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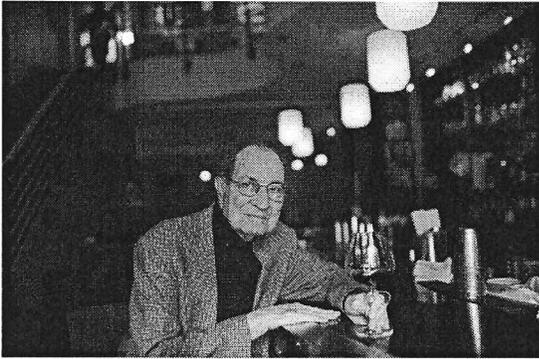
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A New Yorker Shares Stories From His 93 Years of Living

Blue Nun master marketer Peter Sichel has a new memoir titled 'The Secrets of My Life: Vintner, Prisoner, Soldier, Spy'



Peter Sichel, at Morrell Wine Bar & Cafe in Midtown Manhattan. The New Yorker has a new memoir. PHOTO: KEVIN HAGEN FOR THE WALL STREET JOURNAL



By LETTIE TEAGUE

Jan. 26, 2016 6:56 p.m. ET

Vintner. Prisoner. Soldier. Spy.

It sounds like the title of a John le Carré novel, but it is the true story of the life of Peter Sichel. The 93-year-old New Yorker has been each of these things in his lifetime.

The four words are also the subtitle of Mr. Sichel's new memoir, "The Secrets of My Life."

At lunch late last week, I admitted to Mr. Sichel that I preferred the subtitle to the title. Mr. Sichel laughed. "I can always change the title," he replied. How was that possible? I'd never heard of an author who was able to alter the title of a just-published book.

It wasn't a problem because the book was self-published, explained Mr. Sichel. He had sought a publisher but to no avail. Apparently, it was a problem that his life was "three books in one" he said, adding that "publishers didn't know how to market it."

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Was it a story about a prisoner of war and refugee from Nazi Germany—or a story about a senior official in the CIA? Or was it a wine-focused memoir of the man who masterminded the Blue Nun brand?

‘Wine like Blue Nun are like comets—they go up and they come down.’

—Peter Sichel, master marketer of the German wine with a nun on the label

In any
case,
the

publishers all told him, the book had to sell at least 20,000 copies to be a success.

The master marketer decided to tackle the job himself. He spent three years, on and off, writing his story. He couldn't wait for publishers to change their minds—not at his age, he said with a laugh.

If Mr. Sichel could take German wine with a nun on the label and turn it into a global phenomenon, then selling some books sounded like a bit of cakewalk to me. Even if there wasn't going to be an author tour. “Not at my age,” he said.

And yet even at 93, Mr. Sichel's powers of recollection are clearly prodigious. Each section of the memoir is full of details. Many friends and colleagues are recollected—some famous such as former CIA chief William Casey and Ernest Gallo and many much less so.

Mr. Sichel seems to have met just about everyone of consequence and liked just about everyone he encountered. He is relentlessly stylish as well. When making his escape from the Nazis, on his way to freedom in Portugal, he bribed a Spanish official with a little gold pillbox and a Montblanc pen.

Mr. Sichel had a great advantage with an extensive family network all over the world. His family wine business was founded in 1857 in Germany and there were family wine businesses in New York, London and Bordeaux. In fact, upon Mr. Sichel's return to New York in the 1960s, after he quit the CIA, he took over the family's import business.

Why did Mr. Sichel leave the CIA? I asked. “I wanted to “work in the real world,” he replied. As a CIA official, much of his life was necessarily concealed. The wine business in New York was exciting albeit corrupt. Back then, everyone seemed to be on the take including—as it turned out—some of Mr. Sichel's business partners.

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But Mr. Sichel played clean and paid attention to the marketing side of the business, especially Blue Nun, which was a faltering brand when Mr. Sichel joined the company. It was Mr. Sichel's idea to market Blue Nun as “the wine that would go with everything.” In the 1970s and '80s, it was nothing short of a cultural phenomenon in no small part to the radio ad campaign by husband-and-wife team Stiller and Meara. “The radio ads made it,” said Mr. Sichel.

At its peak in the '80s, Blue Nun was selling more than 2 million cases a year; by the time Mr. Sichel sold it some 20 years ago, “it was dying a slow death,” he said. But Mr. Sichel was philosophic about its decline. “Wine like Blue Nun are like comets—they go up and they come down,” he said. (On this particular comet, he made a great deal of money.)

If Mr. Sichel was launching a brand today, where would he look for the wine? I asked. “Australia,” he replied. “They are the best people on the agriculture side and they produce a large amount of grapes.” But Australians did have their shortcomings, he added. “They're good winemakers but not great marketers,” observed Mr. Sichel.

Perhaps the Australians could benefit from his help, thereby adding one more chapter to Mr. Sichel's book.