

# Remembering Painful Memories

by *Michel Jeifa*



My father's family had their roots in the Ukraine town of Zhytomyr. Because of the Czar's army draft and pogroms against the Jews, my father, Bernard, ran away to Paris in 1905. He was 17 years old. In Paris, he established a men's custom tailoring and haberdashery store, with an apartment at the rear, on Rue Claude Bernard, in the Latin Quarter.

My father was a self-educated man who valued formal education and provided this opportunity for his children. He was a moral, cultivated man, as well as a meticulous dresser who was always well groomed. Although he loved his family dearly, he did not display emotions, playfulness, or endearment. His family knew that his austere bearing was only a facade and humored him.

By 1907, my father's father, Moishe, and three of his siblings were already in America, while his mother, Ida, and three of the remaining siblings were fortunate to get visas to America and stopped in Paris to celebrate father's wedding to Adele Tarder in 1907. My mother, Adele, was born in France to David and Rachel Tarder, who immigrated to France in 1870 from Warsaw and became naturalized citizens. My mother was a sweet person, who saw only good in people. Even if one was criticized, she always defended and made excuses for the person. Her light brown hair, tinged with early gray, framed her blue eyes and always-smiling face, which exuded warmth and kindness. Although we lived an assimilated life, not following any of the Jewish rituals, father stated emphatically that he would rather give up his life than give up being a Jew.

Mother and father worked together at their fine tailoring store. She was a clerk, supervising the haberdashery end, while father created fine suits and garments for an upscale clientele, which even included a Minister of the Interior.

A year after their marriage, my sister Marguerite was born. I was born 19 years later, in 1927. When I was four, my sister got married, so all the attention was on me as an only child. A housekeeper cared for me, so mother was free

to help run the shop. My life was tranquil and full of love and security. When I reached school age, I attended a public school where I was one of only a few Jews. I was never abused nor felt any anti-Semitism and had a happy experience throughout my school years. As I was approaching Bar Mitzvah age, father insisted that I learn Hebrew and be prepared to become a Bar Mitzvah, which I did in 1940.

When World War II erupted, father was drafted into the Home Security forces, which guarded the neighborhood to make sure that the blackout was observed and no lights filtered through from houses and apartments. He dressed in his uniform and marched out proudly to serve his country.

In June 1940, when the Germans entered Paris, people stayed off the streets and out of sight in case of violence or trouble. The takeover seemed peaceful, so we cautiously returned to following our usual life. By the end of 1940, an edict was issued that all Jews must register at the police station. My father, being an obedient citizen and proud to be a Jew, reported as ordered.

In 1941, my sister's husband, Solomon Karczmer, who was a Russian immigrant, was arrested and sent to a concentration camp until 1942. After the war, we learned that he had been deported to Auschwitz. When the Russian army began to approach the camp he was among those sent on the death march to Buchenwald, where he perished. After his arrest, my sister Marguerite and her two little boys, Jacques and Claude, were befriended and looked after by a social worker, Madeleine Jaquet, of the small town where they lived. It appeared that this woman also had contacts in the resistance.

During all this time, I continued my schooling. My non-Jewish friends did not change their attitude nor did they treat me any differently. Indeed, when, in June 1942, all Jews had to wear a yellow star, my friends came in the morning to walk with me to school as protectors in case of any mischief against me.

A couple of weeks later, a neighbor police inspector came to warn my father to hide because an order was out to arrest Jews. It turned out that 20,000 non-citizen Polish Jews were gathered and sent off to the concentration camp, followed by the arrest of Rumanian Jews a few months later and then other non-citizens. The arrest of French Jews occurred sporadically as they were picked up for any excuse. At this time, my parents agreed to care for a little seven-year-old boy, Emile, whose parents were arrested in July 1942 and had no one to look after him.

A list of restrictions against Jews was enforced. Jews had to obey a curfew; they could not attend movies, theaters and parks; they could ride only in the last car of the subway train and the back of the bus; shopping was restricted to 11 a.m. to 12 p.m., which left empty shelves by that time. Jews also had to turn in their radios, bicycles, and automobiles. Father gave his radio to a neighbor and thus every evening we were able to listen to the London broadcasts and keep abreast of the war events.

On December 20, 1943, the police came to arrest my entire family. I was at school and father was at the synagogue reciting the mourner's prayer for his own father's *yahrzeit* (anniversary of death). My mother was at home alone with Emile. She instructed Emile to go speedily to stay with a neighbor and proceeded to comply quickly with the police in order that they should not meet up with father returning from the synagogue.

As father was walking home, a neighbor stopped him and told him about the arrest. He hastened to the school, picked me up, and proceeded to Marguerite's house outside of Paris. Marguerite immediately got in touch with the social worker, who was able to secure false papers for me and father. Madeleine advised us that we should not stay together; to separate was the only chance we had. By this time we knew through the London radio broadcasts of the dire conditions for Jews and the massacres that were happening in Poland. We had to follow the advice and hide as directed, even though we could not believe that such inhuman atrocities could be happening.

Because father spoke with an accent, Madeleine sent him back to Paris, where he would be less conspicuous among many. In Paris he worked for a French tailor in his quarters and was advised to keep out of sight. But since mother's arrest, father was in a distraught state of mind; he roamed the streets of Paris hoping to find out anything about mother. During one of his excursions he was stopped and it was discovered that he had falsified papers. He was convicted and sent to a French jail from March 1944 to July 1944. When he was released, he was turned over to the Germans. Father was deported on the last train out of Paris on July 31, 1944, together with many Jewish children from the orphanages.

I was placed with a Protestant family in the south of France in Basses Alpes, where I worked with them as a forester and helped in the production of charcoal. My life was hard. Being separated from my family and not knowing of their whereabouts or safety was psychologically difficult. The host family were avid Christians and their zeal and goal was to convert me. I finally told them to stop or I would return to Paris. They relinquished their quest, but informed me that they would pray for me. At the same time, Marguerite was also hidden with her boys till the liberation.

When Paris was liberated in September 1944, I returned to our apartment, broke the seal, and entered the bleak surroundings. A cup filled with coffee was standing on the table, as if mother was about to return from another room. It made me shiver with pain as the tears rolled down my face. My distraught state drove me out of the flat and I sought shelter with friends. Shortly after, my sister came with the children and that is when we moved back to our apartment, believing that any day, any moment, our parents and my brother-in-law, Solomon, would walk through the door.

In January 1945, the French Auschwitz survivors were returned to France,

where they were housed in the Hotel Lutetia. Every day a list of survivors was posted there. I ran daily to see the new list and returned home disappointed. In May 1945, when the truth of the Holocaust became public knowledge, it brought shivers to one's core, but we still hoped that our parents would return. After Paris was liberated on August 15, 1944, one of the orphan girls from that train, who survived Auschwitz, returned. She told me that my father was sent directly to the gas chambers on arrival. My mother's whereabouts or how she died were never discovered and to this day I am in pain when I think or speak of my mother.

When all hope was gone to reunite with my parents, and after I received a letter from my grandmother and family from New York inviting me to America, I insisted that my sister and her children accompany me. We left France in 1947. I had to leave France; I could not live in a cemetery.

In New York, I continued my education, earned a bachelor's degree while I taught French at Berlitz. In 1951 I was drafted and served two years in the army. When I was discharged I continued school and received a master's degree in accounting. Although I developed a loving, stable and productive life, I still live with nightmares, fear, and distrust. My memories and survival trials are with me every day. I always wonder: "Why did I survive?"

In 1955 I married Blanche Greenwald, a wonderful wife and partner. We raised two children: a son, Bernard, who has his own title-insurance business, and a daughter, Gisele, who is the director of Financial Aid Services for the state of New Jersey. Blanche and I have five grandchildren: Jordan 12, Erica 10, Jacob 8, Alexa 7, and Gabrielle 5, who are the sunshine of our lives and are the answer and the reason why I survived.

After the war, Mademoiselle Jacquet (married name—Madame Boisseille) gave me this tragic yet treasured letter from my father. His words break my heart, but they also serve as a tangible message and good-bye, since I never said good-bye to either of my parents.

### **A Letter from Bernard Jeifa from the French Jail**

*July 6th, 1944*

*Dear Mademoiselle,*

*I received your letter of June 30th on Tuesday and it is always with a renewed pleasure that I read yours. I am always so happy to get news from my dear children whose separation is so painful to me. I regret so much not being able to correspond directly with each one. I have to accept your good judgment and in spite of the suffering I do accept this need to assure their safety.*

*Today I am very downhearted and once again I must impose on your charitable devotion.*

*Yesterday I appeared in front of the Court of Appeals to obtain an increase in sentencing which would allow me to witness the coming events which hopefully will soon put an end to our martyrdom. Unfortunately I was unable to obtain what I was looking for.*

*I am therefore, to be released from here in the morning of July 21st. This is when my worries will start or rather increase. I am sure that you do understand that for me it means nothing else than "Concentration Camps" with all the horrible consequences for us Jews. This I wanted to avoid at all cost.*

*Since I have not been able to prevent my release please, I would want you to get in touch immediately with my attorney Mr. Hector Rivierez, 18 Ave de LaBourdonnais telephone Inv 7756 and to consult with him on the possibilities to save me from this horrible future reserved for me and which terrifies me.*

*Since I will have served my sentence there is no way to appeal. I will be released on that date.*

*A different way to act would be to try to build up a new case against me that would force my staying here during the investigation. Please review these possibilities.*

*Please allow me to point out to you the extreme urgency needed for action since on the 21st—less than weeks from now—I will be turned over to the Prefecture and what will follow. There is not a minute to waste. I apologize to you but to me it is a question of life, and this is why I appeal to you, the only one who can act usefully, the only one I can confide in and the only one that can understand the situation. I trust my life to you.*

*Please let me know as soon as possible what my attorney says and what course of action he advises.*

*If you find it advisable, talk to my friends Rue Claude Bernard so that they may be part of the plan to help me.*

*I will be awaiting anxiously to hear from you and I want to thank you for all you are doing for me. Please believe dear Miss Jacquet in my deepest respect and friendship.*

*Jeifa*

*If you find it useful—please keep this letter.*