiba and old Belaggoune meet him in the middle of a deep sulkiness. He tells them:

"All agree that Omar becomes their chief. In any case, he won't have my voice."

A few hours later, during a preliminary meeting and in a conciliatory move, he changes his mind and agrees to Omar's leadership. Omar reassures him:

"Don't worry, Hadj. I will carry out to the letter my brother Mostefa's program."

Sometime later, during the same meeting, the same Omar vehemently refuses to give the floor to old Messaoud Belaggoune who wishes to speak on behalf of Adjoul and Abbas:

"I acknowledge no procurations! If someone has something to say, let him come here in person."

Old Belaggoune protests, in vain. His speech apparently sparkles a deep latent hostility, confirmed by Hadj Lakhdar to Benchaiba when they meet in the refuge of S'Gag:

"Benchaiba, they are set dead against you. They want you to speak in their meeting and unveil your position, for or against them."

Ali Benchaiba complies and goes to the meeting where he is received coldly. He is questioned on his relations with Adjoul. Benchaiba's eye shines with anger when he narrates:

“They all thought I was an unconditional ally of Si Adjoul. Even Si Mostefa! Ali Mechiche, Omar’s lieutenant, tells me that Si Adjoul and Abbas have killed Chihani and that at present, Omar is the chief of Idara. His status as a leader legally recognized will allow him to attend the coming meeting in Kabylia. He will go there as the sole representative of Aures Nememcha and converse with his peers about problems of the revolution.”

A flashback is imperative. One remembers that Mostefa Ben Boulaid had informed Adjoul of his intention to visit Kabylia in order to expand and strengthen the revolution. Adjoul had opposed his idea. Mostefa, pressed by the many deadlines in Aures Nememcha, had decided to send to Kabylia an experienced veteran fighter, Mohamed Lamouri, then chief of the sector of Setif. Lamouri stayed longer than predicted in Kabylia and returned to Aures two months after Mostefa’s death. He had brought with him an invitation addressed to Mostefa to come to Kabylia.

Benchaïba resumes his narration:

“Ali Mechiche has told me that Omar had to respond favorably to the Kabyles’ invitation. I reply: ‘It is not up to us to decide. Only the Congress has the power to appoint Omar at the head of Aures HQ.’ Mechiche said I was mentally disturbed; he added that Omar will go despite us to Kabylia and on his return, organize Idara his own way. He concluded: ‘You and Belaggoune won’t move from here. We shall put you in a cool place, the ANL’s field hospital of Ain Touta.’ So they did! They placed us under house arrest in the hospital where I must admit our sojourn was more than gratifying. Except of liberty, we lacked nothing. The first night, we got rid of compromising documents, in particular a letter of Adjoul to Nouichi where he insults Omar and calls Benaïssa a dog. Plus the procurations signed by both Abbas and Adjoul. My intuition saved us: on the second day of our confinement, Benaïssa orders Said Aoufi to take our bags. They search them, find nothing and return them to us the day after.”

June 1956. So, and for the second time, Omar Ben Boulaid becomes head of Idara. He gives his word that he will organize the zone of Aures in accordance with revolutionary orthodoxy, as outlined by his brother Mostefa. He insists:

“Nothing will change. The program of Mostefa shall be respected. But first, I have to go to Kabylia.”

He does trip to Kabylia on June 1956. He presents the local leaders with medals ‘sent by his brother prevented from coming by his many commitments’. He informs them that he, Omar Ben Boulaid, is now the chief of Aures Nememcha, assisted by Adjel Adjoul and Abbas Laghrour. The Kabyles, little aware of what is going on in Aures, don’t comment.

On the beginning of July 1956, Omar returns to Ouistili’s HQ. The Kabyles send him a second letter of invitation. Adjoul and probably Abbas receive the same invitation from the same people. For the second time, Omar heads for Kabylia, escorted by a few chiefs and a squad of djounoud. Deliberately, from what told me Brahim Kabouya, Omar delays without reason the holding of Soummam Congress and finally, boycotts it.

11

Amirouche in Aures

It is mid September 1956, some days after the Soummam Congress. Amirouche, an ANL officer from Kabylia, is on his way to Aures. Two armed men escort him. He is met at Maadid, a mountain near the town of Bordj Bou Arreridj, by Tahar Nouichi, Hadj Lakhdar, Omar Ben Boulaid, Ali Mechiche, Mohamed Lamouri, Ahmed Nouaoura and Brahim Kabouya.

Amirouche declares:

“I have been commissioned by the CCE (Committee for Coordination and Execution) to tour Aures in order to explicit and implement the decisions of Soummam Congress.”

While tripping in the direction of Kimmel, he asks many questions, particularly on the death of Mostefa, regional organization, army ranks, and ANL’s relations with civilians. He on his part informs about the CCE:

“It is the leading organ of the revolution. It disposes of a great amount of money. You just ask and I shall get it for you.”

They cross from west to east the Hodna Mountains, spend a night at Ouled Tebbane, cut through Djebel Boutaleb, enter Belezma Mountains in total security. Hadj Lakhdar’s vigilant eyes are wide open to work out any problem. Discussions usually take place on mornings, between 10:00 and 11:00 hours, provided there is no danger. During these breaks, after the compulsory dispersal, Hadj notes that Amirouche often chats in private with Nouichi. He does not appreciate these restricted conversations, but he does not comment because *‘my feelings toward Kabyles were pure and unbiased.’*

On the fourth or fifth meeting, Amirouche wants to know whether the *mintakas* in Aures are autonomous. He informs:

“CCE has endowed me with the power of setting up new mintakas if need be. It has also ordered me to implement the ranking system adopted in Congress. Here is what I propose: first, creation of a mintaka in Arris, and another one in Batna. Second, Si Tahar Nouichi is named captain, chief of the second mintaka (Arris). Si Hadj Lakhdar, also appointed captain, will take charge of the first mintaka (Batna).”

The reaction of Hadj Lakhdar is swift and violent:

“I refuse both rank and nomination. On what right do you impose on us your decisions?”

Amirouche answers that he is only implementing CCE’s instructions. Mechiche and Lamouri

quiet down Hadj. They dread his unyielding and harsh nature. To their surprise, he accepts their clarifications concerning CCE, but still refuses rank and nomination. Amirouche does not insist. He appoints Ahmed Nouaoura captain, Ali Mechiche and Brahim Kabouya lieutenants. He nominates Mohamed Lamouri chief of the first mintaka (Batna), a nomination which does not disturb at all Hadj Lakhdar who represents the perfect model of a pure and sincere militant.

The journey goes on without further incidents. Hadj Lakhdar has revealed to me years later: “Amirouche who sees and hears fine, has, of course, noticed the petty rivalries between his hosts and their dissensions. Nouichi has painted for him a dark picture of Aures. He has especially warned him against Adjoul who *‘if given a chance, would kill him.’* On the other hand, this same Nouichi has tried hard to bring together Amirouche and Omar Ben Boulaid, but without any success.”

I ask:

“Why, Si Hadj?”

“Because Omar has persisted in denouncing the Soummam Congress, perhaps for the simple reason that CCE had turned down his claim to be recognized as chief of Aures. Who knows?”

Mid October 1956. Adjoul is taking a long rest in his family’s bordj of Dermoun, south east of Aures. The bordj, built near the River Dermoun, borders a small palm grove. Its access is difficult; it is protected by a row of breath-taking steep slopes, inside an arid and naked region which crosses the Serahna’s stronghold down to the village of Zeribet El Oued, full south. During the last two years, heroic period entirely dedicated to the birth and consolidation of the revolution, Adjoul has had no chance to visit his family. At present, in these troubled times, he has plenty of time to immerse his worries in the family haven, surrounded by his father, mother, wife, a 14 year old son from a first wedding, daughters and cousins.

Since the death of Chihani on October 23, 1955, and that of Mostefa on March 23, 1956, Adjoul has not moved much. On December 1955, he’s gone to Alinas to meet a group of Tunisian fighters, invited by Abbas who gave them 40 millions old francs and 60 automatic weapons to revive the anti-Bourguiba revolt.

On April 1956, he meets again Abbas at Lamra, South East of Taffassour. On the second half of June 1956, Abbas comes to Kimmel and, generous as usual, offers Adjoul a mule loaded with ammunition. During his sojourn, he pays a visit to Lieutenant Louis, a French officer he captured in Nememcha. Horrified by his filth, he commands he be taken at once to Hammam Chaboura for delousing and bath.

The French choose this moment to launch an attack. Partisans have probably been detected by a plane. They see helicopters dropping paratroopers on tops of crests. Abbas and Bicha, the first armed with a MG 30 and the second with a MG Bren, start shooting. Helicopters fly higher. Abbas who refuses to run risks, asks the paramedic Si Smail Mahfoud to hurry down toward the river bed; he obeys, leaving behind a wounded paraplegic inside a blockhouse. After awhile, Abbas commands fighters to climb up on slopes and shoot non-stop to attract

the enemy. As soon as they reach the peaks, they race down on the other side, heading for Bouder, North of Dermoun, a region riddled with caverns and rocks. Lieutenant Louis dies during that last troop movement.

The guerrillas spend a quiet night inside the caverns of Bouder. In the morning, a tissal informs Adjoul that the French had discovered the paraplegic and assassinated him. The day goes by, uneventful. On the morning next, there is a second engagement, this time at Rezkil, north east of Tedjine. The French spray the zone with mortar shells. Without results since the men hide in caverns. Taking advantage of a lull, guerrillas return at full speed to Bouder and Abbas loses his temper. He asks for a hot meal. Adjoul says no, because of the smoke. Abbas contents himself with a chunk of bread. Fatalistic, Adjoul whispers: "They are still going to bomb us!" He apprehends asking Abbas to change position. For once, he has it wrong since Abbas, at first recalcitrant, suggests that they move forward in the direction of Aïdel, south of Tedjine. So they start running. A plane flies over them. Its pilot makes big signs to them with his hand. They open fire at him, without hitting him. They continue racing toward the peak of Telakhet, a tough slope they cover in no time. They stop on the top for a short pause. A tissal crosses enemy lines, bringing a message from the caid of Ouldja:

"The French are preparing to attack!"

Indeed, Adjoul notes with field glasses from Telakhet, a concentration of enemy troops South, at Khangat Sidi Nadji. He chooses to pull back, splits up the 250 men into groups of 12 and dispatches them to Alinas, where they arrive unscathed.

French planes don't stay idle: a rocket hits a partisan's knee. Bicha stops at his side, takes off his shirt, rolls it tight around the knee, but blood spurts too strong. Bicha gets panicky; he clasps the knee in his hands. The wounded tells him:

"Stop, Bousenna. You're going to mess yourself up for nothing. I am happy to have known you."

Bicha holds him in his arms for awhile and then stretches him head eastward.

On the fateful date of March 23, 1956, the bells have tolled for Aures and Nememcha. Adjoul and Abbas don't meet anymore or seldom. They receive each an invitation to attend the Soummam Congress. They won't participate despite the fact that they are first hour militants, who have passed the baptism of fire and guided the opening steps of the revolution in inhuman conditions. Had they attended the Congress, they would have dispensed their valuable experience to participants.

Now, Adjoul feels a profound disillusion. He has done everything to seize power and power bursts in his hand like a bubble of soap. Everything dissolves around him. He hears and is told the craziest rumors about him, spread by Omar Ben Boulaid and Messaoud Benaïssa. Once, men of his clan, Serahna, were arrested by some Ouled Yacob, belonging to the tribe of Ouled Yacob or Jacob's sons, and released after indoctrination:

"You, Serahna, better not trust Adjoul. He is a murderer and power thirsty!"

Touaba, Beni Oudjana, Bouslimani, Bradja, Ghouassir, Beni Melloul, Ouled Abderrahmane, Ouled Yacob and all other tribes think he is a trouble maker. At present, one must add to them part of the Serahna, members of his own tribe and the Chorfa, his lifelong allies. A majority of tribes are against him. Is not it said that God stands with the majority? Some days away from the second anniversary of the revolution, pessimism prevails. To be clear in his mind about his status, Adjoul assigns Benchaiba and Belaggoune to investigate in Chelia and Ahmar Khaddou. They report that there exists a consensus against him. After hearing such disheartening news, he has a glimpse of hope when a tissal informs him that Hadj Lakhdar, Tahar Nouichi and a certain Amirouche are expecting him at Kimmel. Without losing time, he dispatches to them the same tissal to probe their real intentions.

As he narrates this episode, it rained dogs and cats in downtown Batna. We were sitting in a popular restaurant and listening to the waiter spouting the menu out loud. Adjoul I recall orders a dish of beans bathing in a hot red sauce. He starts: "Their answer comes back the following night. Hadj Lakhdar writes he guarantees my security; he says the meeting has for purposes the reorganization of our zone and a new sharing out of responsibilities. I was aware through my tissal that both Omar Ben Boulaid and Messaoud Benaissa had come down from Chelia with an escort of about one hundred fighters and had hung out at Lamsara, 5 km North of Sidi Ali. As a precaution, I post 10 men at Djeniene and head toward Bouchet Ennedjem with an escort of three men. There, in the middle of the forest, I meet hadj Lakhdar, Tahar Nouichi, Amirouche, Mechiche and Lamouri."

As a man respectful of local customs, Adjoul welcomes his guests. *Hadj Lakhdar and Tahar Nouichi have wrongly recommended to him before the meeting courtesy toward Amirouche.* His mintaka is still rich with many quintals of supplies. He offers coffee, biscuits and dates. He makes a speech:

"I welcome our honorable guests. If, on my part, I have accepted to come, it is because among you I see Hadj Lakhdar whom I trust totally."

12

Questioning of Adjoul

Amirouche introduces himself: "I am the delegate of CCE." He explains that the CCE is the main organ of the revolution and that it stems from the Soummam Congress. He endeavors to read the Congress resolutions written in French. Adjoul listens, someone translates into Arabic. Amirouche asks him:

-Do you understand?

-No. I want written copies.

Amirouche hands out copies to him.

-Here are copies.

Adjoul takes the sheets, looks at them:

-They are written in French. This language is not mine. Don't you have copies in Arabic?

-No problem. We shall translate them for you. This being said, I must inform you that Belkacem Krim, member of CCE, wishes to meet you.

-I accept gladly. Provided I get a pass.

-You will get it!

The meeting is held in Hadj Lakhdar's refuge. Are present, beside the latter, Nouichi, Amirouche and Mechiche. Obliging, Adjoul goes along with their questioning session. Amirouche starts:

-First, we would like you to clarify for us the exact circumstances of Si Mostefa Ben Boulaid's death.

Adjoul answers:

-I heard of his death only two months later, that is around the end of May 1956. That is the date when Benchaiba and Boucetta got in touch with me. They have been gravely wounded by the booby trap which killed Si Mostefa. They were kept in total solitary confinement and uncared for. When I talked to them, I began investigating. I found and heard the civilian who picked up the sack hanging from a parachute. His wife by the way hurried to cut a robe out of that parachute. The militant told me he gave the sack to Ali Baazi, regional chief's assistant.

-Is it usual to remain without news from your chief for so long a time?

-It depends. Before he left Kimmel, Si Mostefa asked me to wait for him. Prior, he had mentioned a trip he wanted to make to Kabylia. I managed to dissuade him and convinced

him to first solve Aures problems. I complied with his order and waited for his tissal at Kimmel.

Adjoul has often boasted he is a pure product of the Organisation. Obeying orders is a leit motiv which always sprays his speech.

-Si Adjoul, why did not you attend the Soummam Congress?

-I have indeed received an invitation. I sent no less than two tissal to get fixed on the exact date and location of the meeting. I am still waiting for the answer.

-Si Omar Ben Boulaid has come. Didn't you get the explanations we sent for you with him?

-I have no contact with Si Omar.

-Why?

-Matter of Nidham. Nothing personal. He has chosen to rebel against legal authority. He is free to assume his responsibilities.

-Which legal authority?

-We are two to embody it: Si Abbas Laghrour and myself.

-After his escape from prison, did you relinquish power to Si Mostefa.

-Yes.

-Was Si Abbas Laghrour present?

-No. He was in Nememcha, wounded, but he agreed with my decision.

Amirouche takes seriously his role of inquisitor. He goes on:

-Where is Si Abbas now? Can we see him?

-Yes. I can lead you to him.

During these troubled days, Nememcha is unsafe. Abbas, a roving warrior, has no fixed post. He returns to Alinas HQ only when he is wounded.

That same evening, they head southeast. On one side, Adjoul with a squad, on the other, Hadj Lakhdar, Amirouche, Mechiche and Nouichi, escorted by around fifty partisans. They cross the forest of Beni Melloul where entire companies of guerrillas can move along in daylight without being picked out, pass over Oued El Arab and enter Nememcha. The trek lasts two days and two nights. *Adjoul has affirmed to me that he refused to continue up to Galaa. In fact, fighters at the entry of Alinas had prevented him from going further, warning him that his life would be at risk.* The others continue without him, meet with Lakhdar Oucifi, chief of the region of Alinas who declares that Abbas has left for an unknown destination and for an unspecified period. They turn back. A few kilometers from Henchir Ali Ben Othmane, in the center of a naked zone, half a dozen helicopters buzz noisily over their heads. Hadj Lakhdar orders dispersal at the bottom of the River Ferroudj. He cries out: "Hide in caverns!" He watches anxiously the helicopters hastening toward Djellal, more West. Nouichi and Amirouche rush inside a grotto, followed by djounoud. Hadj Lakhdar narrates: "A handful of minutes later, for an unknown reason, I see Amirouche race at full speed from the cavern with a bout fifteen fighters. I shout: 'Lie face down! Everybody!' Amirouche stops short, lies down on the ground."

Hadj Lakhdar actually fears a dropping of paratroopers upriver. He dispatches an 8 men squad to open the way, with order to engage the enemy, no matter what. Finally, nothing happens till darkness. They go back safely to Sidi Ali where once again, Adjoul offers them hospitality.

Hadj Lakhdar and the others ignore that at three kilometers from them, another Adjoul's ally, Othmane Kaabachi, has assembled a katiba of seventy djounoud at Draa Chekrid to defend him if need be. Kaabachi tells his men:

“Si Adjoul is in trouble. We must help him. We must not let our enemies laugh at us.”

The day after, Hadj Lakhdar acts as tissal of Amirouche and invites again Adjoul to a questioning by those self appointed judges. Kaabachi takes Adjoul apart and implores him:

“Si Adjoul, don't go. It is a trap. They intend to kill you.”

Adjoul thinks for a little while, then answers:

“No, I will go and try and reach an agreement with them. If they want leadership, I'll leave it to them. After, I will come back here and we will group together, without them.”

Bicha Djoudi contracts his mouth in a doubtful grimace. He is scared. Adjoul has told him of a plan to evade the crisis, but he does not believe him. In fact, he believes no one. Only counts his own safety and to preserve it, he hides deep in the forest.

That evening, before the resumption of Adjoul's hearing, Amirouche makes a preliminary declaration:

“Mujahidin fighting each other is an impious act. It is unbearable. All present disputes must find their end, even if we have to confront Adjoul, Omar and Benaissa.”

Since the autumnal night is chilly, a wood fire is lighted in the refuge of Hadj Lakhdar.

Around, fighters seemingly relaxed, are actually on utmost alert. Hadj is contaminated by Nouichi's psychosis and has discreetly posted a close guard near Amirouche. Now begins the hearing. Hadj starts interrogating, with his usual abruptness.

-Why didn't you acknowledge Si Mostefa's leadership after his escape?

Very calm, Adjoul says:

-It is true that I did not believe in the genuineness of Si Mostefa's escape. In fact, I was just implementing recommendations of the Organization: any militant coming out of enemy's prison is put in quarantine for a 4 month period. I did not apply these instructions since I acted for his return to power in a very short time.

-Did you notice a change in his behavior?

-No. maybe he has changed? Everything can happen during a war.

-Let us talk about caïds. Do you know some?

-Yes.

-Is there a particular caïd you have relations with?

-No. Not with me. With the Organization.

Adjoul ignores that Hadj Lakhdar and others suspect him of having assassinated Mostefa and received the booby trap through the caïd in question.

-What kind of help did they provide to the revolution?

-Oh! They have given us arms, ammunition, fatigues, intelligence on enemy's movements.

-What kind of arms?

-Shotguns, a carbine.

A silence, then:

-I inform you that in accordance with the Organization orders, you are transferred.

Nouichi, Amirouche, and Mechiche observe intensely Adjoul's face. He remains unmoved.

He answers:

-I obey the Organization command. On one condition: that I won't be forced to mix with Omar Ben Boulaid or Messaoud Benaissa.

From what appears in the plan set up by Nouichi, Mechiche and Amirouche, Adjoul is to be replaced in Kimmel by a certain Mohamed Araar, aka Bouazza, an Oudjani from Yabous.

Before the end of the night, Adjoul leaves Sidi Ali and joins his group posted on a crest at Djeniene, 3 kilometers west. The day after, he offers a huge *diffa* in honor of his guest judges, where civilians and djounoud feast most abundantly. Adjoul's hearings have lasted three days. He is self confident. He trusts his lucky star. He knows he can rely on the loyalty of the men of his tribe, Serahna, and of the Chorfa, his allies. Besides, he is at home, in his zone and what a zone! Quite a junction between Tamza north, Arris and Mchouneche west, Zeribet El Oued and Sahara south, Alinas and Nememcha east.

Moreover, he has a great political maneuvering expertise, an art he has practiced for many years. He is sure he will overcome through his verb and power of persuasion. He knows he will convince the CCE delegate of his good faith. On the other hand, if he fails, he will relinquish everything and confine himself with his men in the mintaka of Kimmel.

Many years later, he complains bitterly against his 'judges'.

"What were their accusations? On which testimonies? Who spread the rumor that I killed Chihani and Mostefa? The first has been judged, sentenced to death and executed in accordance with the revolution rules, the second is dead while manipulating a booby trap, victim of his negligence."

I had a sentiment as slender as a butterfly's flutter that he felt resentment not only against Chihani but also, against Mostefa accountable in his eyes for the collapse of Aures.

He goes on: "Abbas expelled from Aures, Omar and Benaissa prowling around Arris like wolves, myself isolated in Kimmel, about to be banished by a foreigner manipulated by my enemies."

I ask him:

"Si Adjoul, why haven't you reacted, militarily, I mean?"

"Because I didn't wish to start a fratricidal war. I had enough fighters and arms to wipe them all off the earth surface."

During the three day hearings, Adjoul never departs from an exemplary correctness. He treats

the CCE delegate as a special guest and, as we've seen, gives a reception in his honor. Despite his good will, he remains suspicious, especially of Tahar Nouichi whom he knows since 1950. On his guard, he persistently refuses to spend the night outside his group posted a few kilometers westward.

October 19, 1956. It is the evening of the hearing fourth day. Amirouche insists:

“Si Adjoul, to-night you sleep with us. We will clarify things.”

Adjoul answers:

“Why not? Hadj Lakhdar is my life insurance.”

13

Attempt to assassinate Adjoul

At Sidi Ali, the atmosphere is smoother. The discussions, the meals taken together, the journey to Alinas, the correctness of language and attitude, all converge toward calming things.

October 19, 1956. By nightfall, the weather gets chillier. A fire roars in Hadj Lakhdar's refuge. Sitting around it, Hadj Lakhdar, Hihi Mekki, Youcef Laalaoui, Adjoul and Brahim Kabouya. Hihi Mekki is narrating his escape from the French concentration camp of Djeurf. His audience, curious, asks him question after question. He answers, they burst out laughing. Hadj Lakhdar smiles, his blue green eyes half shut in the smoke. He keeps his guard up. Not only forty partisans taken from his own detachment and Nouichi's are posted around his refuge, but he has also sent reconnaissance patrols in Sidi Ali's neighborhood. He, indeed, like others, is mistaken about Adjoul's intentions.

The coffee pot boils on the fire. The chatter goes on, unhampered. Adjoul listens, with interest, to Hihi describing life in the camp of Djeurf; his two bodyguards and secretary are seated behind, a little far from the fire. Well away, Nouichi discusses vigorously with Amirouche, his head bent toward his interlocutor, in a plotter's manner.

Farther, in the darkness, perched like night birds along the mountain slopes, the sparse gourbis of Sidi Ali twinkle weakly, akin to a distress signal.

Amirouche calls out to Hadj Lakhdar, asks him to invite Adjoul to drink a coffee and disappears. Hadj turns to Adjoul: "How do you like your coffee, Si Adjoul? Well sweet?" He pours the thick coffee, trying to dispel his uneasiness with everyday gestures. Meanwhile, his companions continue their chatter and laughs.

As planned before, Amirouche and Nouichi were to join them and stay with the group. Because of their absence, Hadj apprehends Adjoul's reaction. Wrongly, because Adjoul drinks down his coffee and, invoking exhaustion, apologizes and goes to lie down against the wall facing the North East, between his bodyguards.

As soon as he sees him asleep, Hadj gets up and strides rapidly in the direction of Nouichi's refuge. A partisan stops him at the door, informs him that the chiefs are meeting and ought not to be disturbed; he even forbids him the entry. Hadj thumps him on the face, makes him fall head first on the wall and hurries into the room. He makes out in the light of carbide lamps Nouichi, Amirouche, Mechiche, Benaissa, Ammar Maache and others, holding an animated secret meeting. They shut up. He questions, harshly: "What are you all doing here? We are waiting for you!" Amirouche is first to react:

“We are doing nothing, Hadj. The coffee is ready? Go ahead, we’re coming.”

Confused, Hadj walks slowly back to his refuge. Adjoul is asleep; Hihi Mekki still narrates episodes of his escape. His companions drink their fill of coffee to fight the cold. Hadj walks round the crackling fire, approaches the wall near which Adjoul and his guards are asleep. His eyes are suddenly attracted by an unusual sight: on the doorstep, to the left, he catches a glimpse of Ali Mechiche gesturing with his right arm toward two men, Ahmed Azeroual and Ali Oulhadj and loading his pistol.

After that, and almost simultaneously, he hears an explosion, several machine gun hails of bullets very near, aimed at lying Adjoul and crackles of a machine gun outside and downhill. In short, absolute hell! Hadj notes in a flash that Adjoul and his bodyguards are hit; a third man is unhurt. He dives on the ground, yells: “Lie down everybody! On the ground!” Bullets smash down the roof, Hadj throws handfuls of gravelly earth on the fire, sees Hihi Mekki crawling, buttocks up, shouts: “Duck! Otherwise, you’ll get one!” He notices Ahmed Azeroual’s collapse like a bran doll, afterward, half-crawling, half-running, he rushes out of the refuge. Outside, in the leaden darkness, a total disorder prevails. Fighters run in all directions, a sustained fire bursts from all sides. Hadj is sure the attack comes from Adjoul’s men. After awhile, falls a sudden silence.

Meanwhile, Adjoul awakes. He shams death and hears Hadj’s shouts. He has at once recognized the typical shots of a Garand rifle and a Thompson machine gun and felt two or three quakes in his body. He flattens on the ground, makes out armed shadows. They stand on the doorstep, advance straight to him. Other shadows are crawling toward the exit. He feels something warm and sticky on his left hand, listens to the raucous agony of his bodyguards. (105) He gets up very slowly, stumbles in the dark and finds himself nose to nose with Ahmed Azeroual carrying a Thompson machine gun. Azeroual waves and yells. Adjoul fires a point-blank shot at his head, (106) then, all ears and eyes, he races out of the shelter, turns left and mixes with fleeing djounoud downhill. After about 100 meters, he bears right and joins his group at Djeniene, south west.

(105)Adjoul’s two bodyguards, Sadek Batsi and Abderrahim Thenia have died instantly. His secretary Mohamed Seghir Hellaili comes out of it unscathed. The man armed with a Thompson, a Bouslimani called Ahmed Azeroual, was at first Benaissa’s henchman. Then, he betrayed him and took the side of Adjoul. Angered, Benaissa condemned him to death, then forgave him at one condition: to kill Adjoul. Azeroual with a Thompson and Ali Oulhadj with a Garand fired at Adjoul and his guards. As for the heavy machine gun shooting from outside, it was manned by Ahmed El Wahrani, a guide of Amirouche.

(106)The executioners chosen by Amirouche and his accomplices are six: Ali Mechiche, Ahmed Azeroual, Ali Oulhadj, Ahmed El Wahrani and his two Kabyle bodyguards. Mohamed Seghir Hellaili, Adjoul’s secretary, miraculously unharmed, testifies that one of Amirouche’s guards lost his carbine during the all out shooting against Adjoul.

The whole thing has not lasted more than a few minutes. When the fire ceases, Hadj Lakhdar returns to his refuge, discovers the deads' bodies, but not Adjoul. He goes out, assembles his men and heads without delay for Mount Chelia where he finds Nouichi and Amirouche. (99) He announces the news: "Serahna have attacked!" *In fact, he ignores that Amirouche, shortly after the attempt on Adjoul's life, has immediately fled from Sidi Ali, unsafe for him, and gone to Chelia.* He looks carefully at both Nouichi and Amirouche, understands in a lightning and shouts his indignation:

"Jews! That's what all of you are! You planned his assassination! Why?"

He can't bear no more. He takes it on Nouichi, crying at him:

"You and Benaissa agreed to kill Adjoul!"

Amirouche attempts to calm him and swears he has nothing to do with the affair:

"Yes, it is true that I asked they bring me Adjoul disarmed and tied up. No more. I just wanted him to be judged."

Hadj Lakhdar displays a disgusted pout. Amirouche reiterates:

"Don't forget, Hadj, CCE has sent me here to put some order in Aures."

Hadj thunders forth against him:

"Which CCE? I acknowledge no CCE. You have come to sow discord. Between brackets, had you killed Adjoul, I would have killed you!"

Amirouche replies:

"If I am to be killed by you, let it be."

Hadj Lakhdar's despair is great, first because he has been manipulated and duped like a novice, second because no problem has been solved. In midmorning, Hadj, Nouichi and Amirouche are joined at Chelia by Kabouya, Mekki, Nouaoura and the others.

In 1972, sixteen years later, it is Hadj Lakhdar's turn to inquire:

"You have not asked me why I waited for Amirouche? For a simple reason: he was after all a guest in our zone and I owed him protection. I did not want something happen to him. My wish was that he returned home safe and unhurt. The last straw that broke the camel's back struck me when he called a meeting and insisted on organizing our zone. I could not bear any more and blew up: 'So, you've come here to give orders!' He kept saying: 'Hadj, I repeat to you that I am sent by CCE.' 'And I inform you that the crisis in Aures will be solved by the people of Aures and only by them. We alone can bring back order in our zone.' Infuriated, I went out, remained isolated in a place and refused to speak any more. In the evening, Kabouya and Nouaoura have come to visit me and I gave in to their prayers. I even promised them I would protect Amirouche."

As he narrates, years later, Hadj's indignation goes still strong:

"There was a general mistrust. Amirouche, in all good faith, had been shamelessly misinformed; he thought, wrongly, that the problems of Aures would disappear with Adjoul's elimination. His surprise at the end was to learn that Omar Ben Boulaid and Messaoud Benaissa had used him to get rid of their forever enemy, Adjoul, and that, after that, they intended to execute him and cancel Lamouri's and Nouichi's nominations."

“What happened next, Si Hadj?”

“I informed Amirouche that I did not recognize his authority and that he had to leave quick because his life was at stake; I added that, for me, he had not come here as a man of peace.

The other chiefs, Ammar Maache and Tahar Nouichi, got angry at me and scolded me for speaking this way to a CCE delegate. I replied: ‘If you disagree with me, leave with him!’ I concluded that I would assume Amirouche’s protection till Djebel Boutaleb.”

Hadj stops talking, seizes in his huge hand a fountain pen lying about on my desk and declares:

“From the start, I sensed nothing good would come out of his secret talks with Nouichi. Then, I blamed myself: ‘You see evil everywhere, all the time. Maybe, he will arrange the affairs of our zone.’ I was wrong.”

I ask:

“Si Hadj, what did Amirouche say?”

“Not much, except that he was going to report to CCE.”

“What really happened with Adjoul?”

“They all said he was plotting against HQ.”

“Who ‘they’?”

“They.”

He grins:

“Nouichi, Benaissa and Omar Ben Boulaid. They joined sides around Amirouche. Adjoul apparently had warned Nouichi that he would never leave Kimmel. I personally think there is nothing wrong in this affirmation. Nouichi added that Adjoul threatened to fight back if they continued to meddle in his affairs. Untrue! How can someone threaten his judges and come spend the night in their company in all trust? The truth is that Amirouche had decided to kill him. He had even picked up the firing squad.”

“Si Hadj, have you met Adjoul after the attempt on his life?”

“No. I felt a grudge against him when he surrendered to enemy. It was not something to be done. But, well, he wanted to give up, that is his business.”

Let us go back to October 1956. Hadj Lakhdar hears rumors: Adjoul has regrouped his troops, Benaissa has moved down his men from Lamsara. He narrates:

“I warn Amirouche: ‘If we don’t depart now, I won’t guarantee your security.’ We leave Chelia on October 21, 1956. I ordered my men utmost vigilance. When we reach Djebel Bouarif, East of Batna, Amirouche informs me of Ben Bella’s capture by the French. He has heard it on his radio. It was approximately October 22 or 23. I immediately compelled a tissal to bring me up a newspaper from Batna. The news indeed is printed in large characters on the front page. Another blow to the revolution!”

Let us take a look at Amirouche’s report to CCE as published in Ahmed Bencherif’s book.

(107) One reads that ANL chiefs in Aures have signed procurations to Omar Ben Boulaid, not to be their leader, but only to accompany them to Kabylia.

(107) Ahmed Bencherif, *Parole de baroudeur*, edition ANEP, 2003.

Hadj Lakhdar has signed his procurations on April 3, 1956. The other signatories are categorical: their procurations to Omar are only a positive reply to the Kabyles' invitation sent to Mostefa Ben Boulaid before his death. A few weeks after Mostefa's disappearance, his brother Omar, appointed as simple member of the 11 men committee, does his utmost to become its chief. He employs seduction, threats, even coercion to attend the Soummam Congress and be dubbed there chief of Aures Nememcha. What beats all! The report of Amirouche reveals that Abdelhafid Toreche signed the procurations without even knowing their contents! Also in his report, Amirouche writes that Adjoul accepts to leave Kimmel and accompany him to Tunisia. *In Tunisia, is installed the supreme HQ, apt to judge, exile or execute.*

Amirouche appoints, on Nouichi's advice (?), Mohamed Araar as the new chief of Kimmel to replace Adjoul who is given the privilege of naming one of his assistants member of the new Kimmel's HQ. Apparently, things run smoothly. In a weak position, Adjoul lowers his pretensions. He accepts to guide Amirouche to Nememcha because, after all, it is a question of honor: with Abbas he still remains, even if only nominal, the Aures Nememcha chief.

He does not expect Nemouchis he has so much despised and mistreated to deny him the right to enter their territory and even threaten to kill him. Amirouche yields to their demands and orders Adjoul to turn back to Kimmel, then changes his mind: "Adjoul, I want you to leave the zone altogether. Here is a pass for Kabylia. You go there and wait for me. CCE will decide your fate." Adjoul out of the way, Amirouche still can't cross to Nememcha. He writes in his report: "We have found out that it is impossible to move toward Nememcha because we are told that a combing will take place in the surroundings. So, we head for Tamza." Tamza is situated south of Chelia, Benaissa's stronghold. Benaissa has not stopped his full of hatred campaign against Adjoul.

Adjoul sees his troops melt day by day. He gets his reward for his tyranny and contempt for his men. Sometimes, he even shows meanness. On his arrival to Djebel Boutaleb, before penetrating Aures, Amirouche is void of prejudices. Omar Ben Boulaid, Messaoud Benaissa and Tahar Nouichi handle him individually or together. They set him against Adjoul. At the same time, Youcef Laalaoui, a Kabyle fighter exiled from Kabylia by the Organization in Aures, gives him first hand information on Chaouia "Cajole them and they will obey you." In addition, Amirouche learns by himself on the field. He notes dissensions, bears in mind slanders and, soon, he is circumvented and unable to judge by himself. Add to this an atmosphere of fear, mistrust and defiance. His mentors show him how to get rid of Adjoul: first, degrade him, second, exile him to Tunisia. Adjoul does not react. He lets things ripen. He tells me:

"After all, I am a Founding Father of the revolution. I warned Amirouche that as officer, I was superior to him and his senior in Nidham." *Maybe he said it, maybe he did not.*

On October 20, 1956, Amirouche writes that "Adjoul has changed and told Nouichi that he won't abandon his sector. Moreover, should someone meddle in his affairs, he would shoot him. During talks we had with Nouichi and Hadj Lakhdar, we have discovered that Adjoul was plotting against us. He has declared that he will kill Mohamed Araar Bouazza this

evening at around 7:00 p.m. Adjoul arrives with 4 of his djoundi to *spend the night with us.*” The rough manipulation goes on. It is said that Adjoul is plotting. The nice thing with him is that he announces in public his criminal plan. He even mentions the hour: 7:00 p.m. The same evening, he dares come and sleep amid people he vowed to kill! One can’t do better! Let us go back to Amirouche’s report: “At 7:30 p.m., I (Amirouche) assembled all chiefs to examine the case of Adjoul; during that meeting, we decided to bind him hand and foot.” Six men are chosen to execute him. They fail; Amirouche hastens to flee from Sidi Ali, now unsafe, and goes to Chelia where he is welcomed by Omar Ben Boulaid and Messaoud Benaissa, enemies of Adjoul. (108).

Amirouche’s stay in Aures will have lasted 50 days, from September 3, 1956 to October 23, 1956. At his leaving, problems in Aures are more numerous and more exacerbated.

(108)The self appointed judges have falsely told Hadj Lakhdar that after Adjoul, they would hear Omar Ben Boulaid and Messaoud Benaissa, and, if necessary, confront them with Adjoul. One can assume that Amirouche and Benaissa met through Nouichi’s channel and set up a plan to execute Adjoul. A naïve Hadj Lakhdar was used as bait.

14

Adjoul's surrender

It is still night when Adjoul joins his group at Djeniène. They swiftly link up with the katiba of Othmane Kaabachi and Mekki Bayouche. He informs them. They observe his wounds and get ready to fight. He stops them.

In 1970, he upholds vehemently:

“What hurt most was Hadj Lakhdar's betrayal. (109) He abused my confidence; otherwise, I would have watched out.”

When he tells me that, all protagonists are dead, except himself and Hadj Lakhdar. He resumes:

“Kaabachi has asked for some money to buy supplies. I gave him three millions centimes and promised more in a near future.”

After a long silence, he adds:

“You say that Hadj Lakhdar has questioned me about my relation with the caïd of Mchouneche and my so-called rebellion against the Nidham. I simply deny his sayings. Not a word is true. Can you imagine a simple chief of a group questioning the head of the Nidham? Unthinkable! Our level is not the same. First, he owes me respect, then fear. Things naturally have taken another course after the attempt on my life and Amirouche handing out posts of captains and lieutenants at will. I was sincere. Had I not been cheated, I would have wiped all of them. (110) Even later, when I returned home at Kimmel, I could have changed the situation in my favor, provided I was given a single month. That was the deadline I asked for. Unfortunately, my men have not complied. When I heard that I was to be handed to Omar and Benaïssa, I chose to join colonialism. I took nothing with me, I disclosed nothing, except what the enemy already knew!”

(109) Adjoul is mistaken. The truth is that Hadj Lakhdar was unaware of the plot wrought up by Messaoud Benaïssa and his allies. Had he known about it, he would have denounced it violently.

(110) It is not Hadj Lakhdar's opinion. He counted the troops in presence: Messaoud Benaïssa disposes of 120 fighters, Omar Ben Boulaid of 40, Hadj Lakhdar of 30, Nouichi of 30 and Nouaoura of 15, the total reaching 235 partisans. Adjoul had only 100 fighters between Serahna and Chorfa.

For Adjoul then, all comes within the framework of an ineluctable normality. He was the scandal man. His troops are reluctant to follow him. All suspect him and he suspects everybody, except his father and cousins. He is harrowed and confused. Now, he feels paralyzed by a severe paranoia which has replaced the hyperactive euphoria that galvanized him so far. Around him, the atmosphere becomes stifling. Like the room in Batna's hospital where I pain to coordinate my respiration and my ideas. The wife of Adjoul is sitting at the foot of the bed where he lies sunk in a coma carus. She narrates with a monochord voice: "After he was shot at, someone brought home his cachabia (111). It was full of holes and blood. I remember having thought: 'He can't be still alive.' After awhile, he came to the bordj and we took care of him. His wounded fingers hung, askew. His men began leaving him. At the end, remained only his 14 year old son, cousins and father. No one else. He told me: 'I will go to Tunisia.' But soon the road was cut by his enemies. He then asked his father to inform colonialism that he would join their camp at El Aouinet, three kilometers from Zeribet El Oued. Colonialism has severed his fingers; they wrote on tracts: 'We take care of the Chief of the Fellaghas (112). He is in good health.' "

"What happened after that?"

"I went to live with Adjoul in Arris where they put him under house arrest. I know he has rescued plenty of people."

She puts her hand on her husband's arm and tries to stop his tremors. A long silence filled only with Adjoul's jerky mumblings. Mesmerized, I look at his left half amputated index and medius. Adjoul rubs forth and back his arms, sometimes pinching them. His wife continues: "I have known him before the revolution; he had quarreled with I ignore who. (*I know: with Messaoud Benaïssa.*). He informed me-we were not married yet-that he was entering politics, at that time a dangerous resolution. He left to study in Constantine for some years. On his return to Kimmel, one year before the insurrection, gendarmes have come to arrest him. We fled. Come to think about, I started the revolution one year before the others. With Adjoul, I gave birth to six children, two boys who have not survived and four girls. At the beginning of the war, people cried out at my sight: 'Beware! She is more dangerous than a bomb!' Colonialism forced us to live in a concentration camp: Adjoul's mother, his sisters and me. His father came once in awhile to visit us. One day, I fled from the camp with his mother and joined the tribe of Ouled Aïssa. Later, his sisters joined us. Sometime after, a goumier came to the camp with French soldiers. He pointed his finger at us and said: 'These women are not Ouled Aïssa. They are Serahna.' A French warned us: 'Wait for me. I will come to night and move you elsewhere.' That same evening, another man advised us to split up and go each in a direction. We did what he said and as soon as our army got stronger, we tripped back to Dermoun.

(111) When he learns of Adjoul's surrender, Abbas Laghrour shows a deep discontent and says: "Adjoul should have fought till death!"

(112)Fellaghas: road bandits or coupeurs de route, pejorative name of ANL used by the French.

I remember once Adjoul came and asked us to prepare a special meal for Si Mostefa's escape. Nidham furnished meat and couscous."

Adjoul speaks to himself, a rapid continuous soliloquy. I ask her:

"What is he saying?"

"Koran. When he regains strength, one can understand. Now, he is too weak for us to sort out the verses." The lips of Adjoul tremble; his left hand hits the wall regularly, obeying an invisible metronome. "Last night, he kind of woke up, complaining of itching all over his limbs and scratching till bleeding. I called for a doctor. None came. Not even a nurse."

I know that to get him hospitalized in the public hospital, high personalities intervened.

Cockroaches in long rapid files climb on the walls. Adjoul has passed away a few hours later.

Now, it rains. I don't feel like writing. My brain is foggy. I must go on though, despite my melancholy. What else can be said? Adjoul and his wife finished their lives as baby sitters since he had no resources, no health insurance, nothing. The *wali* (74) of Batna, pressed by Hadj Lakhdar, gave him a low cost social flat in a popular part of the city. The Adjouls look after 5 or 6 children whose parents work.

"Don't be shy! Tell him!"

Adjoul laughs at his wife who blushes and looks down.

"She won't tell you: we look after children."

At last, she avows: "They are not bothersome. I like taking care of them."

I see the little monsters fluttering in and out the room, tracked by Adjoul's smiling eyes.

Now, he is in a coma, in the hospital, since December. The hospital of Batna was built like a military fortification, with machicolation, escarps and counterscarps, ramps and posterns. It has nothing to do with a health center. To get access to Adjoul's room, I have to walk down a flight of steep narrow stairs. It is pitch-dark. I hardly can make out his wife. Adjoul moans. I put my mouth against his ear, and ask: "Si Adjoul, do you hear me?"

PART 3

The end of the beginning

1

CCE in Aures

End of December 1956. It's been sixty days now that Adjoul has left the stage and Amirouche gone back to Kabylia to report to CCE. At Ouistili, gather a few chiefs who try, despite overwhelming odds, to save from disaster the Wilaya I, cradle of the Revolution. (113)

They are Mohamed Lamouri, Hadj Lakhdar, Hihi Mekki, Meddour Azoui and Tahar Nouichi. Without preliminaries, Hadj Lakhdar claims:

“Let us simply implement Si Mostefa's instructions! This is the only way to save the revolution. I propose Si Lamouri as chief of the first mintaka.”

They all agree by acclamations. Lamouri refuses, saying:

“I think Hadj Lakhdar is more qualified than me.”

However, the pressure on Lamouri is so great that he accepts the post. He then becomes the chief, with Hadj Lakhdar as his military assistant, Hihi Mekki as his political one and Youcef Laalaoui as his intelligence officer.

Lamouri transfers HQ to Refaa, west of Batna, in the Belezma Mountains. Tahar Nouichi, sounded out about leading the second mintaka (Arris), has been rejected by the Touaba, dominant tribe of Arris and its region. Ahmed Azoui is appointed at his place. He refuses. Work resumes, in accordance with Mostefa's planning. Sectors and regions are formally demarcated and fitted with the habitual tricephalic direction: military, political and intelligence. Dues and supplies roll in again from a convinced and structured population, much less boisterous than in the second mintaka (Arris).

Around March 1957, Lamouri receives an invitation to visit Kabylia. He gathers at Ouistili local chiefs, namely: Messaoud Benaïssa, Ammar Maache, Ahmed Nouaoura, Mostefa Reaïli, Mohamed Cherif Benakcha, Meddour Azoui and Ahmed Azoui. He chairs the meeting, assisted by Hadj Lakhdar and Hihi Mekki.

(113)After the Soummam Congress, Algeria has been divided in 5 wilayas. The third zone (Biskra) of the wilaya I has become the wilaya VI with Ahmed Ben Abderzak as its chief.

Hadj Lakhdar narrates:

“I must say that no one was enthused about journeying to Kabylia. Frankly, we only had bad memories of Amirouche. Benaïssa has gone as far as advocate a total break off. Other chiefs’ opinion, sometimes more competent, was globally identical to his. Lamouri pleaded against breaking off. Discussions lasted two days, most of the time stormy. Finally, the invitation is accepted and a tissal sent by rail to the Wilaya III in order to specify date and location of the meeting. The answer comes back four days later. Omar Ben Boulaid declines to go. One day, Lamouri questions me in a funny tone: ‘Tell me, Hadj, what’s between you and Si Tahar Nouïchi?’ I answer: ‘Only good.’

‘That is not what he told me. It seems you have threatened him!’

‘Why would I threaten him?’

‘Anyway, he has asked for a special protection.’

‘No kidding!’

‘Yes. I reassured him and told him he would be under my personal protection. I have acted as guarantor for him and assured you would not harm him.’ ”

Escorted by a 70 men strong katiba, they are nine to head for Kabylia: Lamouri, Hadj, Nouïchi, Kabouya, Hihi, Toreche, Meddour Azoui, Reaïli and Benakcha. The journey till Djurdjura Mountains lasts several weeks. They finally cross Beni Ouacif and mark a stop at Tasslent, near Akbou, in the midst of a bumpy relief. They are met by Ouamrane, Mohammedi Saïd, then chief of Wilaya III and Amirouche. The atmosphere gets more and more relaxed as discussions go on. Once more, they recall the memory and death of Mostefa Ben Boulaid. They endeavor hard to explain Adjoul’s surrender. Particularly Amirouche who wants to be told all details: circumstances, places, dates, Serahna’s reactions, the present situation. On the second day, Mohammedi Saïd informs them that CCE has decided to administer the Wilaya I. He reads to them the names of the officers chosen to lead the Wilaya on behalf of CCE. Lamouri disagrees:

“We only need some time. We will put back our Wilaya on rails. We have already started with the first mintaka. Our example will gain ground.”

Mohammedi Saïd gets more specific:

“Yes, Lamouri. By the way, I inform you that CCE has appointed you as the representative of Wilaya I in Tunisia.”

Lamouri is taken aback. Mohammedi Saïd goes on:

“You know that CCE is the leading organ of the revolution. It commands ANL. Because of security reasons, it is based abroad in a foreign country. It needs information on the situation inside Algeria. That is why each wilaya has to send a trusted representative. And you have been chosen!”

A heavy silence settles down in the room, broken again by Mohammedi Saïd:

“Get ready to leave for Tunisia!”

As soon as he notices Lamouri’s discontent, he hastens to add:

“CCE’s order!”

Years later, Hadj Lakhdar reveals: “I felt as if Mohammedi Said had slapped me on my face. While we were sticking back together the bits of our wilaya, one by one, and while the ambient mistrust between our officers and djounoud was fading away, all of a sudden arrives this CCE which takes away Lamouri, our best chief! A decision utterly against good sense. We were not at all convinced, but what could we do? We began regretting to have come.”

Mohammedi Said turned to me and said:

“You, Hadj, go back to the first mintaka and continue its reorganization under the command of Hihi Mekki, who replaces Lamouri.”

At this moment, Hihi Mekki springs up and claims:

“I am sorry! Si Lamouri can be replaced only by Hadj Lakhdar.”

Mohammedi Said’s tone gets more conciliatory:

“All right! Do your best and work together. Organize as you wish.”

On the third day, the meeting ends. Lamouri, Amirouche and Nouichi head toward Tunisia by crossing the northern region of Constantine. Hadj Lakhdar and Hihi Mekki return to Refaa and the first mintaka (Batna), bursting with a heartbreaking grief. Their other companions continue their trek up to Chelia to inform Omar and Benaissa, who start at once an intense propaganda against CCE. At that time, Ahmed Ben Abderzak, chief of the third mintaka (Biskra and surroundings) cuts off all relations with the second mintaka (Arris) and, thanks to Amirouche’s help, sets up the Wilaya number six (VI). Amor Driss is his assistant.

At the end, the Wilaya I has been severed of a southern part of its territory and does not formally exist per se since it is managed by CCE. Its remaining five mintakas (zone) continue however to fight colonialism on their own, in conditions oddly similar to those of the very beginning of the insurrection. As if nothing has been done! French troops everywhere, encircling the maquis, civilian urban cells dismantled and militants jailed, often summarily executed, insecurity in all places and death served at any time!

Never, the number of discontented who enlist in the French army has been so large. For Arris only, the number of dissidents reaches 700! Fratricidal killings initiated and enhanced by the enemy soar at a frightening speed. Dissidents, also called goumiers or harkis are encouraged by colonial authority to appropriate wives and homes of freedom fighters who, to take revenge on dissidents, leave ANL, enlist in enemy’s troops, slit the usurpators’ throats and return to ANL, this time with wife and children. Dissidents’ number is larger in mintakas 2 (Arris) and 6 (Tebessa). Soon, the freedom fighters lose their marks and refuse any tribal union because contrary to nature and a mortal threat to the peace and stability that prevailed during colonial times. Each tribe returns then to its ancestor and defends its lineage militarily.

The dream of Mostefa Ben Boulaid to initiate a common action against foreign rule and eventually create a nation has gone with the wind.

2

Hadj Lakhdar's appointment as head of Wilaya I.

From May 1957 to April 1958, Hadj Lakhdar and Hihi Mekki head together the first mintaka (Batna). Hadj holds Hihi in respect. Hihi before taking to maquis was a teacher and mastered Arabic as well as French. When he arrives in Tunisia, Lamouri sends them a transceiver which they place under the protection of an entire katiba. They change its position after each emission. He informs them that CCE has appointed Hadj Lakhdar and Ali Nemeur as chiefs of Wilaya I. Hadj replies he can't accept because Hihi needs him in the first mintaka of Batna. Lamouri answers back:

"It is an order! You must obey and take the Wilaya in hand."

Hadj complies reluctantly. He narrates:

"Something was the matter. As soon as we start having a glimpse of the tunnel's end, *'they'* mow us like grass. I was getting ready to join Ali Nemeur when a tissal informs me of Hihi's death in an engagement. I radio the news to Lamouri. He retorts: 'I am sending new officers. Start your job in the wilaya HQ.' Of course, no one came. I waited several months. Finally, tired of waiting (as a matter of fact, when I think of it, I spent half of my life in the bush waiting, always waiting!) I put my assistant in my place, take leave of the first mintaka and head for Kimmel with a twelve men escort. We journey alongside Tinourist Forest, west of Maafa without problem. Fifteen kilometers west of Bouzina, I meet Ali Benchaiba, tell him of my nomination as head of the Wilaya, of prevailing anarchy and dissidents' misbehavior. He says: 'Hadj, we are not representatives of any authority. We possess no legitimacy.' I leave him and resume my trek through the forest of S'Gag. I reach that same afternoon the Mahmel Mountain where we are spotted by enemy helicopters which remind me of a stream of angry hornets."

Immediately, Hadj steps back, looking for a hiding. He at last crouches down with his men inside thick bushes and makes out, at the dim light of a dying day, many enemy soldiers jumping out of helicopters and progressing, backs bent, through undergrowth.

He commands his men to disperse, keep silent and immobile. Obeying, they spend the whole night at a standstill, taking guard in turn. At day break, he commands them to charge at enemy and shoot nonstop. Then, he jumps out first, followed by four guerrillas, shooting like in a traditional wedding. They break the ring and cross over. The eight others, less audacious, get stuck behind and will eventually be killed by the French.

Still running, Hadj passes Mount Ichemoul, goes round the region of Chelia where the French happen to be now in the middle of a big combing operation. At last, he reaches Arris on the beginning of June 1958. A little later, a tissal catches up with him to inform him of the death of his chief: Ali Nemeur.

Hadj feels an immense sorrow and a great loneliness, like after Mostefa Ben Boulaid's disappearance. This is what he narrates:

"I did not feel in security anymore." *At this moment, his habitual pout changed into a very warm smile, quasi childlike.* "I sent one of the four men left to the chief of the first mintaka (Batna) asking him to urgently dispatch me a katiba. In the mean time, I pay a visit to Hocine Ben Abdeslam, chief of the Arris mintaka. I tell him of my nomination at the head of Wilaya I by CCE. He does not look impressed. I do as if I had not noticed a thing and ask him, in a chatting tone, about his relations with neighboring regions. He replies: 'I have no relations whatsoever with anybody. Here, it is each one for himself.' 'Do you meet Sidi Henni?' 'No.'"

About twenty days later, on June 30, arrives the katiba dispatched from the first mintaka, with a transreceiver. Hadj then feels much more secure and stronger. He trips to the hamlet of Inoughissen, stronghold the tribe of Bouslimanis.

He resumes his narration:

"The Bouslimani chief, Ahmed Oucifi, accepts to see me. I inform him of the latest news and ask for his help to bring back to life Kimmel's HQ. At first, he accepts, and then changes his mind. I invite him to come straight to Kimmel with his fighters. He refuses and demands a preliminary meeting of 'clarification.' I protest: 'Ahmed, this amounts to sheer blackmail. I won't tolerate it. I shall go to Kimmel on my own.' Finally, I get the key of the mystery from Hocine Ben Abdeslam: 'The Bouslimani want you to set up a new nahia at Inoughissen. With Ahmed Oucifi as its sub lieutenant.' I ask Hocine: 'How many Bouslimani fighters are there in ANL?' 'Around 260.' 'Out of question! They are mad. A nahia at Inoughissen does not make any sense. It belongs to the nahia of Arris. It will remain as it is!' Stubborn, Hocine insists: 'The new nahia would include Medina and its surroundings.' I, even more stubborn: 'No. I say no. It won't work.' I am forced to take things in hand. I go to Kimmel's HQ, only to find there desolation and miseries. Before, cited as exemplary and coveted with jealousy, Kimmel now, as if stricken by a bad eye since Adjoul's surrender, had sunk into fear and anarchy. How am I to begin? Hocine Ben Abdeslam is of no use to me. On the contrary; to put back the wilaya on rails, he has neither plans, nor ideas. He does just what passes through his mind! He appoints and dismisses chiefs of regions and sectors in his mintaka without

informing anyone. More seriously, he favors members of his family and tribe in the distribution of allowances, supplies or arms. I summon him to HQ, with all sectors' and regions' chiefs of the second mintaka (Arris). All tribes are represented: Touaba, Bouslimani, Chorfa, Serahna and Bradja. During the meeting, all stare at each other like cats and dogs. I realize pretty soon though that their principal enemy is me. Everything I say is meaningless and unworthy for them all. They propose the contrary of my plans all the time and in a more and more disrespectful manner. I felt I was on the verge of being overcome, so I decide to displace Hocine Ben Abdeslam and Sidi Henni and transfer them to the second mintaka of Batna. I replace the first by Youcef Laalaoui. I set up new passes, signed only by me to put some order in the anarchic displacements of djounoud. I send letters to urban militants urging them to collect supplies. Soon after, mules' convoys loaded with food and blankets converge toward Kimmel; the central warehouse begins filling up.

I visit patients in the wilaya field hospital. I discover starving wounded djounoud. On the other hand, I am told that in a nearby officer's refuge are stocked about 400 kilograms of food. Without waiting, I retrieve 350 kilograms of them and have them delivered to the hospital.

The situation gets somewhat clearer. I set out upon a tour through the five mintaka in order to define their geographical limits and try to connect them by radio. Unfortunately, I don't dispose of enough radio technicians. So, radio transmission remains an unfulfilled dream. Amirouche has kept his word, at least on one occasion: thanks to him, CCE releases for our wilaya 250 millions old francs. I keep 100 for HQ and give 150 to the population, especially widows and orphans. For all that, my problems are not gone yet!

I demand a strict application of revolutionary rules. As an example, they stipulate that regional leaders must send a monthly report to wilaya HQ where they describe in detail their military and political activities, with gains, losses and problems encountered. I summon Abdelmadjid Abdessmed, chief of nahia, to HQ and ask him about his reports. He answers he has not established them because the Serahna have refused to furnish him with data and that, in any case, he can't force them to do so. His declarations anger me. The more so when I notice another officer cadet Mohamed Salah Chankhloufi try his best to get a upper hand on Serahna and challenges me openly: disrespect of rules, no reports, no control. I call him to HQ.

He complies and comes in the company of about seventy armed to the teeth fighters. He puts on display sixty of them on the crest facing HQ and brings seven others with him inside HQ. I ask him: 'Why don't you tell the men on the crest to come and join us?' He replies: 'No. Where they are now is a good place.' I am kind of embarrassed. I send two men toward them to beg them to come down. They turn down my offer. I command my assistant, Moussa Heliss, to surround them with a platoon. But, as soon as they see HQ fighters moving in their direction, they flee. Moussa Heliss comes back and reports the event. I turn to Chankhloufi: 'Now, you are my prisoner. You and your comrades will have to give me your arms.' They obey. His escort, when questioned, reveals that Chankhloufi has ordered them to shoot in case

of hostile maneuvers. After awhile, I give them back their weapons, present them with new uniforms and pataugas and set them free. 'You are free to leave, you are free to stay or come back at any time. Only Chankhloufi will remain here with us.' Among the seven, two choose to leave, five to remain. I ask the five to leave with their companions and turn to Chankhloufi: 'Do you by any chance happen to know families of martyrs?' 'Yes.' 'Then, here are 400,000 old francs. You will distribute them to these families.' Surprised, he accepts. Ice is broken and confidence returns. Serahna start to come and visit me at HQ to see by themselves that things are different." *When he tells me this episode, I feel that Hadj is more than proud.* Now, he faces another problem: Lieutenant Abdelmadjid Abdessmed. This officer has vigorously protested when Hadj confiscated 350 kilograms of food from his refuge. Hadj has just commented: "We have the duty to feed starving wounded djounoud." A few weeks later, an officer, Mohamed Cherif Djarallah, informs Hadj: "Something grave has occurred. We have found the body of a djoundi thrown from an enemy plane and near him, a bag containing letters. One of these letters reveals that Si Abdelmadjid Abdessmed is in contact with SAS (113)." "Does Abdelmadjid know about it?" "No." Hadj gropes inside the bag and finds not less than 16 letters either coming from or addressed to SAS. He admits that his inquiry stopped there. He makes no effort to find out whether these letters were written by the French or why one of them was addressed to Abdessmed.

He summons him to HQ, has him tried before the wilaya council and charges him with mismanagement in the presence of Djarallah and Laalaoui. Abdessmed who at that time is chief of nahia, replies angrily that Tunis HQ has named him captain. Hadj denies it, saying that if that had been the case, he, Hadj, would have been informed first. Be that as it may, he orders that Abdessmed be disarmed and arrested. Abdessmed maintains that he does not abide by Hadj's orders, but nonetheless, relinquishes his machine gun.

Both men of the wilaya council, Djarallah and Laalaoui, give their opinion to Hadj: total innocence of Abdessmed. They write a report where they affirm that he is a man free of all suspicion. However, he is put under house arrest for a month, the time needed by Hadj to complete investigation. He gets him free, reinstates him in his initial position and transfers him to the sixth mintaka (Tebessa).

Hadj tells me, hinting at what happened in Kabylia with Amirouche: "Another weird trick of the French that ended as a flash in the pan!" After this happy ending, Hadj continues forging ahead. He has a package of blankets and clothes handed over to Abdessmed and Chankhloufi with order to distribute them fairly. People however complain: nepotism is still going strong. In front of Hadj, the two officers quarrel. Chankhloufi insults Abdessmed. Hadj gets flushed with anger, slaps Chankhloufi on his face, disarms him and locks him inside a casemate. On evening, he radios Tunis HQ and reports the incident. Tunis answers him to do his best; whatever his decision, HQ will ratify it. He thinks for some time, then decides to transfer Chankhloufi to the first mintaka (Batna).

(113)SAS: specialized administrative section or Native Affairs Bureau. Its missions consist in torturing people, disinformation, summary killings and intelligence gathering by all means.

Chankhloufi refuses to be exiled far from Kimmel. Hadj puts him back in custody for another week. He reiterates his proposition. The prisoner refuses a second time. He remains in jail until he escapes thanks to a comrade. Youcef Laalaoui who was to investigate and hear Chankhloufi before sending a report to Tunis HQ, gets nearly cut open by a furious Hadj.

This time, Hadj sends a fulminating report to Tunis, blaming Laalaoui and his *laissez aller*. Tunis responds: "Hadj, you must *forgive* him." All these events are not to Hadj's advantage. He remains still challenged by officers who disobey his orders, sometimes openly rebel. When he refuses to grant the Bouslimanis permission to set up an autonomous region at Inoughissen, headed by a Bouslimani, in continuity with the same sad colonial practice, Hadj comes up against a serious tribal problem. The Bouslimani treat him as a traitor, pledged to CCE and Amirouche. Tired of them, he decides to transfer a great many of them to the Sahara, in the new Wilaya VI. They reject his offer. He cuts off their food supplies. They reply by attacking the supply convoys sent from the first mintaka (Batna) and steal food at its source. Stubborn, Hadj not only protects militarily the convoys, but also surrounds the Bouslimani's territory and deprives them of passes and of right to travel. They are so to speak strangled.

Afterward, he attacks them. The fight lasts three days, at the end of which he routs them. Some time later, starving, they join again ANL and quiet down. With Touaba, Hadj has no problems; they set up their own structures in the region of Arris, Medina and Khangat Maache. The Wilaya HQ grants them regularly family allowances and assistance to provide for the needs of widows and martyrs' parents. Many of them, shocked by the rude methods of Hadj, ask Ahmed Ben Abderzak to accept them in his wilaya. Chorfa, dispersed through many regions, pose no problems to Hadj. Beni Melloul, on the contrary, are a pain in the neck. Their leader, Mohand Ameziane, a one time ally of Benaissa, has acted guilty of many misdeeds and does not recognize HQ's authority. His men, fearing Hadj's reprisals, kill him and head for Nememcha where anarchy is endemic.

In Nememcha, the revolution is not recognized anymore and nomads display French flags on their camels and tents. Hadj does not venture in Nememcha quagmire. He faces enough problems in Aures. He transfers three katiba from the zone of Kimmel to the first mintaka (Batna). Unfamiliar with terrain, they are all wiped out by the French. To compensate, he orders the chief of the first mintaka to send four katiba to Chelia and Kimmel. Years later, Hadj tries to explain:

"My aim was to get rid of that atmosphere of fear, suspicion and fratricidal anarchy which prevailed in Aures. We suffered casualties of course, but what solutions choose when the fate of the revolution is at stake? Every one is pulling the thing on his side, without either dialogue or coordination. Lamouri and Tunis HQ were as useful to me as a plaster on a wooden leg."

Alone, subject to heavy pressures, without precise road maps and without real strength, Hadj Lakhdar manages to limit damages only owing to his legendary prudence, a solid rural good sense and a complete faithfulness to the few revolutionary principles learned on the field.

During this period, there exists a violent antagonism to FNL. It began with Amirouche's Aures tour, it got exacerbated after Ahmed Azoui's misfortunes in Tunisia.

Ahmed Azoui, cousin of Meddour Azoui and leader of the commandos' platoon, has indeed gone to Tunisia. When he returns to Aures, he narrates to whom wants to listen how he was copiously beaten and mistreated by the men of Tunis HQ. He tells also that the men of the Organisation Exterieur of the revolution live in luxury, eat their fill and sleep on beds, in safety, ignoring hardships endured by ANL inside Algeria. Messaoud Benaïssa cheerfully mounts this new battle horse and restarts a wild propaganda against FNL.

Dispirited and disoriented, the partisans rebel by the hundreds and choose a new chief, Cherif Rabhi, one of the first companions of Mostefa Ben Boulaid. Cherif Rabhi sets his HQ in the region of Bouhmar, at Chebha. He and his men roam hills around Chelia and often overflow onto Kimmel to attack supply convoys. The reaction of Hadj Lakhdar catches Cherif Rabhi unaware. For the second time in the history of the revolution, Hadj does not hesitate using force against mutinous guerrillas. Better fed, better armed, the loyalists defeat the dissidents in a Pyrrhic victory. Messaoud Benaïssa continues crying nonstop: "ANL is the only commander. The men abroad have nothing in common with us. Meat eaters can't overcome talghuda (114) eaters." To untie him from Benaïssa's nefast influence, Hadj sends a tissal to Cherif Rabhi:

"Let the past die. Remember Si Mostefa's message: come back to ANL as officer."

Rabhi replies: "No."

He goes on mixing with Benaïssa until one day he uncovers his nocivity and kills him at Sidi Ali.

(114)Talghuda: tubercles which when dried and mashed give a kind of flour.

3

Break up of Wilaya I

Worried by the many casualties and the growing increase of dissidents, Hadj Lakhdar invites Ali Benchaiba and Mohamed Cherif Benakcha to HQ. He charges the first to contact the dissident Touaba and the second, the Bouslimani, with an aim: bring them back to lawfulness. In the meantime, he takes conciliatory measures. Starting from the sector of Medina, he pays the total amount of dissidents' family allowances, with food intakes.

It takes the two missionaries several months to bring back to legal ANL five hundred rebels. Mohamed Cherif Benakcha with about one hundred remaining rebels rallies the new sixth wilaya led by Ahmed Ben Abderzak. However, thirty of them return to Kimmel and ask to be affected to hot warring spots. The other dissidents are dispersed in different regions. Ahmed Ben Abderzak, chief of Wilaya VI, has his eye on becoming the boss of Wilaya I and is delighted to enlist in his troops so many veterans.

Ali Benchaiba won't evoke an event without explaining at length its ins and outs. One has just to bear with him and listen:

"Yes. It is true that I met Hadj Lakhdar in the forest of S'Gag during the spring of 1958. He was heading for Kimmel, escorted by a faoudj (115). He told me of anarchy, dissidence and his appointment as head of the wilaya. The situation indeed was not brilliant. For me, the only thing I could do was to return where I belong, namely Medina, my home hamlet. There, to cap it all, I hear that I am taxed of being pro CCE and even pro Kabyle. I pay a visit to dissidents, chat with Ahmed Azoui, Cherif Rabhi and Messaoud Benaissa. At that time, Omar Ben Boulaid had left Algeria. I had a good contact with the dissidents and their chiefs. I tried as best as I could to clarify things for them: they recognized neither FNL nor CCE. They kept saying that Si Mostefa Ben Boulaid never mentioned the words FNL, CCE or wilaya. I told what I knew, that FNL and CCE are identical and embody the high command of the revolution, that Algeria had been divided into six wilayas and that Aures Nememcha is now the wilaya I. I concluded that our wilaya might well get isolated from other wilayas."

I ask: "Si Benchaiba, how many dissidents were out at that period?"

"To give you an exact number is difficult. I'd say around 700, at first led by Ahmed Azoui, then by Cherif Rabhi, a veteran and one of the first companions of Si Mostefa, wounded in the explosion of the booby trapped transreceiver. Rabhi had set up his HQ at Chebha; the dissidents comprised Touaba, Bouslimani and Beni Oudjana."

"What was the role of Hadj Lakhdar?"

(115)Faoudj: Arabic, means a group of twelve fighters.

“Himself was accused of being a traitor mercenary of CCE since his appointment as head of the wilaya by Tunis HQ. His room to maneuver was small. He was rejected by all: Cherif Rabhi in Bouhmar, Mohamed Seghir Tighezza chief of Bouslimanis at Inoughissen, Mohand Ameziane chief of Beni Melloul, Mohamed Laouar at Tifelfel and the Ouled Nadji at Khangat Maache. Hadj Lakhdar had summoned me to visit him at wilaya’s HQ. He asked me to share out allowances and food from Medina to all djounoud’s families, including dissidents. At that time, security had been somewhat ameliorated in Medina, Khangat Maache and Arris. The test of strength came on September 1958. I was present, utterly powerless. Three days of fratricidal battle between Hadj’s legalist troops and rebels led by Cherif Rabhi. Hadj uses all his power and encircles Rabhi’s men. He cuts them off from supply lines and disperses them till they run for their lives. Hadj is magnanimous and proposes Rabhi’s return to legal ANL as officer. Rabhi refuses because he is under a double influence of Benaissa and Ahmed Azoui.”

At the same period, Bouslimani fighters, recently returned to legality by Mohamed Cherif Benakcha, meet by chance a dissident political commissar belonging to the tribe of Ouled Nadji. They tie him up and bring him back to wilaya HQ. In reprisal, some Ouled Nadji capture Benchaiba himself on a pacifying mission in their stronghold at Khangat Maache. Cherif Rabhi uses all means to have him released. In vain. In the meantime, the captured political commissar manages to escape, returns to Khangat Maache and clears Benchaiba who is immediately released.

The whole affair does not suit Hadj Lakhdar who tells Benchaiba: “The Ouled Nadji have not showed respect for me. They have dared arrest you. I demand redress for their misbehavior. Take a battalion and attack them!”

Benchaiba says no: “Si Hadj, too much damage has been done so far! We already are amid a fratricidal war and if you add colonialism on the alert, that should be enough. I guarantee Ouled Nadjis’ good faith.”

Hadj gets angry. He hates being contradicted. He roars: “Tell me who will guarantee you?” “In this case, Si Hadj, there is no more trust between us.”

They stop their confrontation at that.

It is the midst of 1970 winter. Benchaiba gets nearer to the butane gas heater of his tiny office in a corner of his gas station in Batna, wipes his watering eye (aftermath of the march 1956 explosion of Nara) with a large handkerchief and says:

“Ha! My dear Sir, one can say the situation had greatly improved. In spite of my failure with Mohamed Salah Chankhloufi who persistently refused to return to legality because he feared Hadj Lakhdar. After all, it remains only a detail. As soon as Touaba acknowledged Hadj Lakhdar, all problems were gone. Tissal resumed their roundabouts and supplies their return.”

Benchaiba makes no secret of his admiration for the Touaba, himself a Toubi. He’d often affirm: ‘Whoever wants wealth must take Touaba as partners.’ ”

Let us listen now to Hadj Lakhdar. When he talks of this period, he at once takes on a worried look as if caught up by bad memories. “I would not have thought myself able to enlist dissidents in ANL. Yet, I have done it. Because the revolution was in danger. All what imported was the rebuilding of the anti-colonialist front. I opened up supply warehouses to dissidents and their families. I paid them family allowances, given them passes so that they move freely. Sometimes, I made mistakes; with Beni Melloul rebels, things were never simple. Led by Mohamed Benaissa and Mohand Ameziane, they committed many crimes, in particular the execution of one hundred young would-be students from Kabylia on their way to Tunisia. I launched three katiba on their heels, but they fled eastward, after killing their chief, Mohand Ameziane and replace him with a Nemouchi, named Ammar Rafale.”

I ask:

“Si Hadj is it true that Adjoul got in touch with you?”

“Yes. He sent me a message at wilaya’s HQ, where he proposes his aid and hints about his possible return. It was of course out of question that he joins ANL again! I must say that at the same period, Caid Sebti Merchi proposed also his services and gave us one million old francs to be shared by djounoud.”

Despite his efforts, Hadj Lakhdar is overtaken by events. He does not have the necessary appraisal to face problems. He then turns to the only available reference and commands Youcef Laalaoui to ask recommendations by radio from Tunis HQ. One day, he is informed that Laalaoui communicates directly by phone in Kabyle with Tunis HQ. He calls him:

“What do I hear? You talk in Kabyle with HQ?”

“No, Si Hadj. I don’t do all the time. Only to explain things in case of emergencies.”

“You pretend ignoring that not only colonialism has good ears, but that it also understands very well Kabyle idiom.”

When he tells me that, Hadj’s eyes shine with anger and his upper lip curls up in disgust. I want to know:

“Si Hadj, did Tunis HQ help you? Did they send recommendations?”

“Lies. As usual, empty promises.”

4

Zonal reorganization of Wilaya I

Tirelessly, akin to an ant, Hadj Lakhdar carries on with his work. On October 1958, Wilaya I comprises 2,600 fighters, divided as follows:

- first mintaka (Batna): 860 fighters
- second mintaka (Arris): 1,400 fighters
- fourth mintaka (Ain Beïda): 350 fighters.

We remember that the third mintaka (Biskra) has become the sixth Wilaya led by Ahmed Ben Abderzak. We know on the other hand that mintakas number 5 (Sedrata) and 6 (Tebessa) are taken care of directly by Tunis HQ.

The ranks used are as follows:

- Arif: corporal, sergeant
- First arif: staff sergeant
- Moussaad: warrant officer
- Moulazem first: officer cadet
- Moulazem second: sub-lieutenant
- Dhabet first: lieutenant
- Dhabet second: captain
- Sar first: major
- Sar second: colonel.

The basic fighting unit is the faoudj or group, made up of 11 men and a sergeant. Often, the faoudj splits up into two half groups. The firka or platoon comprises 30 men and 2 sergeants. The katiba or company is made of 70 men and an officer cadet. The faïlek or battalion comprises between 350 and 400 men, plus a sub-lieutenant.

The wilaya I possessed some heavy weapons, such as 15 mortars, caliber 45; 1 mortar, caliber 81, lost in a battle at Refaa; 15 heavy machine guns; 1 caliber 30 machine gun and 7 bazookas. In theory, each katiba is equipped with 1 mortar and 2 heavy machine guns.

Hadj Lakhdar succeeds in convincing sixty harkis (116) from the SAS of Khenchela to abandon the French army and join ANL with their arms. He has adopted a simple method: he sends one of his officers, escorted by two or three guerrillas, to a French post. The officer contacts the native mercenaries one by one and presents them with a nominal letter. Results are generally good. The harki invite the same officer for a second meeting where they offer arms and supplies. On the third meeting, they propose to desert. Most of the time, they reveal they've enlisted with the French army for three main reasons: first, to protect their wives and children, second, to take revenge on native informers who denounced them to enemy, third, incompatibility with local ANL officers reckoned either too rude or too weak.

(116)Harki: native military auxiliary of the French army, akin to goumier.

More than once, they demand from ANL liaison that some officers be removed. Surprisingly, Hadj fulfills their demands and transfers unwanted officers elsewhere. With this policy, the mercenaries commit themselves to provide ANL with ammunition, to shoot in the air during engagements and to desert if need be.

Hadj narrates: “In fact, I limited desertions to minimum. First, because I did not trust them. The perfidious French have often performed treacherous operations in our ranks. Second, because they were more useful to us where they were. I did however encourage them to set up revolutionary committees. Once, they had given rendez-vous to my officer right near the entrance of a French post. My officer got scared and voiced it. The goumiers reassured him: ‘Relax! You are our guest. No matter what, we shall protect you.’ They gave him one mule loaded with 700 bullets and about 20 fatigues. Another time, an officer notes that a revolutionary committee is without chief. He asks villagers: ‘Is there a volunteer?’ No answer. Then a woman gets up, raising her hand: ‘I am ready to lead the committee.’ ”

From June 1958 to October 1958, Hadj is haunted by food supplies. He fears most the specter of starvation and does his utmost to insure food for everyone, djounoud and civilian refugees. He constantly fights against the blockade imposed on them by the French army. He often changes itineraries used by mules’ convoys, often victims of napalm dropped from enemy planes. Mules have even learned to crouch and bend their heads at each aerial alert. Hadj Takes great care to hide supplies in underground bunkers guarded day and night by djounoud. At the end, he manages to offer the djounoud one hot meal per day. The Kimmel field hospital set up by Chihani and Adjoul, is equipped with medicines and small surgical tools. Hadj builds at Merouana another field hospital which costs Nidham the sum of 15 millions old francs.

Each guerrilla receives a booklet containing the ANL code, in Arabic and French. On it are noted down the rules to respect in case of poison gas attack or napalm, the faults not to make, like fleeing before enemy, losing one’s arm, disclosing a secret or surrendering to enemy. Mistakes are, according to their importance, punished by death, prison, degradation or at last, inscription on a black register.

July 1958: Mostefa Boucetta, member of a 300 guerrillas’ delegation constituted of Touaba, Bouslimani and Serahna, formally asks Hadj Lakhdar to stop by all means the fratricidal feuds inside the Wilaya I. Hadj Lakhdar responds with a brutal rebuff, thus increasing everyone’s dismay.

A few weeks later, Mohamed Cherif Benakcha returns home from Tunis. He has been appointed by Tunis HQ chief of the second mintaka (Arris), under Hadj’s orders. From the very start, the two men don’t get along. Their relations deteriorate rapidly till Hadj orders Benakcha to leave Kimmel and head in the direction of the 6th wilaya (Sahara). Benakcha complies, assembles around 100 fighters, among whom Mostefa Boucetta and joins Ahmed Ben Abderzak in whose company he will eventually die on march 1959.

Benakcha complains to Ahmed Ben Abderzak about Hadj's harsh manners. Ben Abderzak vows to inform Tunis HQ and gives him 600,000 old francs as a help for djounoud's families of the second mintaka (Arris).

5

Interwilaya meeting of Taher (November 1958)

On September 1958, Hadj Lakhdar gets a message inviting him to attend a meeting between wilaya. He narrates: “The message said that I should head toward the third wilaya (Kabylia). I comply, escorted by about 60 guerrillas and a close guard of 12 men. The trip from Kimmel to Palestro lasts around 2 months. At Palestro, I am met by Mohand Oulhadj who informs me that the meeting will take place in wilaya IV. Since I am unfamiliar with the region, he assigns to me guides from Kabylia. We follow the prints left by Amirouche and Ben Abderzak, gone well ahead of us. Near Lafayette and Akbou, the French ambush us; we lose a fighter, we bury him. The day after, he is unburied by enemy, then buried again by civilians. We continue our trek, dine in a hamlet separated from an enemy post by only a creek. We reach Thenine, near Kherrata. A fighter hurts a stone, it falls and we hear goumiers’ dogs’ barks. We are pinpointed. The mercenaries follow us and succeed in catching up with our detachment. We hasten to dig trenches. Planes cross the sky without spotting us. We are in the middle of a naked place, rocky and treeless. The day after, we attain Djebel Babor in wilaya II. With my binoculars, I can see Ali Kafi standing before a guitoune. (76) He is the acting chief of wilaya II. We send him a tissal to invite him to join us. We, that is Amirouche, Ben Abderzak, Bougara and me. He answers two days later that he can’t attend the meeting without Ben Tobbal’s approval. He appoints at his place Lamine Khene and Major Hocine.

Finally, the meeting starts on November first, 1958 at Taher, west of Kherrata. All wilayas are present, except wilaya V.

- Wilaya I= Hadj Lakhdar
- Wilaya II=Lamine Khene
- Wilaya III=Amirouche
- Wilaya IV=M’Hamed Bougara
- Wilaya VI=Ahmed Ben Abderzak, aka Haoues.

The meeting lasts twelve days. All the problems are put on the table. Hadj Lakhdar narrates: “At the beginning of the meeting, we institute new rules, the first one being the obligation for the External Organisation to send us arms. If not, we unanimously agree to set up a new military command in Algeria and throw away a useless Tunis HQ. Then, to prevent asphyxia of the maquis, we decide to assemble new battalions and position them along the Algero-Tunisian frontier. Each wilaya was to provide a quota of fighters; their total number was to reach 12,000 men, able to harass French troops on the frontier. In addition, we were to gather a 1,000 men strong detachment, mobile and able to attack enemy on both sides of the frontier,

day and night. Besides, we planned to dig underground bunkers with armor doors to be used as arms depots, especially in the region of Guelma and have them guarded by 5,000 men. We plan also to establish on both sides of the frontier posts protected by heavy weaponry at Bir El Ater (Garn El Kebch), Zerika, Tebessa, Romane Maouna, Guelma, Souk-Ahras. This program is scheduled to be carried out in a short time. Wilaya III is the first to fulfill its promise and dispatch two katiba to wilaya I. The 4th wilaya, due to Bougara's death, has not sent its requested 400 fighters. The 2nd and 6th wilaya did not respect their engagement.

Middle of December 1958: Tunis HQ wires a message to the commanders of wilaya I, III and VI, inviting them to come to Tunis. Mohammedi Said gets in touch with Hadj Lakhdar by radio and tells him to accompany them to Tunis "in order to settle up with HQ once for all and get the revolution going again." On February 1959, Hadj receives another wire from Tunis, this time imperative, to head for Tunis. He is reluctant, invokes a lack of arms and officers. On his turn, Amirouche contacts him by radio: "Come with me. Haoues will accompany us to Tunisia." Hadj finally accepts, waits for Amirouche's and Haoues' arrival to wilaya I and hears of their death. Incredulous, he radios wilaya III and gets back confirmation of the bad news. Meanwhile, Tunis HQ asks him by radio to send them more precisions. He answers that he has none.

A few weeks later, he learns the death of Bougara. Then, he sends a wire to Tunis HQ: "I won't come. I will stay here. Just send me arms, officers and equipment." As usual, HQ replies: "Soon!"

Hadj waits two months, "sixty days and sixty nights." As usual, in vain. Meanwhile, the dissidents have resumed their raids against convoys, intensifying their exactions to the point that interzonal relations are paralyzed. Sometimes, they willingly return to ANL and leave it after a few days, after having stolen arms and food. They even set up a new wilaya, named wilaya VII and don't answer calls for negotiations.

On the insistence of Tunis HQ and 45 days after the death of Amirouche and Haoues, Hadj Lakhdar accepts at last to leave for Tunisia on the year 1959 at the beginning of the spring.

Epilog

During the spring of 1959, the last chief who has survived the slaughter leaves Aures Nememcha and Algeria to live a long exile in Tunisia. Wilaya I will indeed become a real problem for members of HQ.

There is no more chief. Aures and Nememcha are given over to anarchy and everyman for himself. Up to nowadays, one recalls a Nemouchi dissident's reply when asked to obey existing revolutionary rules: "If I respect your rules, what will I do with my own rules?" Chance did not have a hand in disintegration of wilaya I; it was rather a combination of many factors. The main ones are the divisive action of Messaoud Benaïssa and Omar Ben Boulaid, the procrastination of Mostefa Ben Boulaid, the mistakes of Chihani, victim of his hubris, domineering and self confident, the ambition of Adjoul who kills without hesitation for the sake of power, the harmful and dubious attitude of Amirouche who is outrageously manipulated by Tahar Nouichi behind the scene actors, at last, the criminal conduct of Tunis HQ whose members act as gravediggers rather than resuscitators.

In Aures Nememcha, the infrastructure patiently elaborated by Chihani and Adjoul is annihilated. Tissal don't circulate through regions and sectors anymore because they carry or get no more messages. Casemates and refuges are empty. They are unsafe. Guerrillas have become guerrillas' foes. Colonialism has lit the fire; now, it lets it self feed. In wilaya I, the trend is directed toward self destruction. The November first goals are forgotten; they spoke of the restoration of a sovereign Algerian State, democratic and laic, based on the holy Koran. The Algerian revolution has become a desperate revolt without ethic and without a dream.

Until September 1955, populations of Aures and Nememcha have steered clear of the freedom fight, acting as an unconcerned onlooker of a dispute between ANL and the French army. Hardening of the repression and collective slaughter have sped up their leaning toward the insurrection.

Immediately after Mostefa Ben Boulaid's capture by the French, Chihani enjoys overusing power. His intentions are pure, but "in war, intentions are of no value, only results count." By his attitude, Chihani has unwisely awakened old tribal antagonisms, prior to the insurrection and stronger than it. Adjoul has taken advantage of Chihani's mistakes to isolate and kill him. The edging out of Omar Ben Boulaid and his 'reluctant' dissidence has broken up the region of Arris. The apparent winner, Adjoul, does not miss his chance and takes the power.

On Mostefa Ben Boulaid's return from prison, Adjoul endeavors without success to cast doubts on his escape. Under the pressure of his indignant partners, he yields and pledges allegiance to Mostefa. Another chance is offered to Adjoul when Mostefa dies but he does not command events any more. He soon finds himself encircled in Kimmel, alone and powerless because he did not have the guts to fight Omar Ben Boulaid and Messaoud Benaissa.

Adjoul has claimed that Mostefa's escape is a pure make believe hatched by French intelligence. Mostefa apparently has struck a deal with the French: internal autonomy of Algeria versus a cease fire. In fact, the exact opposite occurred: after his return to the bush, Mostefa took no rest until he reactivated the anti colonial struggle. Seeing that, Adjoul continues, the French had decided to kill him.

Many questions remain without answer. France has used all means to overshadow the Algerian freedom fight and prevent the emergence of the new Algeria. The Algerian revolution is credited to have countered French colonialism and to have extracted colonized populations from their sub humanity. For this, one owes honor and respect to all Algerian martyrs.

Annexes

1. Starting on 1947, the MTLD Party buys and conveys arms toward Aures. For most of them, the arms come from WWII Italian and German stocks. They are acquired through an Italian society established in Bizerte (Tunisia). The money comes from militants or benevolents requested to finance construction or repair of phony mosques or Koranic schools.

Around 1952, Mostefa Ben Boulaid carries out a sorting out and decides to sell old arms and keep only the newest. A great number of arms are rendered useless because of the rust, due to inadequate preservation. The remaining weapons are recuperated by French police, often very easily. At that time, possessing an arm was punished by a simple fine. Besides, it is known that the party had bribed many French policemen and gendarmes. Sometimes, colonial administration uses trickery: e.g. the administrator of the commune mixte of Arris (1) one day invites all Chaoui hunters to a boars' battue. On D day, gendarmes disarm without problem the conceited hunters.

Aures population is fascinated by fire arms. They rarely let pass opportunities to firing cartridges by the thousands. Example: to be allowed to accompany a new bride to her husband's home, the Chaouia set up a competition: is chosen the man who will have burned the greatest number of cartridges. A real orgy! Rendered wilder by the fact that competitors belong to different rival tribes. Of course, these orgies take place with French blessing. In 1953, the Party orders a halt of cartridges squandering, thus saving a certain quantity for the coming insurrection.

A few weeks before the first of November 1954, Mostefa Ben Boulaid journeys three times between Arris and Bordj Menaiel, carrying in his car war arms for Kabylia and the region of Algiers.

2. Hammam Chaboura is situated in a place difficult of access, some 25 kilometers north of Dermoun. It is a natural bath, made of two basins inside a stone built room. One gets in through a 1, 5 meter high door. Water springs up about 500 meters uphill; it contains plenty of sulfur used in the past to fabricate cartridges. The water runs in open air in a seguia (narrow irrigation canal), whitening rocks and a thick growth of weeds along its way. When it comes out of the room, it falls from a 4 meters height on white stones. The bath is embraced by a huge palm tree. Facing the bath, there is a large esplanade from which one discovers a breath taking view of the bath and the palm tree.

3. It is interesting to compare the behaviors of ANL and the French army towards war prisoners. The French systematically torture their prisoners, execute them summarily and do away with their bodies in wells, collective graves and sea. The freedom fighters on the contrary, treat their prisoners as guests, as prescribed by Islam. When Abbas Laghrour presents the French sergeant captured at Djellal with some money in order for him to buy confectioneries to his kids, there obviously is no political connotation but rather a banal Aures tradition, still existing nowadays. Mostefa Ben Boulaid has Lieutenant Louis, a French captive, take part in Tedjine's festivities. Bachir Chihani treats correctly enemy soldiers captured at Oued Ferroudj and liberates them some months later unharmed.
4. At the beginning of the insurrection, no grades were used. Leaders were called by their names or first names. E.g. when addressing Chihani, one would say: Si Bachir or Si Messaoud or Si Larbi, surnames used clandestinely, except for Bachir which is his real first name.
5. The mintaka or zone is led by a chief of mintaka, helped by a political assistant. It consists of 4 nahia or regions. Each nahia is headed by a chief and a political assistant. The nahia comprises 4 kisma or sectors, with identical leadership. The kisma is made of cells, up to 12 per kisma. Rural and urban cells are under the authority of military command. There is an absolute obligation to follow official channels, up and down the hierarchy. Except in emergencies, sector's committee meets twice a month; region's committee, once a month and zone's committee twice. Thanks to tissal, information passes nonstop between different organs and Idara.
6. Mostefa Ben Boulaid and Bachir Chihani have attached much importance in selecting tissal or liaison men. Tissal generally is a steadfast veteran, able to feel his environment and respect total discretion. There exists a pool of tissal at each level of command: Idara, mintaka, nahia and kisma. E.g. an instruction is given by Idara HQ. Tissal will dispatch it in sealed envelopes to the 6 mintaka. Each mintaka in its turn will distribute it to its 4 nahia which will then send it off to their kisma. At last, the instruction arrives to rural and urban committees. One notes that an instruction of Idara needs at least 2 groups of tissal to be sent out thru wilaya and several days to reach the rank and file. Often, tissal in plain clothes, use more rapid locomotion means, such as mules, bikes, cars, busses or trains.
7. At the root of the Organization, the cell is in a delicate position because of its direct contact with citizens and their problems of jealousy, persoANL retaliation, and rivalries between tribes. Intelligence collected is often biased and unconfirmed. E.g. a cell leader is informed that a citizen collaborates with enemy. He talks the matter over with other cell members, then reports to the political chief of his sector. At the sector's meeting, additional intelligence is requested from the cell leader. At the same time, a discreet parallel investigation is started on the incriminated citizen by special agents, 2 or 3 per kisma. They give their reports. The military council gathers: 5 are members of

the sector's committee, 2 are anonymous militants. There exist 4 possibilities: death sentence, imprisonment in a casemate, payment of a fine, acquittal. If the suspect is present, he has the right to speak for himself or choose a counsel from the members of the military council, except its president. A prosecutor is designated.

The president reads the accusation act, leaves the floor to the prosecutor who requires a punishment according to revolutionary rules. The counsel speaks in favor of the suspect. The latter is asked to leave if he is present. Discussion and vote take place. Acquittal or condemnation by simple majority. There is no appeal. A copy of the judgment is sent to nahia committee.

8. The cell is the basic structure of the MTLD Party. It comprises 10 men and a chief, generally appointed by the chief of the kisma. Militants live in a city block or in a village or hamlet. The number of militants of a cell can reach 15, depending on the availability of chiefs. The recruiting of militants goes thru three stages:
 1. Awakening of national spirit: each citizen is made to think he belongs to a national entity, different from the colonial one. He gets aware that colonialism hampers his development. Colonial vexations are pointed out, relentlessly, such as fines by police, gendarmes or forest wardens. Social inequalities are stressed. After several months of indoctrination, according to the citizen's receptivity, he passes to the higher stage of sympathizer, then to subscriber whereby he gives a modest amount of money, calculated according to his means. Finally, if he lives up to rigorous criteria, he is admitted as a structured militant and receives his badge.
 2. Becoming a man of the Party: the structured militant is now a cog in the Party. He obeys without contesting and learns to work in a well defined environment, responding to precise rules.
 3. Gaining a revolutionary spirit: the militant is slowly introduced to the concept of independence. To obtain it, one must fight and make a revolution, because colonial order is defeated only thru violence. The militant must be ready for self sacrifice. The three stages last sometimes many years.

- 9 Bachir Chihani was born in Khroub, 18 kilometers south-east of Constantine. . He began his militant's activity at an early age. His high school mates of Constantine describe him as a sickly teen ager, rather shy, fan of soccer. Wanted by police – most feared section of *Renseignements généraux*-in 1951, he goes underground in Batna. In 1952, he is appointed head of the Party's *daira* of Batna. The *daira* of Batna is part of the Party wilaya of Constantine and comprises 4 *kisma*:
1. Khenchela headed by Abbas Laghrour
 2. Barika by Mohamed Khantra
 3. Foum Toub by Tahar Nouichi
 4. Arris by Adjel Adjoul.

Bilingual, Chihani masters both Arabic and French. While clandestine, he is called Si Messaoud. He seldom attends Party's meetings. Once, he declared: "Colonialism creates misery for the true owners of this land and wealth for foreign exploiters who are for most of them, criminals and adventurers brought to occupy our country." With his pale complexion and dark sharp eyes, he speaks as a visionary, overfilled with faith. All who have approached him talk of his love of life and his passion for well done jobs. He hates tinkering about and amateurishness. In his mind, and in this respect, with a higher degree of awareness than other HQ members, everything is clear on how to run the insurrection. He likes writing down on paper his ideas on revolutionary war, for him the unique way toward independence and its multiple upheavals. As organizer, his head boils with ideas. He has the audacity, unusual for his time, to transfer HQ from Aures to Nememcha, decisively moving out the gravity centre of the insurrection and opening it up to the rich and turbulent alluviums of the East. He has the guts to dismiss dangerous self appointed war lords and in some cases to kill them. Despite his youth, all recognize his ascendancy. He writes and sends off the fighter's code, in both languages, so that no *djoundi* could hide behind ignorance. He forbids all that is oral. Instructions and events must be written and archived. Later, it will become unusual to meet a political commissar or a secretary without his bag and portable typewriter. He fixes every one's duties and holds him responsible for his acts. He delimits regions, draws itineraries, sets up new sectors at Alinas and Setif. He is modern for his time: e.g. he permits regions and sectors to use collected *Idara*'s money and send justifications to HQ. When he dispatches inspectors to tour war zones, he gives them entire freedom to decide and implement. In advance of his epoch, he organizes an Open House at Oued Hellaïl to allow people and ANL to get acquainted with each other. Out of nothing, he creates a field hospital at Kimmel, with a surgery wing. Finally, he is the first to set up a corps of political commissars to soothe problems between population and ANL.

10 From 1947, outlaws invest the Aures Mountains. Four of them are well known: Messaoud Benzelmat, Hocine Berrehail and Aissi Mekki, all three belonging to the Bouslimanis' tribe; the fourth, Belgacem Grine, is from the tribe of Chorfa. The colonial authorities endeavor to use them as allies in their fight against MTLD. Caïds and paid collaborators serve as intermediaries between the French administrator and outlaws. The administrator grants them immunity and money if they accept to harass MTLD's militants; he even gives them permission to exact ransoms from the population.

Outlaws agree. MTLD loses all credibility. Mostefa Ben Boulaid refuses to declare war on outlaws in order not to exacerbate intertribal dissensions because outlaws and militants all belong to the same tribes. He thus thwarts colonial plans.

Soon, it becomes fashionable for young Chaouia to join outlaws in the mountains, either to avoid conscription in French armies or after a quarrel with forest wardens or gendarmes. The number of outlaws soon reaches 16. Later, the most important group will be Hocine Berrehail's which numbers as many as 30 men. Meanwhile, it has become difficult for MTLD to convey arms' loaded camels from Tunisia. The French indeed have set up militias, 30 armed men per douar (70) with a monthly remuneration. Officially, they are recruited to fight bandits, in fact, to undermine MTLD and stop arms smuggling.

Outlaws' rule lasts from 1947 to 1950, characterized by acts of personal vengeance. Once in awhile, there happened small skirmishes with gendarmes, but without victims. Starting in 1950, the MTLD enters the game. It arms its militants, but orders them to avoid engagements with gendarmes or bandits, which sometimes requires a big self restraint. At the same time, the Party infiltrates outlaws' groups, asks their chiefs to help fighting colonialism and treats them as native heroes. Each leader is glorified. After some months, all chiefs are integrated in the Party as full time members and given the mission to protect the MTLD against French secret police. They are also asked to harass French security forces: police, gendarmes, caïds, forest wardens and bachaghas. The French ripost by arming rival groups and initiating a war between tribes. Aissi Mekki and Benzelmat are killed. New gendarmes' squadrons are brought in from France; they recuperate arms and put people in jail.

In 1951, only remain in the mountains bandits having pledged allegiance to MTLD.

11 The feud between Benaïssa and Adjoul begins well before the November 1954 insurrection. Messaoud Benaïssa holds a grudge against Adjoul because the latter refused to admit him as a member of a Party cell. Benaïssa manages to get in though thanks to Salah Benadji and foments a plot against Tahar Nouichi. He stirs up problems between Benzelmat and Grine. When Benzelmat dies, Benaïssa accuses

Adjoul of having informed on him to the French. Adjoul complains to Mostefa Ben Boulaid who sides with him against Benaissa, without striking at the root of the evil, leaving the dispute worsening in silence.

On January 1955, Messaoud Benaissa declares in Mostefa Ben Boulaid's presence, that he won't furnish any supplies to Adjoul's region.

On April of the same year, he blames Adjoul for his unequal distribution of arms and food arrived from the south and east. Adjoul replies: "It is normal I take more supplies because my men assume the risk of conveying them till Kimmel."

Bachir Chihani, like Mostefa Ben Boulaid, does not strike at the root of the evil. He appoints Benaissa quarter master with the hope that he will serve himself and quiet down.

Unfortunately, the opposite occurs since Benaissa enters in rebellion at Chelia Mountains.

- 12 Mostefa Ben Boulaid's escape from the prison of Constantine has been narrated to me by Hadj Lakhdar, as he himself has heard it from Mostefa Ben Boulaid's mouth. "Sentenced to death, I had to continue fighting. Thank God, all my prison mates agree with me. We dig the floor of our cell, each in turn. Through cracks of a door, we discover a disaffected room, full of mattresses, beds and sheets. In its middle, we see hay and straw. We make up a master key with a spoon handle and try in vain to open the door of the neighboring room. We turn to digging, using spoon handles which we cover with rags because they soon heat up. We dig mainly at night. Those who don't dig recite out loud Koran verses. We break the cement and reach earth. The dug hole grossly resembles a square. We empty removed earth inside toilets, in small quantities. We throw stones in the courtyard. We manage to find a stick, fix a spoon on it and dig more rapidly and more profoundly. Comes a moment when we can sit inside the hole. We are 30 diggers. We start digging horizontally. In day light, we hide the hole with a plaque of cement removed first; we camouflage its cracks with soap. We reach a partition wall, we pull its stones free and enter the neighboring room the door of which open in a courtyard. We open it easily. Anxiety is at its peak. We dismantle the feet of some beds. I insist on utmost discretion. We make up ladders with beds' bars and tear down sheets to make ropes. In fact, the ladder is too short. We draw lots to determine who will go out first. All refuse. They say I should be the first to leave. With a companion, I climb on the first wall. The second is more difficult. I jump out and see people walking around. My companion jumps also and we remain somewhat dizzy for some time. We take through a Moslem cemetery, turn our jackets inside out and walk till Guettar El Ayeche, 25 kilometers away. I really can't tell you how! We are scared and crave for some sleep. We continue our tripe. We are cold. We see people coming, we hide at bottoms of river beds. We are hungry and thirsty. More thirsty than hungry. We hide in the river bed till evening and resume our trek. We drink at a fountain and reach the Lakes on the following morning. Our feet are swollen and grazed. We adopt a duck walk. West of the Lakes, we enter a small forest, meet peasants, maybe belonging to the tribe of Ouled Sidi Ali. My companion asks for some bread. We eat

the bread as if in a nightmare. Now, we walk on the macadam and hide when we hear the sound of a car. We reach Ain Yagout. A man gives us bread and ghars (mashed dates). He does not recognize us; he does not seem surprised by our looks. He pulls a face though when we ask him for a mule. He begs us to wait and disappears. We don't wait, start running with our ridiculous steps and hide behind a rock. He comes back with a mule. We call him, he helps us mount the mule and walks in our company up to El Madher. He gives us a hand to dismount and goes away with his mule.

Our feet are too swollen. We walk thru fields, the road is too risky. We arrive at the Tournant, 18 kilometers from Batna, climb on all fours up to a crest peak. Young shepherds come to us. I can hardly talk. I threaten them with death should they reveal our presence to anybody. They observe our feet in silence, tears surge from their eyes. They sit near us, propose their donkeys. On evening, they give us boiled eggs, water and barley bread. Quite a feast! Not much though since we can't chew! At dark, we ride on their donkeys till Belkhez where they leave us. We arrive to Fesdis, an old peasant takes care of us and next morning, we reach Ouistili between Ain Touta and Bouzina.

8 page 58: After the independence of Algeria, Adjoul was without trial detained in the Central Penitentiary of Lambese for five years. He was subject to indecent treatment. Prison wards attached with ropes on his back sacks full of big stones and forced him to run around the prison courtyard until he got out of breath. One day, during a minister's visit, Mohammedi Said, aka Nasser, called Adjoul a traitor. Adjoul replied: "I ask to be judged by a tribunal and the truth shall come out."

9 page : In Aures, it is customary to offer coins of money to children to buy candies. In this case, Abbas gives the money to the father, whoever he is. Children are deemed holy and are not responsible for their parents' guilt.