

## Interview with Mr. Michel SZTULZAFT on October 29, 2018, Paris, France

WAV file M4197002

1 hour 14 minutes 58 seconds

WAV file M4197003

1 hour 15 minutes 35 seconds

WAV file M4197004

37 minutes 48 seconds

Michel SZTULZAFT was born on December 6, 1942 at the Hôpital Boucicault in the 15<sup>th</sup> arrondissement of Paris. He is the first person to have recognized his picture in 2011 when the USHMM placed unidentified pictures of children on its internet site under the heading “Remember me?” His profile, attached, gives us the broad outlines of his biography.

The interview itself contains many more details about Mr. Sztulzaft’s father, Abram (called “Maurice”), born in Kowal, Poland in 1904, and who attended the *gymnasium* in Wloclawek where he received his baccalaureate degree. He became very friendly with Fajga (Flora), the youngest daughter of a rabbi from Czestochowa, who was an excellent student like him. Abram had a half-brother, related through his mother, Adolf Dombrowski, who arranged for him to immigrate to France to marry an older woman. The couple had two children, Marcel born in 1927 and Héléne, born in 1935. Abram became a tailor for women and set-up shop in two rooms in the same building where they lived in the 15<sup>th</sup> arrondissement of Paris. He remained in touch with Flora through letters over the years, even when she went to Vienna for two years to tutor the children of a wealthy Jewish doctor.

Abram’s first wife died giving birth to Héléne. He asked Flora to come to France and they were married exactly one year and one day after his first wife’s death.

Michel gives more details about his mother’s life before and after their marriage, one of deep love.

Although he had not obtained French citizenship, as soon as France declared war on Germany, Abram Sztulzaft signed up with other foreign habitants of France to offer his services to fight for France. This was through an association called, “Amis de la République française”.

Flora and Abram were rounded-up during the *Rafle du vél’d’hiv* and were taken to the bicycle stadium by foot. Héléne had been sent to the country for safety. Marcel was not at home at the time. (Later, he returned to the apartment and a neighbor denounced him because she wanted to take over Maurice’s workshop space in the same building. He was deported on convoy 68 and weak while recovering from appendicitis, he was assassinated on arrival, just before his 17<sup>th</sup> birthday.)

Michel explains that he is the youngest survivor of the *Vél d’hiv* round-up, since he was still in his mother’s womb when their neighbor, Monsieur Lagarde, a policeman, was able to get Flora released, maintaining she was pregnant and French.

Michel donated the letters<sup>1</sup> that Abram sent to his wife from the *Vél d’hiv* and later from the internment camp in Pithiviers to the French Shoah Memorial. He was eventually deported to Auschwitz on convoy 13, never to return.

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<sup>1</sup> One of the letters was published in a book that presents similar letters and gives the history of each author and his family, *Je vous écris du Vél d’hiv*, edited by Karen Taieb.

After Michel was born, the Jewish Communist Resistance, the MOI (*Main d'oeuvre immigrée*), found Flora a place to hide: a home for single mothers from bourgeois families in the eastern Paris suburb of Saint-Maurice.

His mother carried out missions for the UJRE and kept trying to get news of her husband's fate. With other resistance fighters, she helped found the *Commission Centrale de l'Enfance* to take care of the approximately 6,000 Jewish orphans in France. There were children's homes in the Paris suburbs (Vesinet) and summer camp facilities. The burden of caring for two children was too much for Flora and she placed Michel in various OSE and CCE homes with Hélène.

Michel remembers that the children who lived in CCE and OSE orphanages year-round did not mix with the children who lived with their parents or family during the year and only came for the summer.

He remembers that the adults were at a loss to know how to handle the trauma and stress of hidden children who had lost their parents. The concept of "resilience", which the child psychiatrist Boris Cyrulnik has popularized, was not universal. Michel remembers that a boy of 16 hung himself in Toulouse.

He finally returned to live with his mother in 1950, at the age of 8. He was bar mitzvahed, but the family was not religious. He was a difficult child and not really interested in studying. Looking back, he realizes that his mother had no model of how to bring up a child, being the youngest in an Orthodox family of 7. Abram was the love of her life and she never married again. Michel evokes the burden he felt of being Abram's son and Marcel's brother, 2 men his mother held in high esteem. He was given a role he did not understand.

He did obtain his "Certificat d'études" and then was put in a boarding school belonging to the Ministry of Defense to learn how to repair electrical systems on air planes. For a while, he did belong to the Zionist youth group, Hashomer Hatzair.

Normally, as a ward of the nation and the son of a deported parent, he should not have been called up for military service in 1960, but there was a paucity of births in the year 1942, so he was recruited. France was fighting in Algeria. He describes how he was able to avoid bearing arms.

At the age of 20, he married a young Jewish woman, whose father had also been deported and never returned. He had a steady job and made a living, but something was missing. His wife encouraged him to return to school and study something that he really wanted to do. He began to get involved in organizing collective activities for other workers in the Communist communes around the outside of Paris, the *banlieue rouge*, organizing trips and discussion groups, films and concerts, sports and cooking classes.

Michel says he is inquisitive and interested in all sorts of things. He has a non-elitist conception of what "culture" is and believes in transmitting knowledge to help people understand their world and give meaning to their lives.

In the last part of the interview, he discusses how the circumstances of his birth and the post-war struggle for immigrant Jews shaped his life, his involvement in politics, and his view of the world. He is active in associations connected to the CCE and the Jewish Resistance Movement and MOI. A documentary film with interviews and archival footage has been made and he is working with a

small, committed group to create a virtual museum in honor of those who fought to liberate France, although they did not possess French citizenship. It is named after the address of the old headquarters of the UJRE (*Union des Juifs pour la Résistance et l'Entraide*), "14, rue du Paradis", an interesting coincidence for a post-war Jewish Communist organization.

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## Michel Sztulzaft Identified

April 5, 2011



Michel Sztulzaft was surprised and very moved when he saw himself in this picture. He hadn't previously known of its existence. He recognized himself right away and noted that he did not look happy. He might have been three or four years old when the photo was taken. He also recognized his sister Héléne's picture.

Michel's father, Abram, came to France from Poland in 1922 to marry a woman there. His father had two children, Marcel and Héléne, with his first wife. Marcel was denounced in 1944, deported to Auschwitz on Convoy 68, and murdered the day before his 17th birthday. After Abram's first wife died, he decided to marry Flora, an old school friend from Poland with whom he corresponded. Flora came to France to marry Abram.

The Sztulzaft family lived in the 15<sup>th</sup> *arrondissement* in Paris, ten minutes away from the Vel' d'Hiv stadium. Unlike some neighborhoods in Paris, the 15<sup>th</sup> *arrondissement* did not have a large Jewish

population. The Sztulzafts were the only Jewish family out of 11 in their building. In July 1942, during the big roundup of the Vel' d'Hiv, two policemen came to the Sztulzaft family and told them that they would be back within two hours. Abram sent his daughter to a neighbor's apartment. Marcel was not with them. When the policemen came back, Michel's parents were arrested and transported to the Vel' d'Hiv.

Mr. Lagarde was a policeman who lived in the same building as the Sztulzaft family. When he came home that day, his neighbors told him what had happened. Still wearing his uniform, he ran to the Vel' d'Hiv and told the policemen that Flora Sztulzaft was pregnant and French (only foreign Jews were supposed to be arrested that day). She was, of course, not French, but this person saved her, and she was able to go back home with him.

Abram spent four days at the Vel' d'Hiv and was then transferred to the French internment camp Pithiviers. He was later deported to Auschwitz on Convoy 13. He never returned.

Flora decided to remain in their apartment until Michel's birth on December 6, 1942. She then hid in Vésinet, and was next hidden by nuns in Saint-Maurice, a suburb of Paris, where she remained until the end of the war. She waited until May 8, 1945, to return to the apartment in the 15<sup>th</sup> *arrondissement*.

During the war, Michel was hidden with his mother. Afterwards, though, he spent several years in different children's homes of the *Oeuvre de Secours aux Enfants* (OSE) and of the *Commission Centrale de l'Enfance* (CCE). The CCE children's homes were located in Andrésy and Le Raincy. His memories of that period are not cheerful. He said the staff at the homes were not trained to deal with the kind of trauma they confronted, but they did their best. After the war, Flora kept going to the Hôtel Lutetia, where survivors returned and lists of survivors were posted. There, she hoped to see her husband. With the exception of a nephew who fought in Lodz, Flora's entire family in Poland was exterminated. In 1950, Michel returned to live with his mother. He was a difficult child and she enrolled him in an apprenticeship program in the army, where he learned to be an aeronautical electrician. He never joined the army. He was not really happy during these years. Michel eventually married and had a son and a daughter. Unhappy with his job, he made a radical change in 1969 and began working as a special educator. In 1976, he obtained a *Maîtrise d'Animation Socio-culturelle*.

Marcel says that he never thought of himself as Jewish, but when his mother passed away, he wanted to share his story. He gave the Mémorial de la Shoah photographs and two letters that his father wrote to his mother, one from the Vel' d'Hiv, the other from Pithiviers.

Michel says, "I represent a small piece of French history that is nothing to brag about, but I am not into being a victim." He would like Mr. Lagarde to be recognized by Yad Vashem as a Righteous among the Nations for saving his mother.

[View Michel Sztulzaft's Remember Me? profile.](#)

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