

John and Cecile  
Biezuner  
Polish Displaced People  
and Holocaust Survivors  
by Daughter Susie Berg  
Serpa Pinto  
1944



On the SS Serpa Pinto: One Family's Story  
by Susie Berg



Dr. John (Jakub Jan) and Cecile (Tzivia) Biezuner were from Ostrolenka, Poland. Her family, the Litwers, ran the dry goods store. His only sibling, a sister, died at about the age of 5. Cecile had two brothers. Her entire family perished in the war.

John and Cecile were married July 17 1932 in Bialystock, Poland. John left Poland for Montpelier, France, where they accepted Jews into the medical school. He came back periodically, and Lillian (later called Lillian) was born to the couple on April 21, 1933. She and Cecile joined John in Paris a year later. They had many friends in Paris. Two of those friends, Phillipe Herzan and M. Alepin, had a small electronics store, and John (often called Jean) worked there with them.

In 1940, John was taken to an internment camp where he worked as a doctor. For a time, anyone who was ill was let out of the camp. John himself had an ulcer. Cecile got documentation of his ulcer and took it to the camp several times to try to have him released. Eventually, her attempts were successful. John was in the last group of sick internees released from the camp.

In these dangerous times for Jews in France, John and Cecile needed to find a way to keep Lillian safe, and they needed to get the whole family out of Europe.

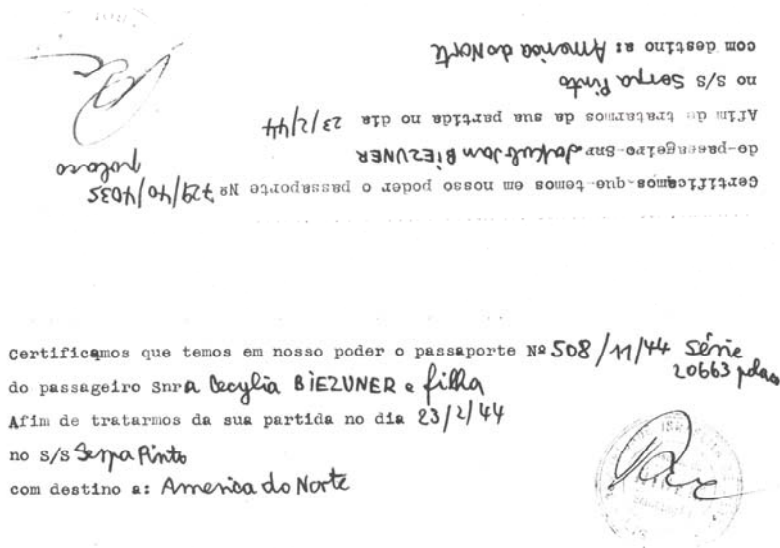
The family lore is somewhat unclear: there are two versions of Lillian's story. Both involve a classmate of John's, Cecile Dixmier. Her family knew of someone whose unmarried, Catholic aunts, Blanche and Céline, lived in the countryside. They had agreed to look after some children, including the Herzan's daughter, Claude.

One version of the story is that they agreed to take Lillian until Cecile and John could find another place for her. Lillian stayed with Cecile Dixmier until someone with a photograph of Lillian came to get her and take her to the two women, or 'the aunts,' as Lillian called them. She lived with the aunts in the French countryside from the age of 7 until about the age of 9, and attended a convent school. At the age of 7, when the other children received first communion, the aunts wouldn't allow her to do the same. Lillian was disappointed by this for the rest of her life.

The other version of the story is that she lived with the aunts in the countryside first, then was sent back to Paris to stay with Cecile Dixmier until the person with the photograph appeared.

Either way, John and Cecile need to leave, though their daughter was still in hiding. The Spanish border was still accessible to foreign nationals, and General Franco was known to be somewhat kind to the

Jews. As a Polish national, John could cross the border. A man named M. Montalambert forged papers for them; John's under the name of John Birch. As it turned out, they never needed the papers. They left Paris by train for Barcelona and crossed the border safely.



Now they needed to get their daughter from France to Spain. The story here is more consistent: the Biezuners and Herzans arranged payment to someone who put Lillian and Claude in a donkey cart, covered them with blankets, and walked them through the Pyrenees.

Lillian and her parents were reunited in Barcelona in 1942. They lived there for a year, in an apartment off las Ramblas. In October 1943, another daughter, Francisca Blanca, was born to the family. She was named in honour of Francisco Franco, and of Blanche, the favourite of the aunts.

The Jewish Immigrant Aid Society and the Joint Distribution Committee helped arrange passage for the Biezuner family on the SS Serpa Pinto, sailing from Lisbon, Portugal, to Philadelphia, Pennsylvania. They lived in Lisbon for a few months, and set sail in March, 1944. Cecile had lots of breast milk and nursed Francisca through the whole journey. John recalled only that they were very, very seasick.

They arrived in Philadelphia on April 6, 1944, the first night of Passover. All passengers were put on board a train for Montreal, and from there the Biezuners continued on to Toronto. They lived there for six weeks, and then moved to Hamilton, where John and Cecile raised their daughters, and lived for the rest of their lives.

RYSOPIS - SIGNALEMENTS		Zona - Femme	
Bok urodzenia / Date de naissance	15-8-1910		
Miejscu urodzenia / Lieu de naissance	Domsza / [illegible]		
Stan / État civil	Zonaty / marié		
Zatrudnienie / Profession	Właściciel / [illegible]		
Wzrost / Taille	170 cm / [illegible]		
Twara / Visage	owalna-oval		
Włosy / Cheveux	czarna / [illegible]		
Oczy / Yeux	brzoza / [illegible]		
Znaki szczególne / Signes particuliers			
DZIECI - ENFANTS			
Imię / Nom	Wiek / Age	Płeć / Sexe	

PHOTOGRAPHIES




Podpis posiadacza / Signature du porteur



John, a highly respected and much-loved family physician in the community, died in 1995; Cecile in 2000.

Lillian remained in Hamilton as well. She married lawyer Frank Vine and had three children, Ira, Miriam (Alan Sobel), and Ronald, and their family grew to include grandchildren, Emma, Laura, and Michael (named for Frank). She was a teacher and an active local politician, and both she and Frank were championship bridge players. Frank died in 1987; Lillian in 1994.

Francisca, now known as Frances or Fran, moved to Toronto where she met her husband, Mel Petersiel. They had three children, Susan (Daniel Berg), Judith (Scott Steele), and Eric (Tami Moscoe), and their family grew to include grandchildren Jacob (named for John), Mara (named for Lillian), Zoë (named for Cecile), Lilah, and Noah. Fran taught French

until her retirement in 1996, and Mel retired from a busy obstetrics and gynaecology practice in 2006.