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12/06/2011 - The Navratil enfants: orphans of the Titanic

Michel Navratil and his two sons, Michel and Edmond, marked the history of the Titanic..... a father who took his children away from their mother in the hope of reuniting his family in America. When the ship went down, the father, knowing that death was inevitable, put his 2 children into a life raft. Their photograph would be seen around the world and they were to become known as *'the orphans of the Titanic'*.

Michel Navratil was born in Slovakia on August 13th 1880. He first lived in Hungary then moved to Nice in 1902 and opened a tailor's shop.

In London on May 26th 1907, he married a lady of Italian origin, Marcelle Carette (or Marceline Marianne Caretto, originally from Buenos Aires where she was born on January 31st 1890). They were to have two boys, both born in Nice: Michel (nicknamed Lolo), born on June 12th 1908 and Edmond (known as Momo), born on March 5th 1910.



Michel and Edmond

The couple was in the process of divorce in 1912 and custody of the children was awarded to their mother. During Easter weekend of 1912 while the Michel, aged three and Edmond, aged two were staying with their father, he decided to take them away to America. Before leaving, Michel Navratil had asked his employer and friend Hoffman to lend him his passport. In order to avoid checks by the police in Cherbourg, they took the train in the direction of Southampton via Calais to board the *Titanic* under the name of Hoffman on April 10th 1912.

On board the *Titanic*, Michel 'Hoffman' mixed with the other passengers as little as possible, carefully watching over his two children. Only once would he leave them to take part in a card game, confiding them to Berta Lehmann, a Swiss lady who only understood German and French.

MICHEL JUNIOR DESCRIBED THE EVENTS ON THE NIGHT THE SHIP SANK IN AN INTERVIEW :

"My father came into our cabin while we were asleep. He got me dressed in warm clothes and took me in his arms. A man that I didn't know did the same with my

brother. When I think back to it now, I get very emotional. He knew that we were going to die".

The boys were taken up to the boarding deck and put into life craft D, the last to be lowered into the sea. Michel Jr remembers the last message his father gave him just before lowering him into the boat: "*My children, when you are reunited with your mother, tell her I still love her deeply. Tell her that I'm counting on her to come with you so that we can live happily together in peace and freedom in the New World*".

"I don't remember having been scared, I was even happy to have been getting into the life craft! We found ourselves sat next to an American banker's daughter who was trying to save her dog ? and nobody said anything. People from very different walks of life were brought together in that boat and I realized only later that if we hadn't have been in second class, we would have been dead. Those who survived often turned out to be deceiving and aggressive; those who were honest didn't stand a chance"

When the life craft approached the *Carpathia*, Michel and Edmond were pulled up onto the ship separately and found themselves in the temporary care of a 1st class passenger, Margaret Hays and another second class passenger (thought to be Edwina Troutt). But according to Juliette Laroche ([French passengers boarding in Cherbourg](#)), it was actually Madeleine Astor ([the 281 passengers](#)) who took the Navratil boys to her cabin. Not speaking their language, she naturally called upon a young French mother in order to communicate with the children. It was therefore thanks to Antonine Mallet and Juliette Laroche that the two young boys were reunited and mothered once again.

The boys' father, Michel Navratil, did not survive the disaster; his body was found with a loaded revolver in one of his pockets. He was buried on May 15th 1912 in the Baron Hirsh Jewish cemetery in Halifax, Nova Scotia.



orphans of the Titanic

The children were taken in by Margaret Hays once they arrived in New York. They would also stay in Boston with Eleanor Widener's niece Mrs Tyler. The two women noticed the boys' olive skin and thought they heard a slightly southern French accent in the way they spoke. They called on the Consular General for France, Mr Lancel and confirmed the boys' Mediterranean origin. Two other Titanic escapees, Lawrence Beesley and Julian Pedro, confirmed that Lolo and Momo were Mr Hoffman's children. The moving story of these two little boys was relayed around the world by the international press.

On Easter Monday in Nice, their mother Marcelle Navratil found out that her two sons had disappeared but didn't imagine for a moment that they had boarded a transatlantic liner with their father. It was only on reading a newspaper article containing a photo of the boys (the article was entitled "The orphans of the Abyss") that she understood they were actually in New York. She then boarded the Oceanic and was reunited with her children at Margaret Hays' before bringing them back to France.



Michel and Edmond with their mother

Michel 'Lolo' Navratil was a brilliant student and went on to become a professor in philosophy at Montpellier University. He returned to America for the first time in 1987, on the 75th anniversary of the disaster. In 1996 at the age of 88, went to see his father's tomb in Halifax for the first time. Michel Junior loved saying, "I only lived up to four years old. Since then, I've been a floater, someone grabbing at extra time and I've let myself go on this ocean". He died on January 30th 2001 at the age of 92.

His brother Edmond became an architect and businessman in Lourdes. Involved in activities for the Resistance in the Second World War, he was caught and made a prisoner of war. He managed to escape but remained physically marked by the ordeal. He died prematurely in 1953 at the age of 43.

