

## A Christian Woman's Gift of Life

# Jewish Students Learn About 'Tante Claire'

By Betty M. Solodar

"I want the world to know about 'Tante Claire,' who cared for us, fed us, loved us during those terrible days, and who gave us the most precious gift, the gift of life."

With these words, Jacqueline Eissenstat, 49, of Shalimar Drive, Brighton, began her talk to a group of fifth-graders from Temple Beth El's Religious School recently. Her presentation, titled, "How A Christian Woman Saved My Life," was held at the Holocaust Resource Center of the Bureau of Jewish Education.

Born Jacqueline Helis in Paris, Eissenstat recounted the moving story of how in 1942, at the age of 6½, she and her 18-month-old sister were sent by their parents to seek shelter in the little village of Iteuil. The family had fled to the village for short periods after the fall of France, when the father, a clothing manufacturer in Paris, foresaw the approaching danger to Jews in Paris.

"WHEN MY SISTER and I reached the village, the farmers, all of whom knew and liked my father, held a meeting to see who could take us in. It was a very dangerous thing to do, but one woman, a widow with two children of her own, stepped forward and volunteered. She was Madame Claire Chauveau, whom we called 'Tante Claire' for the next two-and-half years.

"Money was not abundant, but there was enough to eat. Tante Claire was modest, kind, genteel, and very, very brave. She risked her life and that of her family by taking us in. When I asked her years later why she had offered us shelter, she replied that she couldn't just leave us in the street. She treated us as if we were her own and I and my sister love her, treasure her, and will never forget her."

Eissenstat's sister is Florence Helis of Greystone Lane, Brighton.

Tante Claire was not the only righteous gentile in Iteuil: the entire village maintained a conspiracy of silence about the little Jews in their midst. When Jacqueline began school, the villagers cautioned the principal not to reveal her true identity if the German soldiers came to inquire, as they regularly did, about any Jewish children in the school. Jacqueline had, of course, assumed a new, Christian identity.

Some months later, unbeknownst to the children, their parents made their way to the village and were hidden in an old farmhouse. The parents lived in a single room, the door to which was hidden by an armoire, or clothing cabinet. The children were unaware until the war ended that their parents had been living nearby for two years.

"WHEN THE OWNERS of the farm began to ask my parents for more food money, money that my parents didn't have, once again Tante Claire came to the rescue," said Eissenstat.

"Tante Claire used to take us to church every Sunday, mainly to establish our Christian identities in front of the German occupying forces. Now she began to bring a covered basket with her to church and on the way home we would stop at the old farm. While she left us outside to look at the ducks or the old mill on the grounds, she went inside to leave the basket. We never knew 'til after the war that she was delivering a freshly killed chicken for my parents every Sunday. We also never knew that my parents were watching us through the window each time."

Eissenstat promised herself that the world would know about Tante Claire, and so in 1974 she wrote to a French newspaper. The result was that France awarded Tante Claire the Medal of Honor in 1975. In 1976 Israel recognized Tante Claire as a "righteous gentile," and a tree was planted in her honor. Tante Claire, though ailing, is still alive at 80, and Eissenstat is still in touch with her.

After her talk to the fifth-graders, Eissenstat stated that there were other righteous gentiles who helped the family. For instance, there was the neighbor in the hotel in the south of France, one of the many places the family fled to in an effort to keep a step ahead of the German soldiers. It was from this hotel that the children were sent to the little



HAPPY TO BE ALIVE — Jacqueline Eissenstat holds a handkerchief with the tiny medal she wore as a child pinned to it. The star in the foreground is similar to the one she wore which proclaimed she was a Jew.

village, accompanied on the long train ride by the good neighbor woman who passed them off as her own.

"BEFORE WE LEFT, my father gave us new names and told us we were not Jewish any more. I understood everything, so much so that when we were walking to the train station, I suddenly realized something: I was still wearing a little gold medal around my neck with the Hebrew word 'Shaddai' (God). I ran back to my father and gave it to him, and he began to cry." Eissenstat still has the tiny medal that

