

FERNAND BOULANGER, CHEF AND RESISTANCE FIGHTER 1923-2006

Passionate pastry chef and owner of a Toronto restaurant saved the lives of hundreds of Jews during the Second World War

BY NOREEN SHANAHAN, TORONTO

He was a celebrated chef whose contented Canadian guests never dreamed they were dining at the table of a man who once saved the lives of hundreds of fugitive Jews during the darkest days of the Second World War. As a teenager growing up in occupied France, Fernand Boulanger had spent his time, not in a kitchen, but in a cemetery. Day after day, he escorted refugees through the graveyard and slipped them through a hole in a fence and across the border into Switzerland.

Mr. Boulanger was the first of three children born to Eugene and Henriette Boulanger in a small village near the border with Italy and Switzerland. He grew up just seven kilometres from Geneva, Switzerland, and had just turned 16 when the Second World War began. Less than a year later, Germany had swept across most of France. In June of 1940, Mussolini declared war on France and young Fernand suddenly found his corner of France occupied by Italian troops. He joined the Red Cross, witnessed what he described as atrocities inflicted by Italian soldiers, and joined the Resistance. In 1942, he went one further and joined the Services Spéciaux, or French Secret Service.

At the time, his father worked at the local railway station, creating an excellent cover for clandestine assignments with refugees. He knew his way around the station and easily passed as a youngster hanging around waiting for his dad. It was not easy moving refugees the 10 kilometres from the station into town.

"I had a lady once with one baby," Mr. Boulanger told Steven Spielberg for the film director's Survivors of the Shoah history project. "The Germans arrested her husband and she escaped but she had no money, no food. She had nothing. My sister gave her a dress."

Fortunately, he managed to get her across the cemetery, which was on the border with Switzerland. Loading her arms with flowers to make her appear like an innocent mourner, he led her among the tombstones to the hole in the fence. By chance, they happened to meet again in Paris a few years after the war.

The Resistance also provided many refugees with false identification papers, he said. "But sometimes, people had a very different accent, so we had to be careful what we did and who we did it for."

In May of 1943, Mr. Boulanger learned that the Gestapo was close on his trail. He dashed to safety across the Swiss border, only to

learn that his parents, teenaged sister and baby brother had been arrested. A month later, carrying false identity papers, he left Switzerland on a new mission. He was soon arrested in Arles, France, and spent his 20th birthday in jail. Realizing that his family would be at an even greater risk if he disclosed his true identity, he endured torture by the Gestapo and then somehow escaped. Without papers or money, he walked about 50 kilometres in the dead of night to get home to his village. His family was released several months later.

After training in Geneva as a chef, his career took a sharp turn when peace returned. He moved to Morocco to work as a car salesman and as a cook. Eventually, having already changed the spelling of his name to Boulanger, which means "baker," he fulfilled a life-long dream of becoming a chef.

Cooking was one of Mr. Boulanger's greatest passions, says his wife, Marie-Thérèse, who met him in Paris just after the war. She added that she never learned to cook and never needed to do so.

In 1957, the couple emigrated to Canada where, after a few years selling life insurance, Mr. Boulanger opened two pastry shops in Toronto — the Mont-Blanc, Pâtisserie Franco-Suisse and Chez Boulanger. In 1977, he opened Auberge Maple



BOULANGER FAMILY PHOTO

Fernand Boulanger operated Auberge Maple Inn.

Inn, a French restaurant on the outskirts of the city, and for seven years served as its head chef. A restaurant review from that time said he established a loyal clientele "from amongst the horse set north of Toronto and the more knowledgeable and adventurous of city folk."

He made his presence known among the customers, strolling through the dining room in his chef's whites to ask whether they were enjoying their meal. His

guests knew him as a jovial host who loved French music, great food and wine. But they knew nothing of his years in the Resistance.

As it turned out, his family knew little more. Although he had spoken of his wartime experiences to Mr. Spielberg's history project, he never revealed it to anyone else. His family discovered the Shoah videos only after his death.

"I thought the videos were something about a concentration camp and I couldn't bear to see them," said daughter, Liliane DeVries. "So my husband started watching and he called to me: 'Liliane — it's about your father!'"

By then, it was already history to Steven Spielberg. In 1998, the filmmaker wrote a letter to Mr. Boulanger to thank him for his contribution: "Your interview will be carefully preserved as an important part of the most comprehensive library of Holocaust testimonies ever assembled. Far into the future, people will be able to see a face, hear a voice, and observe a life, so that they may listen and learn, and always remember."

Fernand Boulanger was born on Aug. 15, 1923, in Annemasse, Haute Savoie, France. He died in Toronto on June 17, 2006, of complications from cancer. He was 82. He leaves his wife, Marie-Thérèse, daughter, Liliane, son, Dominic, and grandchildren Tom, Maurice and Michelle.

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