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*Chapter 10*

**A LOVING TRIUMPH OVER  
THE RAVAGES OF WAR**

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**ABSTRACT**

I have a powerful story to tell, of a mother's love and devotion to her family, taking us on the trajectory of her life that spanned 80 years from Tunisia to Marseille, France, prior to, during and post WWII. The death of Bernadette's mother in childbirth sets the scene for a journey defined by torment, guilt, loss, despair and illness, yet instilled with hope and extraordinary resilience. Bernadette is no longer with us to divulge the innermost secrets of her long and turbulent life. Her adult children have, on the other hand, entrusted me, the story teller, with the intricate details of a journey that has earned her and her daughters a place in our book, *Women and War: Opening Pandora's Box*. Deferring to the family's wishes to remain anonymous, pseudonyms have been used to protect their identity. Pouring over French documents, personal communication and recordings that I have translated, I have woven together a story that illustrates graphically the impacts of wars on families globally. Bernadette endured incredible hardships as a result of WWII and the Tunisian War of Independence, dogged by personal misfortunes that threatened to destroy her spirit. However, she was also endowed with an infinite capacity to love and to give, especially to her husband and her

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children. The women of this Sicilo-Tunisian-French family have reacted far more intensely to the intergenerational transmission of traumas of war than their male counterparts. Where appropriate, I have juxtaposed interesting insights on gender issues analyzed from the male perspective as opposed to the feminine insights into similar events. These reflections provide balance and contrast, shedding light on significant issues. The impacts of war continue to wield their inexorable force on the lives of descendants of war Veterans.

Une vie pas facile, je pense que Maman a payé très cher son passage sur Terre. Elle voulait mourir avec ma main dans la sienne, son ultime vœu a été exaucé. (A difficult life, I think that Mother paid dearly for her passage on Earth. She wanted to die holding my hand, and I fulfilled her dying wish).

(Olivier, [Bernadette's seventh son], May 2016)

## INTRODUCTION

This is a story of trauma for Sicilian-Tunisian immigrants who survived war, personal loss, illnesses, injustices and insularity as they attempted to create a life for their family in a land where they were not welcome. The crosses they had to bear started early, during WWII when Tunisia became the last stronghold for the Allied Forces in 1940. Bernadette had fallen in love with her future husband, Franck, before war was declared. Recruitment had begun and upon Franck's decision to volunteer, at 22, he was mobilized to the North of France; a member of a 'motley' crew from the North African colonies and squadrons of soldiers from the French Foreign Legion. The Allies needed to shore up their numbers and this group of soldiers would ostensibly provide the buffer they needed against Hitler's powerful army. They had in fact been sent to battle without the requisite grueling training of regular regiments. Franck's desire to take up French nationality, in direct protest of Mussolini's obsession to build Imperial Italy, had taken its toll on their union, especially Bernadette, whilst Franck was still at war.

This story has not been included to invoke pity; neither is it presented for glory, pride or recognition, but for the potential lessons on the impacts of war. Madelaine, Bernadette's daughter explains:

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L'important ce n'est ni moi ni Maman, l'important c'est ce bouquin et que cette histoire vous permette d'honorer les femmes qui ont tant souffert à cause des guerres! (The important thing is neither me nor my Mother, but this book, so that this story allows you to honor the women who have suffered so much as a result of wars). (Madelaine, May, 2016)

The actions and circumstances that define a man's character can affect him for the duration of his life, especially when wars, duty and honor are at stake. The decisions he makes in a highly charged emotional state, can trigger a chain reaction that impacts either positively or negatively on those with whom he comes into contact. Bernadette's husband, Franck, proud and brave, returned from the Battle of France during WWII with his spirits crushed, the humiliating losses weighing heavily on his conscience, as he had been one of the few soldiers to survive the skirmish. He cared deeply for his family but the effects of war are insidious and inexorable, provoking serious repercussions on his relationships; especially when compounded by forces outside of his control. In this story, Franck's formidable character, his unwavering righteousness and stubbornness are deemed to have exacerbated what were clearly traumatic times for his wife and young family as the seeds of bitterness and despair were sown. Each member of the family responded in their own unique way to the dictates of the autocratic male figure in their lives as they perceived his actions and words from very different lenses.

## **PREAMBLE – THE SOCIOCULTURAL CONTEXT OF TUNISIA**

A brief overview of the economic and sociocultural context of Tunisia prior to WWII is necessary to set the scene for the important sequence of events that influenced the lives of Bernadette and her husband, Franck. This was a unique situation according to Madelaine. Tunisia was coveted by Italy and France and only became a French Protectorate in 1881. However, given this country's proximity to Italy, the Italian diaspora, especially the Sicilian contingent, was significantly larger than the other communities whose cultural mix comprised Muslims (Arabs, Berbers, etc.), Jews, and Maltese. Curiously, the French colony was one of the smallest, consisting mostly of public servants and the military. Until the outbreak of WWII, all of the communities had co-existed in a comfortable milieu where cultures did not mix but respect was paramount. The Italian diasporas continued to increase at a steady pace in the 20<sup>th</sup> Century, becoming more than a 'viable minority' of 105,000 residents

by 1910, under the protectorate of the French colonizers, whose numbers still remained small by comparison (Russell, 1977).

The conquest of Tunisia by the French in 1881 was driven by what the colonial rulers considered “*Le Péril Italien*”, The Italian Danger, as they felt threatened by the pervasive cultural influence that the Italians enjoyed in this country. In their quest to propagate *La Francophonie*, French language and culture, the French protectorate enacted its policy of economic and cultural expansion to rival Italian development and growth, offering free education in French schools. The French managed to entice many Italians when they offered French citizenship to residents on request. The promotion of French citizenship was one of the main reasons for Mussolini’s intervention in Tunisia (Russell, 1977).

In 1942, the Italian troops actually succeeded in occupying Tunisia, seizing it from the Nazi Collaborationist government at the time. This Vichy regime was the seat of the French State. By May, 1943, the Allies had conquered all Tunisia and all Italian schools and newspapers had been shut down by the French regime, their constant harassment signaling the emigration of many Italians from this land (Watson, 2007). The War of Independence, ending in 1956, heralded the victory of Tunisian Arabs, provoking a dramatic exodus of Italian residents who fled to Italy and France to start a new chapter in their lives.

## **FRANCK’S INVOLVEMENT IN WW II – THE BATTLE OF FRANCE**

The vast majority of Italians in Tunisia were from Sicily, from whence Franck and Bernadette’s families originated. The different wars that took place in the first half of the 20<sup>th</sup> Century had serious implications for Franck and Bernadette’s relationship and by extension, for their eight children who were born during this period. Sicilian through and through, Franck had made the deliberate decision to denounce his Italian nationality, so acute were his convictions that Mussolini had acted inappropriately. His rejection of the Italian leader was a defiant act and he became French to fight with their troops during the French War against Adolf Hitler in 1940. This act of bravery or foolishness set the scene for the events that shaped their lives from that moment on.

Whilst this is Bernadette's story, it is important to contextualize certain events that provide an insight into the man that Franck was, for the subsequent influence his actions and behavior had on their eventual marriage after the war. Their relationship began when Bernadette was only 17 and Franck 22 as he left for the Battle of France in 1940 together with the Allied Forces. Franck was proficient in several languages apart from his native tongue, Italian. Having been educated in the French system, his linguistic prowess was highly valued as he had also acquired Arabic and Maltese.

Franck was of humble beginnings, his Sicilian family poor and unpretentious yet full of character and restless. Franck is described by his family as gargantuan, with amazing strength and also very attractive to the opposite sex. He was an enterprising automotive body shop mechanic and very sportive and enjoyed life to the fullest until the war. Franck had inherited some of the incredible qualities from his father that have manifested in his son Olivier also, especially where defending the family honor and human rights are involved. Unfortunately, impetuosity and aggression when provoked, characterized the males of the three generations. Having witnessed a child being attacked by Tunisian males, Franck's father had beaten the offender to death and killed the two bystanders who had encouraged the perpetrator. This action forced him to flee to the US for four years.

Franck and Bernadette had fallen in love but there was no time for marriage as the call to war came abruptly. Franck was a significant actor in the events that unfolded in their lives, influential and autocratic even for the determined Bernadette. This war, against Hitler's initial assault, had lasted only six weeks before the French and the Allies collapsed, causing dramatic repercussions for Europe during WWII (Sheffield, 2011). Sheffield (2011) explains that "the defeat of this powerful army in a mere six weeks in 1940 stands as one of the most remarkable campaigns in history" (p. 1). Dismissing the Maginot Line as too formidable a challenge from Germany, he argues Hitler's attack had focused on an approach from neutral Holland and Belgium. In short, The French army, a 'powerful bulwark' against potential Nazi aggression towards other European nations, had been annihilated, not to mention humiliated, by June 22, 1940.

When Franck returned home from the war, having miraculously survived, his bitter recriminations from this war manifested with the realization that the recruits from the French colonies, Tunisia in this instance, had been used by the French Army as fodder for the enemy. Young untrained youths had been willing to fight for France without adequate preparation. They had been sent to the battlefield and had been annihilated in no time at all. How Franck survived

this battle is a total mystery. During WWII, the Germans entered Tunisia in November of 1942 and in a short period of time this complex war ended in May, 1943 with the surrender of the Axis forces in North Africa, made up of German and Italian troops. They had sustained huge casualties and the Allied forces had taken over 200,000 thousand prisoners of war. Franck had not participated in this war but it was fortuitous that he had changed allegiances and fought for the Allies. Where the Italian community was concerned however, Franck was considered a traitor, the ramifications of which had impacted on Bernadette significantly whilst he was at war and upon his return when he decided to join the Police Force in his district.

## **BERNADETTE - WAR COMES TO TUNISIA**

Bernadette was born into a family of modest beginnings, hailing from the idyllic western coast of Sicily, whilst her ancestors had enjoyed a more privileged life style. Both her parents, and Franck's had immigrated to Tunisia during a wave of mass migration from Sicily at the turn of the 20<sup>th</sup> Century. Bernadette's tragic, yet courageous journey begins with her mother who died in childbirth. The irrational sentiments of guilt and responsibility she carried for having in some measure, inadvertently caused the death of her mother, and the despair of knowing that she was never to meet this wonderful woman weighed heavily on Bernadette's conscience. These feelings of dejection and guilt were to revisit her on a regular basis throughout her life. She had been fortunate and grateful that her older sister, Geneviève and her stepmother had tried to assuage her pain as she grew up but there was a persistent emptiness caused by her mother's absence that never managed to heal her broken heart. Yet, her demeanor exuded confidence and inner strength of character. Bernadette, although educated in an Italian school in Tunisia, boasting total proficiency in the language, had acquired an excellent level of only spoken French, and was insufficiently skilled to work in the professional field in a city where the official language of the Protectorate was French. She was employed at a local factory making pasta until she was forced to give up work during the last stages of her pregnancy due to ill health. She had only obtained French citizenship through marriage when Franck was naturalized.

Communication was difficult between Bernadette and Franck during the war. With only a modicum of support from her sister after Franck's departure, Bernadette, unmarried, discovered that she was pregnant with Franck's illegitimate child. The young couple was in love and they had behaved like

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most couples who faced the vagaries of wartime. Pledging undying devotion to each other they made love and prayed that Franck would return. They had sinned in the eyes of God, breaking the Roman Catholic laws that forbade sex before marriage; there had been no time for an engagement. This would have made little difference in the eyes of the Church and the Italian community where intolerance was inexorable for those who failed to observe the dictates and ethical conduct of their culture. In most Southern European Diasporas established overseas, allegiance to societal and religious rules was vigorous and sacrosanct, often even more draconian than in the motherland.

More often than not, girls in Bernadette's predicament were peremptorily dispatched to relatives or convents in another city until the illegitimate child was born and offered up for adoption. Bernadette's obstinate insubordination was flagrant in the eyes of the community. Her disobedience of societal dictates was impressive and brave but clearly imprudent! This was a proverbial case of Samson versus Goliath. The unwritten code of conduct stipulated that she leave town and as abortion was not an option, subsequently offer the baby up for adoption. The alternative was to be shunned by the society she had lived in all of her life. She was effectively marginalized for this decision. Almost completely isolated, Bernadette's defiance forced her to bear the brunt of a difficult and painful pregnancy practically on her own. The psychological trauma she endured was soul-destroying and her loneliness was unbearable as she longed for Franck to return safely from the war. She was subject to a constant barrage of emotional abuse and intimidation from the staunch, Fascist Italian community for two grievous sins; the first, her shameful indiscretion with Franck and the second, due to her French nationality by association with Franck, she was also considered a traitor. Franck had denounced his national heritage to fight for the 'enemy' in the Battle of France and Bernadette was by default also a traitor.

Upon his return, Franck found his partner in very poor health. He had not known of the impending birth of their baby and whilst he was elated at the prospect, he did not fail to understand the gravity of the situation, especially in light of the decisions he had made. Their first baby boy, Philippe was born in good health in spite of medical issues that lasted many months. Had it not been for the moral support of her sister, Geneviève, Bernadette may not have survived this pregnancy because in addition to the untold physical and mental suffering, she had also been abandoned by Franck's family who could not forgive her for having fallen pregnant. They could not be seen to support this union out of wedlock as this would affect their standing in the community. When they were married, the relationship between Franck and Bernadette and



his parents remained strained and neither of them could forgive his family for having turned their backs on her during Franck's absence.

## TEN CHALLENGING YEARS

Franck left the army so that he could better support his wife and child, deciding to join the Police Force. The chronology of the births of the children who followed Philippe is significant in highlighting the extraordinary circumstances that define the challenging first ten years of their married life. Franck did not return from battle unscathed. Posttraumatic Stress Disorder had not yet been diagnosed for war Veterans but if one can fathom a soldier's witnessing of the massacre that took place on the battle front during the catastrophic War of France, it is not difficult to imagine the pain and suffering that he had to cope with at seeing his comrades torn to shreds before his eyes, whilst he had miraculously survived. He suffered from many symptoms associated with PTSD, including nightmares and depression and turned to the bottle for relief. He had had affairs before returning to Bernadette, who chose to forgive him, no doubt because of the bond and love that they shared. In her predicament she was also aware that she would not have survived as a single mother, given her poor health that was to deteriorate as she grew older. Franck chose to devote his energies to his career in the police force, somewhat more rigorously than most, at the expense of his own family. It is in this role of law enforcement that Franck's behavior toward his wife leaves one dumbfounded. Life was tough during the war, in Tunisia as it was in every country where the enemy had infiltrated the lives of most communities. The effects of war are unquantifiable and apportioning blame on any one aspect is impossible. Suffice to say that a sequence of events had a disastrous impact on Bernadette and Franck's lives.

Times of war are particularly notorious for hardships that take their toll on the lives of so many individuals especially where food scarcity is a factor. WWII brought so much devastation worldwide that had flow on effects even in communities that had limited or indirect involvement in combat. The economic and political situation in Tunisia, prior to and during the Battle of Tunisia, between November 1942 and May 1943 brought further turmoil to Tunisians who had to queue up, like their counterparts around the world, for the most basic of food, supplies and services, the lines growing ever longer as desperate families tried to feed their children. A significant percentage of childhood deaths are linked to poor nutrition during war times as this group is

always the most vulnerable. Accurate statistics are difficult to obtain as world health organizations work tirelessly to stem the flow of deaths whilst creating awareness for this massive and perennial problem. They face a disheartening task.

During his service as a police officer in Tunis, Franck was mobilized once again, joining his troops to fight for the French Army. Securing a position close to his family should have been advantageous for Bernadette who was instead, bemused by his actions! One of Franck's duties at the time involved the rationing of food and supplies for the population. No one, least of all, Bernadette, could believe his resolute devotion to duty at the expense of his own family. Bernadette demanded nothing but by that stage, pregnant with her second child, she was obliged to queue up with Philippe for hours in the hot sun in order to put food on the table. Friends and colleagues who witnessed this righteous attitude could not understand how in spite of her two pregnancies during that time, Frank granted no privileges to his wife. She was expected to queue up like everyone else. Were it not for some friends who assisted when they could to provide the essentials for her and her child, she may have fallen gravely ill. Reputed in the army for his moral rectitude and steadfastness, Franck's attitude did little to endear him to those who were close to his family. He had, on the other hand, been recognized for his war efforts in combat by the French Army who awarded him the "*Croix de Guerre*" (the War Cross) and the Tunisian Legion of Honor Medal. Maintaining his righteousness was consequently of paramount importance.

Bernadette's second baby boy, Bernard, was born during this difficult period of war, in November, 1941. What transpired after this is tragic and agonizing, triggering a period of grief, disbelief, deep depression and anger for Bernadette. Shortly after Philippe's second birthday, the little boy passed away, of unidentifiable causes in September 1942. The untold suffering of the young mother was not to end there. One month later, in October, Bernard suddenly died and this death was attributed to the fact that whilst Bernadette was undergoing treatment for an illness, without proper medical advice, she had continued to breastfeed the baby. It is believed that the medication was inadvertently transferred to the child through the mother's milk causing the child to pass away. The despair and suffering that Bernadette and Franck endured at having to bury two babies within a month was unfathomable, needless to say. How does one reconcile the loss of these little souls and not assume some responsibility? No one was blamed but many questions were asked. Had PTSD been recognized in that era, no one would have doubted the effects of war on the returned soldier, his actions post-war and the

unmistakable symptoms of PTSD and secondary trauma that left an indelible mark on the psyche of both parents. In those days counselling and support for psychological disturbances were non-existent. Unbeknownst to Bernadette and Franck, Bernadette was pregnant with their third child before the decease of the babies, little Georges arriving in May of 1943.

The tragedy does not end there. Lamentably, in addition to the relatives who had passed away during the war, during this period of mourning, Franck's father passed away. Franck kept a horrific secret from the family for decades, a decision that had profound psychological effects on him. Given the timing, how could he have revealed the circumstances of the gruesome death of his father who had been executed by the Gestapo during Nazi occupation of Tunisia? He had been found with two bullets in the head and thrown under a train. His remains had been unceremoniously collected and he had been buried without delay. It is not difficult to analyze the added drama that had unfolded concurrently with the tragic events in their lives. Carrying the weight of this secret for so many years took its toll on Franck and his marriage, yet the couple persevered, the unconscious strategy of trying to bear more children assisting them to cope with such momentous losses.

The next baby boy, Bernard, bearing exactly the same names as one of his deceased brothers, was born in 1945 as the war ended, signaling perhaps happier times to come. Bernadette and Franck were sadly deluded however, as their first baby girl, Josiane, the fifth child born in 1946 in quick succession, passed away in less than four months. Bernadette's health had evidently deteriorated over the years without adequate medical facilities for other than the privileged. Whilst the cancers that were detected later received better treatment, the family cannot say whether early detection may have prevented the deaths of some of the babies.

Words are inadequate to describe the emotional rollercoaster ride on which this family travelled, characterized by continued trials and tribulations during these times of war. The writing appeared to be on the wall. Bernadette and Franck, however, found the courage to go on, never giving up. As for many other Roman Catholic families, contraception was not considered a priority and they continued their quest to fill the void in their lives that the death of their three babies had created. Marianne, the sixth child, whose unique set of circumstances provide further drama in this narrative, was born in 1948, followed by her brother, Olivier's arrival in 1950, the seventh child brought into the world in Tunisia. Olivier is one of the heroes of this story as the insights into his strength and unfaltering devotion to his mother reveal the

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truth behind the amazing woman who survived intolerable challenges until the age of 80.

### **TEN YEARS OF RESPITE**

The ten year cycles became significant for Bernadette and Franck. It appears that the misfortunes that had dogged Bernadette's family for decades were finally receding during the following ten years when joy and happiness returned to the family home in Tunisia. Alas, tragedy had once again reared its ugly head in the form of a terrible accident. Bernard's case is tragic by all accounts. At the age of seven, Bernard and the boys of the district in their small Tunisian town had been trying to set an ant's nest on fire. The foolish prank literally backfired and Bernard received third-degree burns over his whole body that left him maimed for life. He had however, amazingly survived in spite of the incompetent actions of the clinic doctor. Admittedly, Burn Units were non-existent in those days and if they were, they had not reached their levels of effectiveness in the post-war period, especially in North Africa.

The inexperienced emergency doctor had attended to the wounds as best he could and then covered the child from head to toe in plaster, covering the extensive burns, as one would for mummification, this, inconceivably in 45degree heat! After a few days, the skin and flesh that were left on the poor child's bones had begun to rot with infection setting in, literally decaying before their eyes, until a renowned doctor's quick action had ended the catastrophic occlusive treatment. How Bernard survived this traumatic ordeal is pure conjecture, especially during an era where the wealthy families had access to good medical care, whilst those who struggled coped as best they could. This doctor, who was a specialist in his field, had effectively saved Bernard's life free of charge and the family is convinced that this was evidence of yet another miracle! The fact that he now suffers from considerable trauma is not surprising, even if he has healed well from his wounds. This blessing on the family brought a further period of respite as they embarked on a family business, acquiring a restaurant on the seaside, giving them some joy in a life that had been marked by pain, trauma and perpetual suffering. As you can surmise, not for long it seems, as the Independence of Tunisia put an end to their dreams.

## **INDEPENDENCE: NEW BEGINNINGS IN MARSEILLE, FRANCE**

The effects of WWII and the long drawn out war of Tunisia that culminated in Independence in 1956 had caused havoc on the Sicilian community and untold hardships on Bernadette and Franck's family. As the Tunisian Arabs assumed power over the Protectorate, a frenzied exodus of Italian residents occurred to avoid renewed horrors. Most fled to Italy and to France, including this family, reduced to four children who immigrated to a brave new world, Marseille, France. Pregnant with Madelaine, the last child would come into the world at a time where her parents found themselves destitute and unemployed for over a year. The bitterness and anger that distinguish this horrendously traumatic period of adjustment from the preceding episodes include further grievances added to the list of injustices. Finding themselves in a city where some of the locals were xenophobic and intolerant of refugees, Franck and Bernadette took measures that were heart-breaking for them all, forced to separate the family so that they could find housing in a cheap hotel room. The citizens of this town did nothing to help this family that had disembarked from Tunisia, treating them worse than second class citizens, even if they were naturalized. The following quotation is articulate and graphically portrayed:

Une période terrible: ma mère enceinte avec quatre enfants, mon père sans solde pendant un an, personne ne voulant nous loger. "Les sauvages" débarquaient de Tunisie, les animaux étaient "préférés" aux enfants! Cette famille découvrait ce que l'on appelle "LA CIVILISATION." (A terrible period: my mother pregnant with four children, my father unemployed for a year, no one wanted to house us. "The savages" had disembarked from Tunisia. Animals were "preferred" to children. This family discovered the meaning of "civilization". (Madelaine, May, 2916)

They managed to find humble lodgings paid with the modest savings that were not supplemented by government grants. Italians who were naturalized, emigrating from Tunisia in that era were not entitled to the endowments for which the much maligned Unemployment Benefit system and the Sécurité Sociale have become infamous in today's society. The boys, Georges and Olivier were sent away to live with acquaintances some 30 kilometers away simply because there was no hotel room that could accommodate the whole family. Yet the boys held no grudge at being expatriated from the family, at

the tender age of fourteen and seven. They were refugees. It was either that or they were all evicted, onto the streets of Marseille to fend for themselves. They grew up proud, bearing their Sicilian family name and two of the five children, Olivier and Marianne reached heights in their academic careers that defy belief. ‘I did it for you Mother!’ This was the mantra that propelled Olivier to do great things in education and is responsible for his success.

The children had already witnessed the ravages of war but in this city the dehumanizing forces of a bigoted society were even more confronting. Bernadette desperately tried to shield her children from the effects of racism and discrimination in Marseille but the barrage of racial slurs was relentless. There was no escape. At the age of seven, Olivier, whose devotion to his mother was equal to none, vowed to take on the mantle of protector for her and for his siblings, after he and his brother had been the target of vicious racist smears from a male who told his mother:

“C’est à vous ça? [indiquant Olivier]. Madame, ici vous n’êtes plus en Afrique. On préfère des chiens aux enfants ici!” (“Is this yours? [pointing to Olivier] [this – used in a pejorative sense]. You are no longer in Africa! We prefer dogs to children here!” (Olivier, May, 2016)

Turning his back on revenge, Olivier embraced his physical prowess as well as his enviable, psychological strength of character, all inherited from his mother. Even at such a young age, he learned to observe the character of individuals and made the conscious choice of focusing on survival; intent on overcoming all forms of adversity that life had in store for him. He thus adopted an extraordinarily humble and philosophical approach to life, proud of his resilience and indestructible spirit and his cheerful disposition. Endowed with a self-deprecating sense of humor, he is an optimist and is grateful to his parents for the life he enjoys today, in spite of the draconian treatment his father reserved for his family. He was clearly close to his beloved mother, whose tragic and traumatic episodes he witnessed first-hand. Highly spirited like his mother, Olivier’s survival instincts have made him impressive in his role of defender of the oppressed, whom he perceives are increasingly at risk of being vilified, harmed or swindled. At every turn, he does it for his mother, evoking her strength and courage. Olivier’s quick Sicilian temper, sharp tongue and angry demeanor are apparently legendary as he goes to the rescue of anyone dear to him.

Placing the incredibly tragic events that have impacted on Bernadette and Franck’s family in perspective, we can juxtapose the characteristics of these

two personalities who were, in spite of everything, entirely devoted to each other and their family, to the end. Franck was an extraordinarily strong individual, hardened and psychologically scarred by war and an intransigent society. Bernadette had great inner strength and resolve, and could, at times, be a formidable character, rarely abiding by societal dictates. To her great credit however, she refrained from retaliating when cornered, as she had an endless source of tolerance and love to bestow on her husband, her children, and her fellow man. Olivier's words are poignant in this context, as they highlight the effects of the hardships on their family, particularly during those challenging times in Marseille: "Je pense qu'une dose d'amour vaut bien des repas!" (I think that a dose of love makes up for missed meals).

Dans ces moments elle a toujours aimé son prochain en me disant: "Fais le pour moi mon Fils!" Qu'est-ce que je devais faire ? Croire en Dieu; croire à son prochain et étudier. Voilà le secret de ma réussite. Les conséquences de ces guerres sur Maman ont été de nous communiquer une force incroyable. (At times such as these, she would turn the other cheek, saying to me: "Do it for me, Son!" What was I supposed to do? Believe in God; believe in others and study. That is the secret of my success. The legacy of the impacts of these wars on Mother was to communicate to us an incredible strength). (Olivier, May, 2016)

What is ultimately puzzling is the revelation that all of the members of this family reacted quite differently to the impact of the wars on their parents and the intolerable losses they had suffered as a family unit. Space precludes a thorough analysis of the complex relationships of each individual mentioned in comparison to the rest of the family; suffice to say that the inclusion of the main actors offers fascinating insights into the effects of trauma on different personalities, especially where intercultural and gender issues are concerned. Tragically, two of her eight children, Madelaine, the youngest child and her older sister, Marianne bore the brunt of the intergenerational impacts of war on this family more significantly than their brothers, compounded by the challenging processes of adjustment in a new country and their own personal relationship issues. The youngest, after a life-changing illness is only now beginning to recover! This is as much their story as Bernadette's, especially in contrast with Olivier's, whose life journey is diametrically opposed to theirs.

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## MADELAINE

Madelaine was born in Marseille, France in November, 1957, a French national of Sicilian parents. The blond, blue-eyed, exceptional beauty, as depicted by her own siblings and all who know her, Madelaine stands in sharp contrast against her brother Olivier, who is dark, heavily built, and olive-skinned. In spite of being gifted with stunning physical features, Madelaine suffers from major neuroses, her inferiority complex, capriciousness and covert jealousies towards her sister Marianne and her niece, Martine, totally incomprehensible to her family when they finally understood the origins of her grievances. Being born in Marseille after the war had created little buffer against the intergenerational transmission of systemic problems generated from the traumas suffered by her parents. Madelaine could not perceive the world through the same lens as her brothers; instead she reproached her family for the real and imagined unjust treatment she received as a child; for the fact that they no longer lived an idyllic life in the small Tunisian town; for having brought the family to a country that was hostile to their culture.

Unlike Olivier, whom she considered was blessed by the gods, for his innate ability to bounce back and relativize, quick to put things in perspective, Madelaine could never dust herself off and move on whenever there was an issue to deal with. Madelaine never forgave Bernadette for her overt preferential treatment toward Bernard, who suffered excruciatingly as a child from his burns and is still scarred psychologically. As she secretly harbored angry, bitter recriminations for years, the predictable effects of this process took its toll on her physical health, manifesting into cancer at the age of fifty-eight. Madelaine has survived this cruel blow to end all blows. Upon the diagnosis of her psychosis, revealing years of pent up jealousy towards her brother Bernard, especially, and also towards her siblings, these relationship issues reached breaking point causing marginalization from the family. In addition to this, her jealousy towards a niece appears mysterious but the reasons for this have not been shared with me.

Madelaine's worldview is comprised of injustices caused by all and sundry, in particular her own mother, for reasons no one really understood when it became apparent that she was not well. Her grievances towards Bernadette turned pathological and wreaked havoc on her health, making her insufferable to live with. It is clear from the sources that I have been privy to that Bernadette should have assumed some responsibility for the way Madelaine had reacted because of her mother's unashamed and ostentatious preference for one of her older sons, Bernard, at the expense of her other



children. In Bernadette's defence, she adored all of her children equally, but her proportional demonstration of attention and love had been dictated on a greater needs basis. She could not imagine that anyone would bear a grudge against her or Bernard. Blaming Bernadette for the impacts of the war on their family was unjustified, yet the rippling effects of the dramatic episodes of their lives were revisited on the whole family. Each member dealt with their personal painful recollections of these events before, during and after the war in their own way. Yet Madelaine, the only one who had new beginnings in a new country had fared the worst.

Madelaine's story is in stark contrast with Olivier's. The psychological features with which one is endowed and how these are integrated into an individual's identity are clearly enigmatic. One sibling becomes victorious and the other is totally diminished in character. Is gender an issue here? Probably, but then traumatic circumstances affect each and every one of us in very individual ways. Individual personality traits are responsible for the way we approach life, environmental factors contributing significantly to dramatic outcomes for some, whilst others, blessed with a more robust constitution are capable of surmounting the most difficult of obstacles. The juncture at which environmental factors and genetically transmitted characteristics intersect can then open up a Pandora's Box of emotions and reactions.

The fact that Bernadette had always showed unwavering affection for Bernard is perhaps understandable but not from Madelaine's perspective. This predicament did little to assuage the shame and guilt Madelaine felt at being ostracized at school because they were Tunisian immigrants. Where her siblings willingly forgave their Mother's distinctive treatment of her children, Madelaine retreated further into her shell and held a grudge for her whole life. It is difficult to imagine but with the pre-disposition for such bitterness and misery all of her life, Madelaine got married and now has two children living in the South of France. How she managed to beat cancer is another miracle that this family has witnessed, except for her mother who passed away without having forgiven her daughter for the despicable rift she had caused in the family.

Even Olivier, who appears to be a most forgiving character, could not find it in his heart to absolve Madelaine of the ill feelings she harbored toward her mother, sister and cousin all of her life, until she fell gravely ill. It is perhaps his act of selflessness in welcoming her back into the fold that has contributed to Madelaine's miraculous recovery after being diagnosed with a presumably incurable form of cancer. Olivier ran to her side to offer her the physical and moral support she craved. The fact remains that after the aggressive treatments

of Chemotherapy and several operations, Madelaine has emerged cancer-free, after a four-month battle, quite extraordinarily, it seems. She is now glowing and beautiful, the cancer having failed to mar her beauty completely.

Her positive attitude with regard to this unfortunate illness is admirable and quite out of character: "*Mes handicaps, en fait, sont des avantages ...*" (My handicaps are, in fact, advantages). (Madelaine, May, 2016). The experience was clearly cathartic for the change in Madelaine's perspective on life is remarkable. The question comes to mind whether a physical and spiritual healing has taken place, her mother having passed away without forgiving her. This too seems quite extraordinary, in light of the forgiving nature of Bernadette. Too little too late, perhaps?

On her mother's death bed, at Olivier's home, Madelaine had been called to mend fences and to bid her mother farewell. As a result of the long rift between her and the whole family, the deafening silence between them spoke loudly of the painful yoke she had carried, of the injustices she believed she should not have been subjected to. Bernadette refused to speak to her daughter, depriving her of a chance for atonement. Madelaine's pain increased one hundredfold as she heard her mother say to her sister-in-law: 'I love you, Monique.' With these last words on her dying breath, she ceased to exist, holding Olivier's hand as promised. The psychological impact of this feud that had provoked such a cruel blow to Madelaine has left her scarred for life.

Metaphysically, if one buries traumatic episodes of one's life, holding on to bitterness and vengeful thoughts, the results can be catastrophic on the physical body. Externalizing one's problems on the other hand appears to assist in a cleansing process. This may help explain the distinct outcomes between Madelaine and her brothers. Madelaine has survived cancer, but only time will tell whether she has extricated herself from the depths of despair and depression in which she found herself for most of her life.

## MARIANNE

Marianne was born in Tunisia in 1948. The transmission of delayed trauma, triggered through an abusive and disastrous relationship with a despicable man, twelve years her senior, is directly linked to Bernadette's obsession to marry her daughter off to a Sicilo-American in Tunisia. His name was Robert. Marianne enjoys perfect Italian good looks with dark blond hair and blue eyes, like her little sister, Madelaine. This beautiful, kind hearted girl did what most Italian girls of her era were expected to do, honor and obey her

parents. In this case, however, there was bitter opposition from her father who refused to give his blessing to Marianne. He forbade the couple to sleep together under his roof but he had capitulated under the incredible pressure from Bernadette to sanction the marriage.

Bernadette's uninformed advice to her daughter to do the right thing for all of the family provoked a predictable outcome. Franck had unexpectedly given in to his wife as he felt responsible for many of the hardships his family had endured during the war and upon his return. For once, he had been powerless to stop her. Against his better judgment, he allowed Marianne to leave Tunisia at the impressionable age of 17 to "*follow the American dream*" of her mother. Franck had stood firm for many months against this merger because he hated, not only the power that this family had over others but also their supercilious treatment of others; in his opinion they were of questionable repute and lower-class citizens who were not worthy of his beautiful daughter.

The dynamic force and motivation behind Bernadette's desire to see Marianne married to Robert is directly linked to the impacts of war on her family. Bernadette sought to provide unique opportunities for her daughter in the US, a metaphorical salve for the hardships she had borne for so long. This was Marianne's ticket out of Tunisia after the war. Had she known that she would not see her beloved Marianne for a very long time, Bernadette may have desisted in her quest, but she persevered doggedly until she won. As mentioned previously, quite clearly obstinate, Bernadette, and Robert's mother were in collusion to force Robert away from the love of his life, a prostitute! He had attempted suicide when threatened to stop pursuing this relationship. Robert's family name had already been tarnished by his insalubrious practices and questionable behavior. It was in the interest of both women to engineer this situation, ostensibly for the 'good' of both families. The lure of a Sicilian male with an American passport and the *American dream* did not take long to embroil Marianne in their plan as Marianne was the 'beautiful prize' that could finally entice Robert away from the prostitute. Bernadette had refused to relinquish her quest to 'save' her beautiful daughter from a life of mediocrity in Sicily after the physical and psychological ravages that the war had exacted on their family and their community. If this story sounds like the script for a movie, one should remember that sometimes life is stranger than fiction!

Bernadette's insistence on Marianne's union with Robert had catastrophic results on the whole family. Bernadette remained blissfully unaware of the horrors that her daughter endured for many years because she refused to come home for a visit that would have revealed the truth. When her mother discovered finally how Marianne had suffered throughout this ill-fated

marriage, alone to bear the burden of shame and ignominy in the US, she was inconsolable and full of remorse but the damage had been done. This constituted yet one more cross for her to bear until her dying day. The effects of Marianne's parents' individual traumas had been transmitted inter-generationally through insidious ways, in line with new research findings in this area.

The hatred that Franck and his sons felt for this older man had been vindicated, as they discovered by chance, the despicable way he had treated Marianne. This eventually proved the error of Bernadette's ways, to her utter consternation but it was too late to remedy the situation. Or so she thought. She had not counted on Olivier, in perfect Sicilian style to go to his sister's rescue. Robert's autocratic attitude, the physical and emotional abuse to which he subjected his young wife provoked a dramatic reaction at home, as the heroic brother immediately flew to the US to intimidate this man. Olivier had previously had an altercation with Robert in Sicily where the family had all gathered on a holiday, finally discovering the real state of affairs. Olivier had slapped Robert's face in front of everyone for having allowed Marianne's troubling medical condition to deteriorate.

When Olivier arrived in New York, he punched Robert once again, knocking him down, for his contemptible conduct toward his sister. His cavalier attitude towards an illness that developed had progressed unchecked and Marianne had been paralysed on one side of the face. Robert was a diminutive man, considering the power he wielded on the vulnerable. Mindful of providing collateral for Marianne, in what might appear to be a foolish act in light of Sicilian operations in the US, Olivier denounced his brother-in-law to the police, requesting surveillance, should he lift a hand to his sister once again. He then hopped on the plane and went home.

It has been reiterated several times during the course of my research on this family that Bernadette, still suffering from her personal traumas, always had the most honorable of intentions, desirous only of the happiness of her children. That this was sometimes flawed can also be put down to the vagaries of passionate individuals and human nature. The long lasting effects of Bernadette's fixation on that ill-conceived marriage are only now beginning to subside as Marianne has now been divorced for five years, ending the nightmare. She has put the appalling marriage and divorce behind her. When Robert had pushed her down the stairs injuring her, this had been the catalyst for the police to take action and divorce proceedings had begun.

Marianne is now ensconced as a lawyer in New York with only her two daughters, enjoying a loving relationship with a compassionate and

understanding partner who does not live with them. Whilst the vestiges of her ill health and a partial paralysis on her face are still slightly visible, Marianne has retained much of her extraordinary beauty and is apparently starting to overcome the psychological issues that had plagued her. The resilience that defines Olivier's identity is finally manifesting in his sister. Marianne's son, her second born, unfortunately inherited all of his father's genes and has turned out to be an ignoble individual. Her husband passed away from ill health recently but those who knew him swear that had he not died, that his days were numbered. Marianne's son has been banned from seeing his mother and sisters and now spends his days following in his father's footsteps and avoiding prison.

### **INTERGENERATIONAL TRANSMISSION OF PTSD**

It is hard to refute the fact that the nefarious effects of PTSD, still undiagnosed after WWII, in addition to environmental impacts of war may have manifested in insidious ways on this Sicilian family, as it has on so many unsuspecting individuals. Madelaine did not experience the intense suffering of her Mother and her older brothers in their French district of Tunisia. Yet, somehow, intergenerationally, she has potentially inherited some of the symptoms of the PTSD and secondary trauma that troubled her parents' lives. How is it possible then that Olivier's strong resolve has seen him surmount traumatic episodes of bigotry and childhood cruelty that are so prevalent in many multicultural societies? Olivier's childhood is brimming with examples of bullying, discrimination and intolerant attitudes, simply because he was an immigrant from Tunisia with olive-skin and embraced a different culture. This was reason enough to bear the brunt of heavy emotional abuse from the French community. Yet, he proudly declares himself a Sicilian born in Tunisia, speaks fluent French, Italian, Arabic and is conversant in English. Embracing the color of his skin, Olivier defiantly recounts a painful event in his life that clearly affected his mother also, and could have produced comparable results with Madelaine's. For unexplained reasons, he has instead thrived. His pain is palpable through this testimony:

... là-bas on m'appelait "Négru Patata" (la Patate Noire) un vrai petit arabe, mes frères et sœurs étaient pratiquement tous blonds aux yeux bleus. Mais, voilà le vilain petit canard même s'il ne s'est pas transformé, il a réussi à montrer qu'il existe des choses beaucoup plus importantes

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que la couleur de la peau ... (Over there, they used to call me “Négru Patata” (Negro Potato) a real little Arab; my brothers and sisters were practically all blond and blue-eyed. But, there you are, even if the ugly duckling has not been transformed, he has shown the world that there are more important things in life than the color of one’s skin).  
(Olivier, May, 2016)

If Olivier’s family enjoys friendship, love, good health and abundance in their lives, who could ask for more? His three boys and seven grandchildren are all happy so he considers himself a very lucky man. So what of Madelaine’s and Marianne’s circumstances? Their stories are clearly significant in this saga for the effects of war on their lives. The discussion on the intergenerational transmission of PTSD is proving to be very interesting as new research points to the fact that whether the condition is genetic or learned from our environment, the symptoms of PTSD can be ‘transmitted’ to children (O’Brien, 2004). Why it affects some children and not others is the subject of ongoing research. It would seem plausible that one’s physical disposition and genetic make-up from both sets of parents’ chromosomes may create offspring who inherit certain characteristics and conditions whilst others do not.

## CONCLUSION

It was impossible to narrate this poignant and distressing story and remain dry-eyed and impervious to the crosses that Bernadette had to bear. Yet whilst pathos is unmistakable, this sentiment does not define Bernadette, a woman who has had more than her fair share of challenges and regret, similarly to the women who have been portrayed in our book. Bernadette’s experiences have left me with a sense of awe and respect for a woman whose life challenges appeared insurmountable, yet she managed to overcome adversity and remain resilient until the age of 80. The events that have characterized her life left permanent scars on her, through two life-threatening cancers over the years, for which she was subjected to a series of excruciating operations and treatments. Bottling up such misery, she was not spared psychologically either, as is so often the case. Her dying day is memorable. She died with her husband by her side and Olivier holding her hand as he had promised. The eloquence of this last quotation sums up the incredible strength and power to love and to give that Bernadette personified. It seems indeed, that she had paid dearly for her passage on earth. Yet, the story ends on a positive note.

*Les conséquences de ces guerres sur Maman ont été de nous communiquer une force incroyable.* (The legacy of the impacts of these wars on Mother was to communicate to us an incredible strength). (Madelaine, May, 2016)

### **Commentary**

In this touching, sometimes saddening, and mostly enlightening story of a Sicilian French family, the author explores their life, familial dynamics, and their goals and aspirations in times of WWII, and thereafter. While the author describes the ravages of war, from the husband-and-wife separations, to the death of infants due to inadequate medical care, from social ostracism to having to make life and death decisions about their unborn illegitimate child, that family has not only survived, but triumphed. Bernadette, the mother and main character in this story, signifies by her presence, strength, love, and devotion to her family and others, and is thus able to soothe angry voices, calm stressed nerves, and convince her husband to go along with what the children want, in one case - to her detriment as the marriage of Marianne turned out to be a bad and abusive one.

The family survived not only the war and its aftermath, but the dreaded PTSD that soldiers and those who experienced war first hand [citizens, for instance] are so familiar with. And those who read this book, and particularly this chapter will come away from it, as I did, knowing that war is a horrible event, but love and resolve can not only win, but can help us recover, rejuvenate, and demonstrate to ourselves that we can - if we want and know how, to go for it.

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