

# MON FRANCAIS FANTASTIQUE COUSIN

BY JACK HAGEL

An only child, raised until age 10 by my mother and a more or less absentee father, and then, from age 12, by her and a stepfather, I had very little interest or knowledge of my paternal lineage. I was dimly aware of two much older half-sisters—my father's daughters from his first marriage—but after my parents' divorce, we didn't stay in touch. Looking for meaning at 21, I dedicated myself to a religious cult and, regretfully, distanced myself from my dear mother for a time.

Once I abandoned the impractical idea of saving the world, I returned to it, out of step and impoverished, but now married and with two lovely children. I awoke from my crusading idealism with a curiosity about my place in the world and from whence I came. I reconnected with my mother, Hedy. Mother filled me in on her roots and became an integral part of our growing family. However, in '97 she passed away.

I reached out to my older half-sisters, who were receptive and generous. From them I learned about my father, as both the younger man who raised them and as an elderly man, as he had lived near them following my parents' divorce. I learned that my father, Henry Meltzer, had died in '91. I only saw him once in the 27 years following the divorce. Although he was a ne'er do well, I had my family, my sisters, and my passionate curiosity. That's the background that led me to locate my French cousins.

My wife, Haruyo, and I had two children, who left the nest in the Oughts. We had established a stable business, still operating today. In recent years, we finally had the luxury of sufficient time to delve into genealogy. With the help from my son's mother-in-law, I was introduced to some of the methodology of family research. My first pursuit was my paternal lineage. What we knew of my father, Henry, was that he emigrated from Kovel, a shtetl in central Ukraine, as a young man, married and had two daughters, divorced, re-married my mother, had me, and stepped out of our lives when I was ten. Before she died, Mom told me that my father had two brothers, Jacob and Lucien, for whom I was named.

From research, we learned that Henry was born in 1895 and immigrated in 1913. His marriage to my mother, Hedy, was in 1953 when he was 57. She was a naïve and fresh-faced immigrant from Vienna, just 22-years-old. She didn't realize their age difference until they had to sign the marriage certificate. Today when I tell people that my father was born in the 19th century, or that my sister is in her '90s, they find it hard to believe.

We learned that both of his brothers had also immigrated to the US. They died in the 1940s. While researching the older brother, we came upon a letter written in 1922, addressed to someone who appeared to be a sister living overseas. Theretofore, neither I nor my half-sisters had any idea that our father might have had a sister. Henry had never mentioned her.

In time, I found other clues to the likely existence of this aunt who lived in Ukraine. The first reference to her was in my mother's baby book of my first months and years. Then I found a reference to a relative in France, Andre—my father's cousin—whom we visited once when I was three; supposedly he'd been a decorated



HEDY AND HENRY WEDDING DAY

Resistance fighter. My quest led me to JewishGen's website, where one can search by surname within a geographical location, even small townships and shtetls.

There I found a match with a Frenchman, to whom I sent an email and then waited.

A few days later, this Frenchman, Serge Osville, responded, but with hesitance and wariness. After establishing our relative bona-fides, we were able to confirm that we are indeed cousins. We opened-up to each other; Serge in his ebullient, vivacious, and charming way.

Here is the connection. My father, Henry, did indeed have an older sister, Bertha, or Batya, who remained in the old country to care for their parents. She had married a Russian, Saviel, or Saul, Ossipov, around 1902, and they had four children. By the 1930s, all the children had migrated to France. To date, we do not know what became of Batya and Saul, nor of the parents Batya remained behind to care for.

Those days were tumultuous times (WWI and the Russian Revolution) and there are stories yet to be discovered.



ANDRE (WONYA) OSSIPOV



SIMON OSVILLE W MADILINE

Of the four Ossipovs, now Osvilles, only two survived WWII: Andre and his brother, Simon. Simon married before the war and then became a POW in Germany for four years. A few years after his release, Serge (the Frenchman), and his sister, Elizabeth, were born in Paris. I located them in 2020, at the height of the pandemic. They are a few years older than I am, but apparently in fine fettle. They're writing a book about their parents, chiefly amassed from letters from their parents.

Serge has been a bit of a nomad. He had a career as a banker in numerous African countries, funding infrastructural projects and agricultural enterprises. He has a home outside Paris and a summer place in Luxemburg. He has a wonderful wife and a daughter who has a family near Montreal. Our entire family is intrigued and delighted by this discovery of a large branch of the family. We look forward to the times ahead of sagas spun under the stars as we unravel the mysteries of ancestors in other places and times.

Meanwhile, with perspicacity and the genealogical tools we now have, we hope to find more branches, stems and leaves.



SERGE AND BRIGITTE