

FROM PARIS TO NEW YORK TO PLATINA

THE STORY OF A HIDDEN CHILD

By David Wind

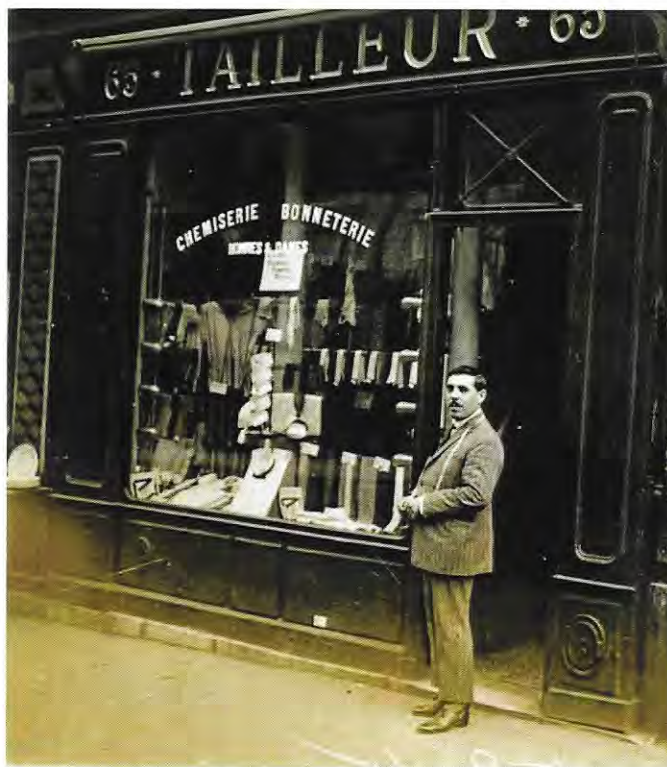
It was my great honor to interview Platina resident, *Michel* (Michael) *Jeifa*, who was one of the hidden children of World War II.

It was in 1943 when *Michel Jeifa* became one of France's hidden children. Until then, he lived in Paris with his family. *Michel's* father, Bernard, a high couture tailor, a secular Jew, and a socialist, immigrated to France from Russia in the early 1900's. The rest of his family immigrated to the United States; however, *Michel's* father did not find the U.S. welcoming and returned to France, and to his wife, Adele, a lovely Parisian Jew who preferred Paris to New York. Together, they brought *Marguerite* and her brother *Michel* into the world. *Michel* was born on March 11, 1927

When Hitler rose to power in Germany, *Michel's* father warned the family, and many others, of what was coming. Most ignored his speaking of the anti-Semitism he had fled in Russia, as France treated their Jewish population somewhat better than most. But on June 14, 1940, when the Nazis reached Paris, everything changed. Orders came for all Jews to register; the *Jeifa* family followed the request, as they always did when it came to following the law. They had been warned not to register by other Jews, but they did because it was what was required.

In 1941, orders came down for all Jewish business owners to open their businesses to Administrators. That was the beginning of the end. All too soon, the businesses were either taken over or liquidated. Which is what happened to the *Jeifa* family.

In 1942, all immigrant Polish Jews were rounded up and sent to camps in Poland, and in 1943, the arrests and deportations to the various camps began for the French Jews. Those who registered were rounded up, many of those who had not, escaped. For the *Jeifa* family, it was a time of tragedy as the Nazis came to arrest them, but the only one home at the time was *Michel's* mother, Adele. She was taken and



Michel's father standing in front of the tailor store

sent to Auschwitz, devastating the family.

It was then, that *Michel* was sent to the South of France, to be hidden by a Christian family under the name *Michel Louie Pierry*. His sister's husband was taken in 1941 and sent to Auschwitz. She and the children went elsewhere,



Michel at 15

as did *Michel's* father, who, sadly, in 1944 was taken and sent on the last prisoner train out of Paris to Auschwitz on July 31, 1944

The following interview is not about the holocaust itself, but about *Michel* and his life following the war. (*Michel*, when he immigrated, took on the name *Michael*.)

DW: By the end of the war, hidden as you were in the South, you only knew that your mother had been taken, but nothing about the rest of the family. When did you finally find out about them?

MJ: When I returned to Paris, I literally followed the Army—marched right behind them into Paris. The

continued to page 17

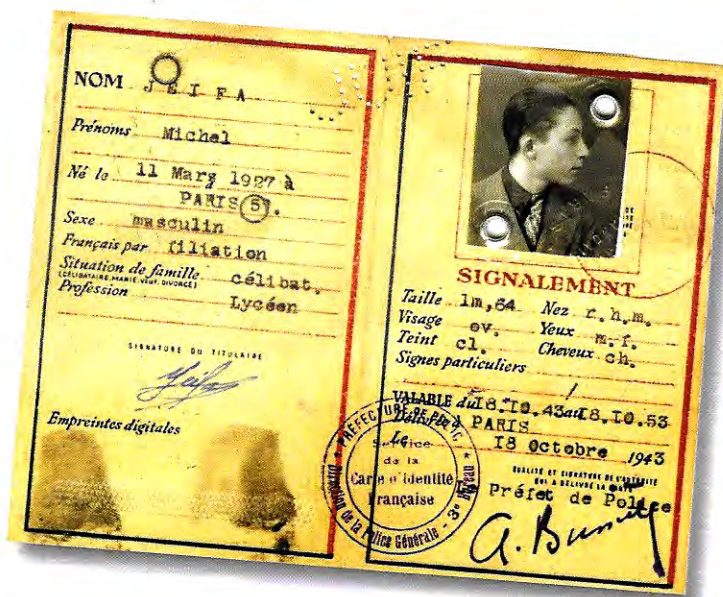
first thing I did was to go home, where I used to live. The apartment was sealed off, so I broke through the seal and went inside.

It was then that I realized I was the first person to enter the apartment since my mother's arrest. The coffee cup my mother was drinking from when the Nazis came was still on the table.

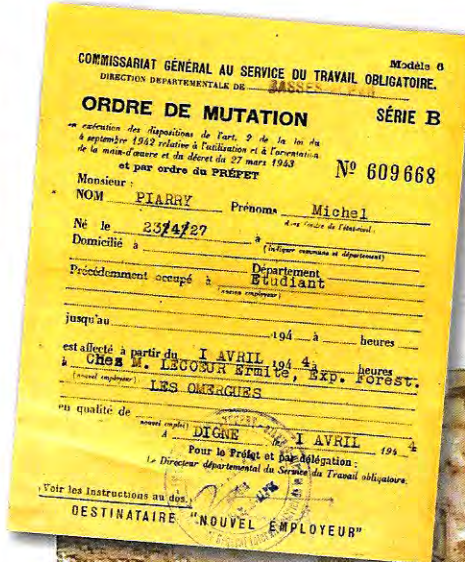
It was strange, and for some reason, I felt guilty about breaking in and went to the police to report it. The policeman who I spoke with, shook his head. It is your apartment, he told me, you cannot break in to your apartment. Go back, go live in it. I did. Then I began to look for my father and my sister. I visited his friends and learned that he had gotten false papers and returned to Paris in 1944. The French Police arrested him, for having false papers, and then sent to prison for 6 months. When he was released, he was turned over to the Nazis, and was then put on the last train out of Paris and sent to Auschwitz. I found *Marguerite* and her 2 children soon after. Her husband had been arrested and sent to Buchenwald, where he died. I moved in with them. *Marguerite* was able to reclaim her home shortly after that. It was in the suburbs, so we moved there, and I spent my weekends with her, but during the week I stayed in Paris.

DW: Why Paris?

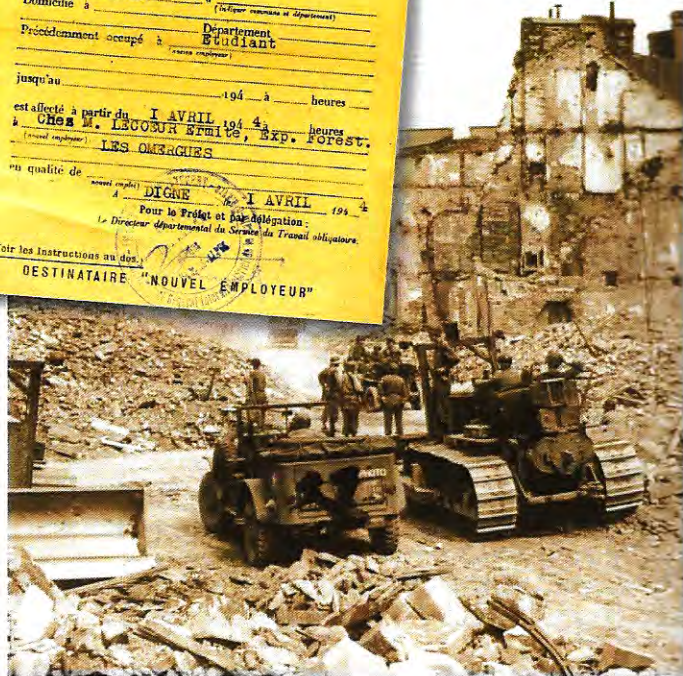
ML: I returned to school to finish my studies. I was able to work and to get my Baccalaureate—my



"Registration Papers" the papers that marked him Jewish after the family registered with the Nazis



"False" Papers under the name Peirry



bachelor's degree. After that, I continued my education at the Sorbonne from '46 to '47.

DW: You were 17, almost an adult when you left Paris and were hidden from the Nazis. Was life hard for you when you became *Michel Louie Pierry*?

ML: I was fortunate, it was not as hard as some. I was sent to the south—the French Alps—working in the forest and living with a Protestant family.

DW: I have heard many stories about hidden children and the people who protected them. Many of the children converted to Christianity. As you said, you lived with Christians who were protecting you, did they try to convert you to Christianity?

ML: Yes, some of my friends converted. My protectors asked me as well, but when I said no, they did not pursue it.

DW: So, after the war, you went to school and worked. When did you decide to come to America?

ML: That's another story... One day early in 1947, a US Army captain named Seidman, came looking for me. Seidman was an MD, and a friend of my family in NY. He told me they had asked him to find me and

the rest of my family. Well, he did, and he helped me to immigrate to New York. But... it wasn't as simple as that.

DW: I would have thought it was no problem.

ML: Except the quota for French Immigrants to the U.S. was now closed. I was disappointed, but Captain Seidman believed there was another way, and, somehow, he was able to contact a congressman, who was able to get me a visa and, voilà, I was able to immigrate.

DW: Was it a relief to come to the U.S.?

ML: Well, not really. In the beginning, I was greatly disappointed ... mostly by my family and other Jews. My grandmother was here, as were my father's sisters and brothers, and no one seemed capable of understanding what had happened in France, in Germany, and in Poland. They did not understand the magnitude, the overall numbers involved in this monstrosity that Hitler had created. They would say to me, 'It is over, forget what happened, you are starting a new life.'

But they were wrong. How could I forget what happened? How could I forget what I witnessed, what I had seen? How could I forget my father and mother's murders in Auschwitz? No, it was not a pleasant beginning.

DW: But you moved on ... yes?

ML: Of course. There was nothing else to do but move on.

DW: Were you able to work?

ML: Yes, I worked at Berlitz, teaching French, (shrugging) It was a job.

DW: So you worked and became a citizen?

ML: No, I was drafted into the army in 1950, during the Korean War.

DW: Drafted? But you weren't a citizen.

ML: I wasn't, but I really had a choice. Go in the army and then become a citizen, or do not go in the army, and do not become a citizen.



DESIGN: SCOTT WEINBERG

continued to page 20

DW: I didn't realize they did that.

ML: They did, and I went in the army.

DW: Two wars and you were barely in your twenties ... What happened when you came home?

ML: I decided not to return to my job at Berlitz and went to work for the Home Insurance Company in the claims department. It paid better than teaching French; and, I was able to return to school and receive my Master's in Business Administration.

DW: I know you've been married for 60+ years. Tell me about meeting Blanche.

ML: Ah, a good story. Would you believe it was my aunt who arranged this? She was at her dentist's and met a man waiting as well. His name was Joseph, and he told her about his daughter ... his single daughter. My aunt, of course, said something like, "Do I have a boy for her!"

DW: And so the romance blossomed.

ML: Not, ah, really. My aunt decided to interview the Joseph's daughter and ended up being hung up on.

DW: That doesn't explain 60 some odd years of marriage.

ML: Well, I decided to ignore what my aunt did and Blanche agreed to go on a date. That was on May 1, 1955. We were married 7 months later, on December 12th.

DW: *Michael*, this is all we have time for, but I have one more question. Your family told you to 'forget about what happened and start new' did you finally take their advice?

ML: Absolutely not! There is not a day that passes, not one single day, that I do not think about what happened, that I do not see all the pictures in my head. No one should ever forget what happened, not if they do not want it to happen again.

DW: *Michael*, thank you.