

The story of his distinguished career began in promising times, and in one of Europe's most exciting capital cities -Paris.

Paris before the war of 1935-45 was a gay and cheerful place, particularly if one paid no attention to French politics. It was equally a city of great promise for the young and ambitious: and to no one did it seem to offer more promise than to a 31 year-old Swiss, trim and well-dressed, who in the year 1924 first arrived there from London in quest of a new career.

Michel Leopold Dreyfus was born April 4, 1893 in the unique Swiss village of Endingen, in the canton of Aargau, about 30 kilometers from Zurich. "Unique" is an apt description for Endingen, because in a land of Catholics and Protestants, its only religious edifice was a synagogue that served a community founded nearly six centuries earlier by refugees from the Spanish Inquisition --Jews who escaped Torquemada and Ximenes as others later, all too few, were to flee from Hitler. Dreyfus' father was a cattle dealer in Endingen, and his uncle, Samuel, dealt in wines and spirits from his capacious cellars in the Enge district of Zurich.

The life of a cattleman didn't appeal to young Michel, but the wine and spirits trade did, and Samuel Dreyfus may well have been his nephew's inspiration to pursue a career in a field that has brought him success, recognition on both sides of the Atlantic and a full and productive life.

ACADEMIC CAREER

After attending the village school at Endingen, Michel went to the Hochschule and the, paradoxically for peace-loving Switzerland, to a boy's military school.

Following that tour of academic duty he entered the Handelsschule, or business college, at Zurich in 1908 for two more years of study. The courses in business were not yet of the same sophistication as those American universities offer future M.B.A. IS, but they were sound, and the instruction in languages was first-class. Knowing both Hochdeutsch, and the Swiss Bundesdeutsch, Michel concentrated on English and Italian.

The years just before the First World war, for a young European starting his career, may well have been, as they have often been described, the last really good years our century was to know. England was at its Victorian peak, powerful, proud and wealthy; and it was there that the young Dreyfus decided to make a beginning in the hotel business, then as now a special preserve of the Swiss.

So in 1910, Dreyfus left Switzerland --but not forever! He returns home at least once a year.

CHANCE MEETING

During a visit last spring he met, to his great surprise, an old classmate he hadn't seen since boyhood. "As we shook hands," he said, "I saw a rather corpulent man with snow white hair, although I recognized the expression on his face, yet he looked old. But then something strange happened! After we had been together and talked about the old days, little by little, his appearance seemed to change and just before we parted, there was before my eyes a slim young cadet --the friend and confidant of my military academy days.

"In taking leave of each other, he turned to me and said: "Michel, I've got to make a confession. When first we met today, I said to myself I certainly recognized Michel, but how he has aged, but the longer we chatted, the more I sensed something of a change in you. Right now, you look like my dear classmate of old.'

"We both agreed with a chuckle that our mutual experience spoke well for the headiness of Alpine air!"

Back now to the years between 1910 and 1914 --a period when Dreyfus was to taste everything the British hotel industry had to offer, first as a pot-walloper and pantry boy in the now-vanished Westminster Palace Hotel. A cheerful smile and superior manners quickly won him an easier job as a waiter in the same place. While he was serving his apprenticeship, one of his cousins, Wilhelm Dreyfus, visited the hotel incognito, and after observing his cousin Michel at work, made himself known to him. Cousin Wilhelm, somewhat of a chemical genius, who was to become the president of the Swiss Society of New York, had already made a small fortune in the United States, and was able to offer his cousin an opportunity to join him in America.

Young Dreyfus turned him down, not because America failed to allure him but because he was just then gaining an insight into the complexities of the hotel business and he wanted to master them.

"Cousin Wilhelm," he said, "since leaving Switzerland I have learned to stand on one foot: I would like to learn to stand on two without any family help."

Cousin Wilhelm got the point.

In a series of provincial hotels the learning process continued. Dreyfus remembers the night when, at the Queen's Hotel in Chester, he and a young Swiss cook, the two of them on night duty, sat in the kitchen singing the "lieder" of the Aargau, drenched in homesickness, while the kettles of fine York hams, which the young cook was tending, boiled and boiled until they contained nothing but a mass of fibers, bones and broth. The embarrassed cook quit that night, but Dreyfus stayed on and ate ham croquettes with other staff members for a fortnight.

Perhaps the traumatic experience of the hams taught him that there was much to learn in hotel kitchens, for one of his next jobs, by his own choice, was that of an apprentice cook in the still famous Hyde Park Hotel, London. He had already acceded to a head waiter's tail-coat and responsibilities at London's Imperial, on Russel's Square, but decided that this phase of the business was not for a young Swiss as stiff-backed and punctilious as he.

KITCHEN DETAIL

The kitchen phase was not a long one, either, for Dreyfus was now heading for management responsibilities. His training ground: the British provinces and Ireland. In May 1920, he left a managership of the Midland Hotel, Birmingham, carrying with him a gold watch engraved with an expression of esteem from the entire staff of the hotel. It is a good watch, too, for Dreyfus wears it proudly still.

Next stop was at one of the world's most famous hostelries, London's Savoy Hotel, the rambling palace on the Strand and the Embankment, memorable for Gilbert and Sullivan, and for Winston Churchill, whose table in the Savoy Grill was later to be permanently reserved in war, as it had been in those peacetime years when "Winnie" was in loyal opposition.

In seven years at the Savoy, Michel Dreyfus rose from a position in the reception office to assistant manager, no lowly situation in the hierarchy of the Bonifaces.

PARIS BOUND

One day Dreyfus was chatting with the legendary Tom Jackson, managing director of a Scotch distillery who was bemoaning the fact that he had soon to go to Paris to find a new Continental representative for his very popular brand of whisky. His sympathetic listener heard him out, then abruptly asked, "Would you consider me for the place?" Jackson stared at him and just as abruptly said, "Good day, Mr. Dreyfus~"

Next morning, however, Jackson was back with an offer, and after giving notice to the Savoy, the hotel man began his metamorphosis into the super-salesman of beverages today widely known on two continents. The year: 1924.

In Paris, "Mike" Dreyfus became a member of the international sporting set, a golfer and a notable wing shot. Every few days the columnist "Sparrow" Robertson of the Paris Herald had an item about "my old pal, Mike," and his Scotch sales vaulted.

Those were fine years in France before World War II, and for Dreyfus things got even better. In 1927 he met a tall, charming American girl, Fritzi Weinberg, who was visiting friends in Paris, and in December of that year they were married. Two years later their daughter, Jeanie, was born --(today she is Mrs. Robert Arnel, wife of a stockbroker in New York) --and at an early age became a pupil at the Lycee Moliere.

Business prospered, too. Not only did its Scotch sales grow, but the Dreyfus agency became increasingly prominent in trade circles with the addition of a notable list of still wines and champagne. As the firm progressed, Dreyfus considered taking on a partner and expanding. In 1934 to be exact. The move came about in a curious way.

Dreyfus did his banking with the National Provincial Bank of Paris, located on Boulevard de Capucine. In the course of his visits, he met a young bank officer named Cyril Francis Ashby. They became close friends. One day, as Dreyfus was transacting business at the bank, his friend approached him. "Michael," he began (Mr. Ashby always employs the English version of Michel's name). "Michael, I would like to go into the wine business." A simple statement and out of it a partnership grew.

"A splendid idea," Dreyfus replied. "Meet me in my office tomorrow morning."

Ashby did and began on that day an extensive two-month apprenticeship in the wine trade.

"There wasn't a place I didn't go that he didn't accompany me," Dreyfus says. "I saw to that. II And when they both felt that he could operate on his own, Cyril Francis Ashby, who preferred to be called "Tim," crossed the channel and opened the London office of Dreyfus-Ashby & Co., Ltd.

The days passed quickly, all too quickly. There were great times, exciting times and, toward the close of the 1930's sad times sad times reflected day after day in newspaper headlines around the world.

Hitler was on the move!

Dreyfus was forced to close his Paris office and shortly thereafter his London operation. (Ashby, a Sandhurst graduate, returned to the Army.)

For Dreyfus, his American wife and their young child, there was only one haven: America.

Getting there could have been difficult, but wasn't, even though thousands of people, all with the same desire, were queuing up in seemingly endless lines at the American Embassy seeking entry visas.

Enterprising Fritzi had squared away that detail as early as 1936. She asked the right question of the right man at the right time -- during lunch!

DIPLOMATIC ENCOUNTER

It seems that Fritzi and Robert Murphy, diplomatic trouble-shooter for seven presidents, were guests at a luncheon hosted by a mutual friend. No sooner were they introduced to one another when Fritzi popped the question --and the Ambassador came up with the answer couched in highly diplomatic terms.

"You have no problem whatsoever, Mrs. Dreyfus. Your husband is entitled to a non-quota visa. I compliment his good taste in selecting you for his wife and I compliment his foresight in marrying an American citizen."

In the fall of 1939, the Dreyfus family boarded the S. S. President Harding, bound for the United States, and established a new home --and a new life --in Scarsdale, New York.

What the new life had in store for him several years later, Dreyfus could never have anticipated.

Early in 1942 a story in the local newspaper caught his eye. It reported that the draft was draining the Scarsdale police force of its personnel. Recruitment had dropped sharply.

Dreyfus, then 48 and too old for military service, decided he would do his part by joining the local auxiliary police. Which he did.

Almost overnight --or so it seemed to him --a debonair Parisian wine merchant became a spit-and-polish cop on the beat, equipped with billystick, a Colt .45, badge "16" (he still carries that) and a better-than-average knowledge of ju jitsu.

He enjoys telling of the time he was directing traffic on the Boston Post Road when he spotted a car shuttling back and forth, its driver, a young woman, obviously lost and confused.

Finally, she pulled up to him and asked for directions in a pronounced French accent.

"Madame, c'est un plaisir," Dreyfus responded, giving her detailed instructions in impeccable French.

Somewhat startled, she responded: "Oh, monsieur. Vous etes Francais."

"Non, madame. Je suis Americain," he said, snapping a quick salute.

There's a sequel.

Dreyfus attended a cocktail party sometime later at the home of the French Consul General in New York and he fell into conversation with a French perfume importer. As they chatted, the Frenchman mentioned his wife and a rather unusual experience she had recently with "of all things, a French-speaking American policeman."

The Swiss ex-patriate listened quietly up until his new acquaintance reached the punch line, which he repeated in chorus with him. The Frenchman did a quick turn and almost shouted across the room:

"Margo! Viens ici. Voila le policier qui tá renseigné on francais il v a quelques années a Scarsdale."

Dreyfus remained on the Scarsdale police force for four years, resigning in 1945 to devote full-time to his career in the wine and spirits trade.

JOB HUNTING

Herein lies another tale for which we turn the clock back to 1939, the year of Dreyfus' arrival in the U. S.

It didn't take long for his reputation as a wine expert and merchant to reach the ears of the legendary Lewis S. Rosenstiel, who six years earlier founded what today is the \$600,000,000 liquor empire of Schenley Industries, Inc.

Rosenstiel, considered by his peers a financial and marketing genius, also is a man of taste --and men of taste appeal to him which may explain Dreyfus' "summons" to the liquor magnate's New York City offices.

"The interview hardly began before it was over," says Dreyfus, "and when the discussion ended I left the building with the title of 'hotel and club representative.'"

His territory: big, bustling metropolitan New York.

Dreyfus began calling on the trade, dressed as any European wine salesman would, resplendent in homburg and spats. But when he learned that he was expected to call on his customers through the "rear entrance," he quickly abandoned his formal attire for more conventional American styles.

It didn't take him long to click at Schenley; one promotion followed another, and by 1942 he was named vice president and managing director of Schenley Import Co.

Life for Michel Dreyfus was not all business then, anymore than it is now, but he does possess the happy and rather unusual faculty of being able to mix business with pleasure intelligently and gracefully.

His widely publicized reputation as a host and a gourmet (he is quoted more often in the food columns of The New York Times than some business leaders are in trade journals) always serves to enhance his company's name and frequently its sales.

That he is an authority on food and wine there can be no doubt.

KIND WORDS

"When the gentleman makes a statement about wine and food people listen with a serious ear," famed expert Craig Claiborne wrote of Mr. Dreyfus in the New York Times.

"Among Manhattan's epicures, Michel Dreyfus, a mild-mannered, finely tailored man, has an impressive elegance⁷ impressive because it is without precocity or pretense," Mr. Claiborne continued.

His personal charm as well as his incontestable knowledge and sophisticated palate perhaps help to account for Michel Dreyfus' many honors. He is now serving his third term as the popular president of the Paris American Club. Twice he has been decorated by the French government, having been awarded the Medaille d'Honneur du Comite National des Vins de France, and having been made an Officer de l'Ordre du Merite Agricole.

Other organizations which list him among their active members include the National Association of Alcoholic Beverage Importers, the Academy of the Wines of France, the Escoffier Society the Comite de la Bonne Bouche, La Chaine des Rotisseurs, and the Confrerie du Chevalier du Tastevins in which he serves as Grand Officer and Delegee General d'Amerique as well as Chairman of the Sous-Commanderie de New York.

What is not widely known is Dreyfus' philanthropic work. Take his interest in the International Geneva Association Square Club. He founded it back in 1951 because of his devotion to the ideals of Masonry, which he defined in the preamble he wrote for the Square Club's constitution: "to have Faith in the Supreme Architect of the Universe, Hope of immortality and Charity to all mankind... "

It was the latter idea -- "Charity to all mankind" that sparked Dreyfus to urge the club to underwrite a program of "free vacations in the country for poor and underprivileged children."

"Everyone agreed immediately that it was a grand idea," he explains, "all it took was money, something the club seemed to lack in the early days. Our first effort could be complimented only for its good intention: one youngster on a brief holiday."

But the idea grew --and so did the money behind it. This summer more than 300 children will benefit from a program initiated 19 years ago by a man who believes that charity has broader meaning than occasional contributions to worthy causes. "It means giving others the same 'square deal' you want for yourself."

When he was a young man in England, Dreyfus often heard the term "on the square" and although he sensed its meaning, he asked a friend one day to explain it.

"Well," the friend replied, "it is an expression often used by members of the Masonic Order to stress their emphasis on honest dealings with one another."

Dreyfus bought the concept and the Order. He joined a British Lodge in Paris (Britanic No.9) and by 1938 he was its Master.

But now the clock moves forward again to 1945 when Michel Dreyfus leaves Schenley's employ to start his own American based importing company, known --to the surprise of no one --as Dreyfus Ashby & Co., Inc. What he had hoped for actually were three bases of operation: New York, London and Paris. He succeeded with the first two (Ashby, back from the war, and now a retired Colonel, opened the London firm of Dreyfus Ashby & Co., Ltd.) A Paris office, regretfully, remained a dream.

SCHENLEY ACQUISITION

Over the years, Dreyfus' firm grew steadily in sales and reputation and in 1957 the company was acquired by Schenley Industries, Inc. Today Dreyfus Ashby represents a host of world-famous labels imported from France, Portugal, Holland, Great Britain and his own beloved Switzerland.

Among Dreyfus-Ashby's world-famous labels are Mateus Rosé, Krug champagne, Chateau Latour and Rose, Lillet aperitif, Chateau Clos Fourtet Bordeaux wines, Joseph Drouhin and J. Faiveley Burgundies, LaDoucette "Chateau du Nozet," a product of Loire region, the Delas Freres Rhone wines, the F. E. Hugel et Fils label of Alsace, and a dozen excellent products from Switzerland, including Neuchâtel Clottu and Robert Gilliard's Dole du Mont.

Of Swiss wines, he had this to say at a tasting some time ago in Boston:

"The Swiss have many claims to fame. They are experts in the culinary arts and have contributed much to the development of the food industry around the world. Yet it seems strange to me that up until a few years ago, one of the great products of that charming country was the least known --wine! It was especially strange to me because of my firm belief in the marriage of wine and food. A country that is renowned for its fine food should also be appreciated for its fine wines.

"This takes promotion.

"I am happy to say that I have initiated action along these lines. I have done so out of love for Switzerland as well as for my own industry. Most of my business life has been devoted to the promotion of the great wines of Europe, but it is my strong desire --and my full intention --to climax my career by establishing the great Swiss wines in the United States."

No one in the trade questions that Dreyfus has done just that. His associates contend that once he decides on a course of action nothing dare stand in his way --even a doctor's order.

They tell this story:

Dreyfus, whose health is the envy of men half his age, came down with a raging fever on the eve of a dinner at which he was to be knighted by France's Ambassador, Charles Lucet. Off to the doctor he stomped. "Give me anything, just see that I get to that dinner," he demanded. The doctor was anything but understanding.

"Get home to bed!"

But Dreyfus prevailed, and the Doctor pumped him full of life-sustaining serums, all of which gave him a peaceful and a heavy head on the following day.

But things proceeded nicely at the dinner. Toasts were offered, the meal served~ the wines consumed; speeches delivered and then came Dreyfus' big moment!

Clad in the robes of the Chevalier du Tastevin, he stood proudly in front of the Ambassador as the latter, intoned the proper rituals and began to pin the medal to his chest.

It was all too much for Dreyfus. He passed out. Two days later the medal was presented to him in less dramatic fashion.

Every now and then Dreyfus claims he will slow down a bit. "

"When?" his friends inquire.

"Next year!" is the proverbial reply.

No one will wager that he does, even as a retiree!