

Tribute from Alain Prigent and Jean

With my sister Jean, we wanted to pay tribute to Michel, recalling his youth in Tunisia, Scotland and Germany. That contribution is based on personal memories, on discussions with our parents and Auntie Jenny, and also on the personal papers of our father.

This story started in 1939. New-York City, Pier N°88, the French line. At the end of August, Dad who was a mechanic on board The Normandie, waiting for the departure of the liner, was the witness of an astonishing image: The Bremen, the German liner leaving the harbour with the crew on the upper decks singing "Deutschland über Alles". Three days after the war began.

In June 1940, Dad was on the way to Indochina expecting to get back to France with fresh native soldiers. As they arrived near Singapore the crew was informed that France had lost the war. A mutiny emerged on board. Dad was one of them. A lot of sailors, including officers, didn't want to get to Saigon. 42 of them joined the Free French and then the British Forces in fact the RAF. After two months crossing, he arrived in Greenock in April 1941. The year later he met a young girl near Ayr Station. She was employed as waitress in her Aunt Peg's Hotel. They got married the 12th December 1942 in Douglas, Lanarkshire. During the war, my dad was always on the move from a Royal Air force base to another (Biggin Hill, Hereford, Cornwall, Ayr, Brighton, Newcastle, Dorset, Biggin Hill again, Edinburgh, Orkneys Islands, Plymouth, Bristol). Michel, most of the time, lived with his mum in Douglas. But near Brighton, in Shoreham, in August 1944 they saw a V1 crashing not far away from their house. So, Mum and Michel moved back to Scotland. He was the only grand-son, loved by all the family.

His grand-parents were so proud of him. But the baby-boomers arrived soon! Celia; Menzies, Jean and Ebeth; Douglas and me; Ann and then William. John and Alan in the late fifties.

When the family arrived in France in April 1946 it made a huge difference. After the standard of life of coal mines communities (house with tap water, bathroom, electricity, inside toilets...), my mum had to move in villages, miles from small cities, in houses with no facilities. I've heard many times, Mum saying that French people lived as it was in the 19th century. Lonely, she had to face such hard challenges. First, the language. During three years Michel was only talking English. Using the bases Dad gave him before, Michel was so clever that he could speak French in a few weeks. Michel went shopping with Mum. It's now hard to believe that he taught French to his Mum! Illness was a second challenge. After two births in only one year, Mum was in critical condition. She was only 26 years of age. In January 1949 she had an emergency operation. I remember Jenny telling me in Scotland in 1983 this part of her life. Our Grand-parents had three daughters: Nance, the eldest, expecting a baby, died of an ectopic pregnancy in 1947. Family solidarity was not only a word! Mum was so weak that Granny and Jenny stayed in South West of France, in Saintes, near Cognac, for several months. One day, after visiting his mother in hospital, Michel asked: "Granny, Jenny, when Mum'll be back home? Do you think she is going to die? She is so young: I need her!" He was 5 years old.

She survived but had to move again to Mont-de-Marsan, not far away from the west Spanish border. Michel was 6 when he went to the primary school in Saint-Martin d'Oney, a small village where we lived. He had to walk half a mile, and as the other kids, he had his lunch in a small café, not far away from the school. No local service at school!

The family moved to Tunisia in June 1951, a month after William's birth. We stayed in Bizerta 5 years. In this harbour, the French forces had an Arsenal and an Air force base, the second in the south Mediterranean, like Gibraltar or Malta. We lived in Zarzouna, a mile away from the city, a new

neighbourhood created just after the war. When we had to go to Bizerta we took the “caricolo”, a donkey carriage led by a local driver speaking Arab. You can easily imagine the pleasure we had to move in such a coach. After, we had to cross the canal using an old ferry or a rowing boat.

Our lives were very busy. The beach was half a mile away from home, a lovely sandy beach where we spent great time at spring and autumn. Summer was too hot. Michel helped his father in the garden, breeding silkworms. We were very happy to observe the worms eating the mulberry leaves, and the cocoons, what a mystery. A little river flowed half a mile from home. With Michel and his pals, we caught frogs. Nearby, a small brickmaking factory. Jean remembers he spent a lot of time round the workers. He seems to be fascinated as I was, the preparation of the clay in moulders, the bricks in the fire place, and then the drying process.

Most of our neighbours came from France, employees, civil servants, military personnel. But it was also a melting pot of people coming from Greece, Italy, Malta and the natives of course. I think my parents knew that it was the end of colonial times. My mother had problems with some neighbours about the level of wages given to the maid or the cleaner.

She was so weak that she needed help: there were no washing-machines in those times! She decided to give “moral” wages instead of the colonial tariff. In 1953, Michel went to the high school in Bizerta. He was doing well in a classic section. Jean remembers that he was clever in drawings. Of course, every month we had a special delivery from Jenny: the comics, Beano and Dandy, Our Willie and the Broons.

Every two years all the family, except my father, travel to Scotland. What a trip it was! Bizerta, Tunis, Paris by plane, or by boat to Marseilles, the train, the ferry (Dieppe-Newhaven), the train again. Michel helped my mum watching after us arriving Gare de Lyon in Paris or in Victoria Station: Mum with William, the baby; and Michel keeping Jean and me, the twins, in a harness and a leash like dogs. It was a different world for us. The coal mine communities were quite strong in the fifties. It was strange for us to see all the miners coming back from the mine, every afternoon, and among them our Uncle Bill and Uncle Ian. Sounds and smells were so different! The crows cawing, the smoke of coal burning in fire places, the bell of the ice-cream van. We had great times with all the cousins. Michel was a popular guy in Douglas, all the kids of his age were around his. He had such extraordinary stories to tell, sometimes they were fascinated with the lion's chase. You could also easily imagine Michel driving a Buggy, a soap box running down Springhill Avenue! We used to go to the pictures every Saturday. All the kids of the village were there watching Cowboy movies or war films like “The Damp Busters”; a special one for my cousin Douglas. But we spent most of the time outside: playing at the swing park, watching the swans near Douglas Castle, enjoying four hours walk in the mountain drive. Jean remembers swimming with all the gang in a frozen river down the village. A day trip to the Scottish Riviera in Ayr; another day in Strathaven to visit Aunt Annie. Uncle Jim coming from Germany took us to the Edinburgh Zoo.

At the end of July, Granny organized the meeting of all the cousins around a huge birthday cake. Our grand fathers were so nice. Elizabeth, Granny, and Willie, Grandpa. In 1954, two weeks after our return from Douglas, we had a telegram telling that he passed away. What a shock!

During summer 1955, we had holidays in Tunisia. First three weeks near the Algerian border in the Tunisian Mountains. Accommodation was great for Mum: nothing to do. We had great walks and open-air picture performances. But nights were cold, so we need to be cover with blankets. Then we visited the city of Tunis.

One day, my father who was fan of Cycling booked tickets for Races at the velodrome. It was a night session (Night in Tunisia!), I was following Dad and Michel, so happy to see the world stars Fausto Coppi and Louison Bobet. We watched the warming-up but unfortunately it started to rain, and the champions refused to compete, arguing security problems.

The family doctor was worried about Mum's condition. He said it'll be better to move back in Europe. Then we moved to Germany living in Achen, a small city not far away from Strasbourg. We lived Constantine Block in a nice apartment outside the city. Just behind the block, the garrison of the French troupes. We thought it was German Barracks, build in Old Style. A few years ago, I've learned that it was first a mental hospital in the 19e century and during Nazi rule an experimental centre for disable patients. Did our parents know anything about it?

I don't think so. A lot of tragic stories had been hidden. Living in a new country, listening people talking German, long winter with snow for weeks! Everything was different. The last time we spent long time together was in 1957. With Michel and Gine, we spent a month in a holiday camp in the Black Forest with other kids of military staff in Germany. Living in a huge and wonderful chalet, we had long walks in the mountains around. One day we went to the Feldberg, the highest point of the Schwarzwald. Included in the youngster group, Michel showed some talent during the theatre performance. We were proud of him.

Michel had a complicated relation with the school system. Jean reminded me last week that every year he had to blow the candles of his birthday's cake the day of the starting of school year. In Germany, Michel went to the high school in Baden-Baden, the Lycée Charles de Gaulle. The headquarters of the French forces in Germany were concentrated in this beautiful city. Michel went every morning at school in a military bus. A lot of his pals were subaltern officers' sons, as my father was. But he met also boys and girls of the high French society, generals' sons, diplomat' daughters. My father wanted him to join the French cadets, but Michel didn't want it. So in 1958, 15 years old, he began practical studies in a professional hotel school in Strasbourg, the biggest city of Alsace, out of the family now.

Back home every fortnight, he enjoyed his new free live. As a student he used to be employed by major Chefs in nice hotels, so he earned his first wages. He had opportunities to watch some famous football players as Pél  and the Brazilian side of Santos FC.

But he was worried about the war in Algeria. Born in 1943, he had to join the French Navy for his 19th birthday.

But that is another part of his life; another story!