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AGE 29

NASH: Today is January 3, 1974 and I have the pleasure of speaking with Monsieur Andre Soltner, who is the chef and owner of Lutece in New York City. Mr. Soltner came to the United States in 1961. Mr. Soltner, where were you born?

SOLTNER: I was born in Alsace in a little town, the name of it is Thann, in 1932.

NASH: And could you tell me a little bit about the town?

SOLTNER: Yes, it is a nice little town near the mountains, the Vosges, eastern France, and about seven thousand people. And I say it is nice because everybody likes their owe town. And I grown up there until the age of fourteen. And at the age of fourteen I decided to be a chef so you have to spend an apprenticeship. I went to Mulhouse, which is about twenty

miles from Thann, and I spent there three years in an apprenticeship.

NASH: What made you to decide at fourteen to become a chef?

SOLTNER: Oh, I just liked to cook all the time. I was around my mother and watched her and how she did tarts and, you know, all. And normally at fourteen when I had to decide what to do, I said, "Okay I want to be a chef."

NASH: Was that a tradition in the town? Were there any chefs from that particular town?

SOLTNER: No, not at all, no tradition, I don't think so. The only thing who guided me a little I think is my mother who was a very good chef. But no other chefs in the family.

NASH: Where is your mother now?

SOLTNER: She is still there in Alsace. My father was a carpenter, and that's it.

NASH: So what was your apprenticeship like?

SOLTNER: Oh, my apprenticeship was like all apprenticeship about twenty-five or thirty years ago, very, very tough. But on the other hand it

was a good apprenticeship because we
learned a lot.

NASH: What made it tough?

SOLTNER: Long hours like fourteen, fifteen hours. You know, at the age of fourteen sometimes you prefer to go play a little outside, but we had to spend at least twelve hours every day there, six days a week, sometimes seven days a week. And I think for a child it is tough enough.

NASH: How long did that last?

SOLTNER: Three years. I had to spend three years and after three years there is sort of a contest which is called Certificate Aptitude Professional, which gives you the title that you will be a cook. Then from there on I did like most other chefs. We go from one city to another and from one restaurant to another and try to catch up whatever we can learn.

NASH: When you were an apprentice, were you paid at all?

SOLTNER: Yes, we were paid a little. My first year I was paid six hundred old francs, which is a little over a dollar a month and the second year then it was about two dollars and the third year about three dollars a month.

NASH: What did you do with all that money?

SOLTNER: We couldn't do too much. First we didn't have too much time and it was enough to go to the barber once a month, you know, and to have a beer maybe once a week, and that was it.

NASH: So what were the cities that you worked in or any restaurants that you care to name?

SOLTNER: Other cities?

NASH: Yes.

SOLTNER: Yes, I started in Mulhouse and from Mulhouse I went to Deauville, you know, which is a very well-known finance city in France, and from Deauville I came back to Alsace to Saint Louis and then from Saint Louis I went to Switzerland, Palace Pontresina, and from the Palace I went to Wildhaus [PH] near Zurich. From Wildhaus [PH] I went back to Pontresina, and then I came back to France to spend my army, which I did half in the French Alps in the Alpine troops. Not cooking. I refused to cook in the army.

NASH: Why?

SOLTNER: Oh, because, you know, the ingredients and there was not really, and I prefer to ski, so.

NASH: What was the food like in the Army?

SOLTNER: Awful. Just couldn't eat it.

NASH: Did you lose weight?

SOLTNER: No, I don't think so, but I was very skinny anyway.

NASH: It must have been sort of interesting not cooking for a while. Maybe it was sort of a rest.

SOLTNER: Yes, I enjoyed it very much. And after a few months in the French Alps I went to North Africa, you know, with the troubles with Tunisia and Algeria, for nine other months.

NASH: Were you involved in military actions there? Did you fight?

SOLTNER: No, no, not really, no. We just went there for occupied, you know, territory, but never fight.

NASH: During all this time did you ever have the idea of coming

to the United States?

SOLTNER: No, not really. My idea was to go to Paris. You know, Paris for a chef is a little, attracts you a little.

NASH: Why?

SOLTNER: Because you find many jobs there. There are many restaurants, you know, and find opportunities because you have many restaurants, and that's what I did. I went to Paris after my service.

NASH: What was the restaurant that you first worked in, in Paris?

SOLTNER: It was a nice Asian restaurant by the name of Shai Honsi [PH] and I started there as a cook and chef de party. A chef de party means you take care of one part of kitchen. I was chef de party and after a few years I was sous chef in the same restaurant and a few years later I was the chef, the head chef. I had fourteen chefs and two pastry chefs with me, it was very nice.

NASH: Looking back on all the places that you worked up until that time, were there any men, any chefs that stand out in your mind for one reason or another?

SOLTNER: Oh yes, especially my first chef where I spent my apprenticeship. He was very tough with us, but he was a very good man and his name is Ernest Simon. He is still alive and when I go to France I always go to see him and early he teached us what we should know about cooking and he gave us also the love for cooking. But that is really the one that I admire the most. After I had a few other chefs, were very well-known and I (?) all of them.

NASH: So when you go to Paris how did it seem to you? Was it exciting?

SOLTNER: Yes. On one hand it was exciting and at the other hand it was a little depressing because, you know, Paris is a very big town and everybody thinks, oh Paris, Paris. And Paris is a very nice city if you go for vacation. If you go for work, there is rather a small salary. It is not always so funny, you know.

NASH: Even when you were the head chef with fourteen chefs under you?

SOLTNER: Yes, I didn't go to Paris as the head chef, you know, I ended up as the head chef. Then it was different, yes. Then I liked it very much, you know, because I was very well paid and it was nice.

NASH: How long did it take you to work your way up in that restaurant?

SOLTNER: I spent six years in this restaurant. I was chef after. I was sous chef after four years, no after three years I was sous chef and was sous chef for two other years and the last year I was executive chef. And as soon I was executive chef, I thought it is not for me anymore.

NASH: Why?

SOLTNER: Because I was pretty young, you know. I was executive chef at the age of twenty-seven, and if you stayed in the same place you don't improve anymore, you know. And I had an opportunity to come to this country so I said, okay let's go to see what's happened there.

NASH: Could you tell me a little bit about how it was that this opportunity was extended to you?

SOLTNER: Yes, like I told you, I was chef at Shai Honsi [PH] and here in New York was a man by the name of Andre Shoeman who planned to open a high-class restaurant and he heard about me so he took the plane, he went there, he had dinner, and after dinner (phone rings in background, break in tape) Why I came,

that's right.

NASH: Yes, and then you began to say there was a man in New York who had heard about you and that he took a plane, so you can say there's a man in New York.

SOLTNER: Yes, there was a man in New York by the name of Andre Surman and he planned to open a restaurant, a high-class restaurant, and he heard about me, he took a plane, came to the restaurant and after dinner he asked for me and he said, "that's my plans, I want to open and are you interested to come to America?" So first I was a little surprised and afterwards I was thinking I have an opportunity to go there and, you know, when I was a child my grandfather was here around 1900 and he told me all the time about Nevada and California and so finally I said to Mr. Surman, "Okay, let's try. I am willing to come." So after that he took care to prepare the papers, immigration paper, and a few months later I came to New York.

NASH: How was it leaving France? Did you think you were leaving permanently?

SOLTNER: No, really not. I was thinking that I would come for a year

or two and also to learn English and go back after two years, let's say. That was really my plan.

NASH: What did you think that you were going, well, I don't want to use the word gain, but what did you hope to get out of the experience of coming?

SOLTNER: First, to speak English was one thing and really to see how people live here and how it is because when I came here it was not a matter of money because my salary in Paris was the same that what he offered me here, so it was not the money. But, you know, I was single and the age of twenty-eight, and I said, okay, let's see for two years and it will certainly be nice experience."

NASH: Was he the owner at the time, he was?

SOLTNER: Yes, he was the owner here.

NASH: So you took a plane. And what were your first impressions when you got off the plane and into New York?

SOLTNER: Yes, you know, I was used to travel a little and to change cities because of my work, but, of course, when I arrived in New York it was impressing, you know. I looked a little around and let's say the first two

or three hours I said, "Why did you come here?"

NASH: What made you say that?

SOLTNER: Because you feel a little lost, you know, if you know nobody and you feel really a little lost. But next day I started my job and we opened the restaurant.

NASH: In this same building, 249 East 50th.

SOLTNER: Yes, in this same building. And as soon we opened, I was so busy for the opening that it was not such a big difference between France and here because in France I spented so many hours in my kitchen, so did the same thing here. And most of the employees here were French, so I got along very quickly. I accepted it very quickly. And right away, I must say I liked it because the people who came in, American people, they are different than the clients in France. In France they are maybe sometimes a little snob, you know, but here I noticed right away a big difference between the relationship between the customers and ourself and I liked it very much, I must say.

NASH: Could you explain a little bit more? I mean could you give a detail about, do you remember your first customers?

SOLTNER: Yes. Not the first customers, but what may shock the most was we were

opened about two or three days and then my boss who was Surman, he came to the kitchen with another gentleman, and the other gentleman, he asked me how did you do that and I had the souffle with epinards, you know, a spinach souffle. And he was very interested how I did it and he asked me if I could give him the recipe and explain it. And finally at end I found out that he was a former general and so I was really shook because in France a general, he doesn't come as easy to the chef, you know, and be so nice, so natural. And that was my first shock really. And after I found out that really everybody was very nice to me.

NASH: Was there anything on the other side or maybe something about French clientele that was an advantage or something more on the positive side about French clientele?

SOLTNER: An advantage, you mean?

NASH: Well, no, I don't really mean an advantage, but you saw things that you liked about the Americans who came. I mean was there anything that you didn't like?

SOLTNER: My biggest problem was I didn't speak English. That was a little problem, but I am Alsacen so we speak both languages, French and German, so it helped me a lot, especially for the buying because many dealers they spoke

German. So I had a little difficulty with the language, but I started out very fast.

NASH: How did you learn it, I mean if you were in such a French environment? It seems hard to imagine how you would learn English.

SOLTNER: Yes, first my English still is not too good.

NASH: No, it's good.

SOLTNER: But I just picked it up. I didn't have time to go to school and I just picked it up.

NASH: Where did you live when you first came here?

SOLTNER: When I first arrived here I lived at Westside, 75th Street, West, and then I moved to 78th East, and then I came closer to Lutece. When I got married then we used to live on 51st Street and 2nd Avenue. And then we moved in here since about eight years.

NASH: Your wife is also French, but you met her here?

SOLTNER: No.

NASH: No.

SOLTNER: I met her in Paris, but I came here single and I said, okay if I like it there I come back, we get married then and you join me, you come with me. That's what we did. See, she came about a year and a half later.

NASH: What is it like to work with your wife all the time?

SOLTNER: Sometimes we have little problems, but I think it is very nice to do it because alone I couldn't manage, you see, so she helps me a lot and that why (?) out.

NASH: Well, how did it happen that you became the owner of the restaurant?

SOLTNER: Well, I came here and after a months my boss said, "You know we should maybe, you should have an interest," and I said, "yes, that will be the only thing who will keep me here. You see, otherwise I will be here for a year or two and then I will leave." So we were talking and he sold me thirty percent of the restaurant at this time and then we were partners for eleven years and a little over a year ago he decided to go back to Europe and I bought his shares.

NASH: Do you go back to France every year?

SOLTNER: Not every year. Normally every two years. We really try to not to go back every year.

NASH: Why do you try not to?

SOLTNER: Because when we go there we have so many friends and during vacations we spend them in the restaurants because we are in the restaurant group so we go to see other restauraners and we come back and we really are more tired than before we leave. So one year we go there for, let's say public relation, and see the family, and one year we stay here really to relax, you know, to relax.

NASH: Have you been able to get out of New York? Have you seen the rest of the country?

SOLTNER: Yes, I did.

NASH: Nevada?

SOLTNER: No, we never went West, but around here we went to Niagara Falls and one year we went to Canada and we went to Puerto Rico, to Jamaica,

to Guadalupe, French Island.

NASH: What about the rest of the United States?

SOLTNER: No. I don't know. We went, of course, to Washington a few times, but I have never been Chicago and I've never been out West but we plan to go next year, next summer.

NASH: Are most of your friends French ?

SOLTNER: Yes, I must say that most of my friends are French. I have many good American friends here too, but the people with whom we spend our weekends, our Sunday let's say, they are most French, and they are most chefs. You know, we are in a business where we have a little odder hours than the other people, you know.

NASH: I didn't understand.

SOLTNER: When other people are off we work so that's a little thereason that the chefs are always together. You know, we are off in the afternoon. Sometimes we take one hour or two hours off or in evening when others go out to dine we work, so that select a little your friends.

NASH: What do you talk about when all of you chefs get together?

SOLTNER: Cuisine. And our wives they are very mad at us that as soon we are together we talk really cuisine.

NASH: And, of course, do you eat together?

SOLTNER: Yes, we do. We are now, we have a house in the Catskills, which I like very much because the Catskills look a little like le Vosges from where I come, sort of the same type of mountain. So we have a house there in Hunter and there are at least ten other chefs who have houses also. So on Sundays we cook and then we eat together. We try out our new recipes and things like that. We do our own cider, for example, in the Catskills. You know, cider like champagne, and we do our cooking there.

NASH: Do you drink American wines or French wines?

SOLTNER: No, I must, the American wines, that's one thing I didn't accept too fast. We still drink French wines.

NASH: You were saying that you feel apart in some way. Who do you feel apart from?

SOLTNER: From all the other people a little, you know, because like I said before, we don't have the same hours that other people, so we have really

to choose our friends who have off the same time that we have, you see. Let's say we have a very good friend who is a doctor or who is a carpenter. If he says, "Okay, let's go to the restaurant," you always have to say, "No, I cannot because I work." That eliminates most of, you know, and that is not especially here. It is in France or in Europe the same thing. The chefs, they stick a little together. They are apart, they are not integrated in the same, you know, with other peoples too much.

NASH: Do you think it is just because of the hours or is there anything else that sets you apart?

SOLTNER: No, it is mostly the hours. It is because of the hours, yes. We have many other friends, you know, but we cannot socialize with them too often. When they say, "Let's go to the theater," we say all the time, "No, we cannot." You see? So that's why we, sometimes you say it is like people in the circus, you know, they are altogether, you know. They don't socialize too much with others because of their hours, because they travel, and that's it, you know.

NASH: After French cuisine, which I assume is your favorite cuisine, what are your other favorites?

SOLTNER: I like really all the other cuisines. Not to do it myself or not to eat too often, but when we off, when we cook at home we cook French

cuisine. When we have guests it is always French, but if we have off sometimes on Sunday, we don't eat home, so we go to a Chinese restaurant.

NASH: I knew it.

SOLTNER: We like it very much, you know. We like Chinese food very much. But also we try other cooking like Hungarian and all the cookings. It is very interesting for us, you know, to find out what they do and how they do it.

NASH: Let's say that you have a Chinese dish. Do you ever, can you as a French chef incorporate certain things that you might taste or some ideas into French cooking or is it something that you just can't change?

SOLTNER: No, we cannot mix it too much, no. I enjoy very much to eat Chinese cooking, but I don't try to mix it too much up you see, no. Other European's cuisine you find ideas, but Chinese cooking is so different.

NASH: That's what I really meant, whatever the cuisine, you can sometimes get ideas from other cooking and you do incorporate it?

SOLTNER: Oh yes, of yes, absolutely, absolutely. But the most ideas we get, we get them from other French people.

NASH: Is your taste so finely developed that you can just taste what goes into a dish or do you have to go back and perhaps ask the chef, "Did you do a little of this or do a little of that?"

SOLTNER: Yes, we do both. When we eat something we, either way we try to analyze it, but some things you just can't be sure so you ask the chef and, you know, normally he tells you what is in it. When we go to a restaurant we go to see the chef really every time.

NASH: Do you let him know before or after you come?

SOLTNER: It depends. It really depends. Sometimes we go in and we let him know after.

NASH: What is his reaction?

SOLTNER: They don't like it too much. You know, if somebody does it to me, I don't like it too much, but many times they do it to me too.

NASH: What do you think of cooking critics? I mean like newspaper critics?

SOLTNER: Well, the newspaper, the food critics I found that it was a little hard to live with them at the beginning here because here there are many much more than in France and in France fifteen years ago we weren't bothered too much with food critics, but here each newspaper, each magazine has it's food editor, you know, this food critic, and it was a little tough that year. But on the other hand they help us also to improve, you know, because you have to watch and I must say, with most of them in their friendly way, we have a very friendly relationship. Now after thirteen years I know all of them and really we have a good friendship with all of them.

NASH: You are a permanent residence. Is that what your status is?

SOLTNER: Yes, yes, yes, permanent resident.

NASH: What do you think the future has in store? Are you uncertain about staying in the United States?

SOLTNER: No, I am not really uncertain. I don't think too much about that, but I just signed a fifteen year lease so that means that in my mind for the next fifteen years I am here for sure if nothing happens, of course. And

for later on, then when we retire we will see. Maybe sometimes we say, okay if we retire, we have a house, like I said to you in Hunter, maybe we will live six months here and six months in France. But that is too far. I don't think about it really. But for the time being, I don't think at all to go back to Europe.

NASH: Well, is there anything else you would like to say about the experience of being an immigrant?

SOLTNER: Yes, in Europe when you say you are an immigrant, that means you are maybe a little lower than all the others and I don't want to be nice to you, but I must say that here you don't have the feeling. If you don't speak English really the way you should, nobody looks at you, you know. Everybody think it's normal and that's really what I like the most here. You don't have any complex to be an immigrant. There are so many anyway.

NASH: And yet we find it a little hard. Even I find it hard see when I say to you, "What do you want to say about being an immigrant?" You are very sort of conscious of that word. I am.

SOLTNER: Yes, but really in thirteen years never one time I had the slightest, you know, that somebody tell me, "Oh, you are an immigrant." Never, never, never, and if it would be so, I would go back either way, you see. But really it isn't. Nobody told me anything, you know, and they accepted you really

very nicely and I must say I think the people here, they are much nicer than the European people for that, you know. In France I remember the Italians or Spanish people, they were accepted too, but they were a little, not the same level really, but here it isn't so and that is really the nice part here. Now my family comes to visit me. My mother was here three times and my sister was here with her husband, and I really feel home, really I do.

NASH: Well, thank you very, very much Mr. Soltner.

SOLTNER: You are very welcome.

END OF INTERVIEW