

The Life Story of My Parents

Margaret and Jean Bigot's life story can be summed up in four words. These words colored their youth. These words illuminated and guided their adult lives until the end of their days. These four words are roots, garden, freedom, and faith.

My mother Margaret Shuley was born on March 6th, 1928, in Vancouver, a big city on the West Coast of Canada, in the province called British Columbia, twice as big as France. In a city of the New World.

My father Jean Bigot was born on December 20th, 1931, in a neighborhood on the edge of le Mans, neither a town, nor the countryside, where they lived just like a village—a village of the Old World.

My mother's roots were closely linked to the upheavals of European history. Her father had fled Ireland at the beginning of the 20th century. At the time, many Irish parents chose to send their children halfway around the world with the hope that they would find a better life there. It was a one-way ticket with no return. One of my grandfather's brothers went to Australia, another to New Zealand, and he went to Canada. He was 17 years old, and he never again walked on the ground on which he was born.

The mother's mother was Scottish. She was 14 years old when her parents, escaping poverty also decided to emigrate to Canada. My mother's parents, both uprooted, met and got married in Vancouver. My father's roots were from la Sarthe. His ancestors had all lived in the little corner of France where he was born.

My mother and her brother were raised in a Canadian province where immense lakes, mountains, tumultuous torrents, and glaciers shape wild and grandiose breathtakingly beautiful landscapes. There all the neighbors came from elsewhere. All were immigrants united by a taste for effort, turned towards a common goal, and built a new country while remaining viscerally attached to their European roots.

My father, an only son, was born in a garden and his roots were anchored in the Sarthe soil. His parents were market gardeners, they grew beans, melons, strawberries... Like all his ancestors, my father's childhood was spent in the rhythm of seasonal work and solidarity between neighbors. To the rhythm of the traditional evenings which brought friends and neighbors together in winter around a fire, during which they knitted, and played cards. To the rhythm of the steps of his parents' horses, whose names he has never forgotten, Mouton, Coquette, and Carbone.

To the rhythm of the cries of vendors and craftsmen who crisscrossed the roads to offer their services, the last survivors of small trades, the grinder who sharpened scissors and knives, the glazier who repaired windows, the chimney sweep who cleaned chimneys and the cry of the milkmaid. The milkmaid was his mother.

Nevertheless, his parents were modern compared to their neighbors: in 1931, they had acquired the first car in the neighborhood to facilitate the transport of vegetables and milk.

My mother was educated in a school in Vancouver run by French nuns. This is where her passion for the language of Molière was born. Later, she studied French literature and English literature, delved even deeper into the Old-World roots, and became a French teacher.

My mother was born into a very religious family. At the age of 10, she abandoned the Protestant religion and converted to the Catholic religion at the same time as her mother and her brother. All her life, her faith was unshakable.

My father loved school and was a very good student. Passionate about geography, thanks to the maps that covered the walls of the classroom, he traveled while remaining seated. He was already dreaming of elsewhere; he was already dreaming of discovering the world. However, his path seemed set, he would follow in his parents' footsteps and one day would grow fruits and vegetables in his childhood garden. It was without counting on the persuasive skills of a teacher who, having noticed his potential, came to see his parents, and convinced them that my father should continue beyond the age at which most children stopped at that time. At the time of choice, he decided to become a horticultural engineer, a job that would allow him to stay close to the earth while standing out from his parents: he would grow flowers and not fruits and vegetables. He studied at the National School of Horticulture in Versailles. All his life, my father revered and thanked this teacher, he said he owed him everything.

Throughout his life, he kept a faith pegged to the body.

My mother was born on the other side of the world and her only "glimpse" of the war was those young Canadian men older than her, whom she taught, who had fought to free France and who after their return home continued their studies interrupted by the war. They recovered the freedom to learn.

For my father, of course, the story was different. His childhood was marked by the European wars. First, there was the sadness of losing his two grandfathers in the aftermath of the First World War. Then his father was sent to the front during the Second. He was a war refugee, when in 1944, following repeated bloody bombings, the city decided to close all schools and evacuate children to the countryside. It is because of these moments that my father led all his fights as a freedom-loving man, for himself and for others. Freedom

to think, freedom to believe, freedom to move, freedom to learn, freedom to make one's own life choices.

This is when my parents' paths came closer. In 1954-1955, winner of a competition launched by the United States Department of Agriculture, my father did an internship at UCLA, the University of Los Angeles, California to learn modern floriculture techniques. By a strange coincidence, almost at the same time, my mother was working as a French teacher at the University of Berkeley, also in California.

By a strange coincidence, my father was returning to Europe at the end of his internship when my mother, attracted by her roots, was leaving Canada to spend a year in Europe, to work as an English teacher at the Berlitz language school. And this is the meeting! And it was love at first sight between this young scientist with rural roots but resolutely turned towards the future and the world, and this young, intellectual, very cultured woman from the New World. At the time, the crossing was done in five days by steamboat. These five days were enough to link their lives forever. My mother did not return to Canada, she decided to stay in France and married my father a year later.

After a few years in Paris where my two brothers, Christophe and Jean-Philippe, were born, my parents settled permanently in Le Mans, 200m from my father's childhood home. They called the house they built The Crossroads. A name that evoked their meeting but also all the enriching encounters they planned to make throughout their life as a couple. This is where my sister Patricia and I were born.

In 1958, my father started a horticultural business. He mainly produced roses which he sold to florists in Le Mans. My mother taught for a while and then she stopped.

In 1978, my father founded the group of producers Ouest-Fleurs, the sale then concerned all the west of France.

The growing pressure from third countries and the collapse of sales margins in France pushed my brother Jean-Philippe and my father to decide to try the adventure of creating a rose production company in Africa, to save the "French historical company". Their choice fell on Kenya which, due to its equatorial location, its mountainous relief, and its abundant water reserves, is conducive to the cultivation of roses. The climate of Kenya in the Great Rift Valley is the spring of France all year round. The farm was born on January 1, 2002. Today it is a flourishing business.

My parents' commitments were numerous.

Professional commitments of my father on departmental, regional, and national levels.

Actions with the National School of Horticulture of Versailles where he studied. For the past two years, he has fought to save the Vegetable Garden of King Louis XIV which, because of political choices, is no longer maintained according to the rules and is adrift.

Political commitments. My father was the first deputy mayor of Allonnes, a small town close to the family home.

Associative commitments. From 1963 to 1970, my father was the founding president of Couple et Famille, a movement to advise and safeguard family values.

My mother was involved for many years in an association that helps relatives of people hospitalized in Le Mans Hospital. As an English-speaking Canadian, she was often called upon to help relatives of English-speaking patients. Thus, one summer, the Anglican pastor of the High Church who accompanied a group of pilgrims on the road to Lourdes said a mass in our garden.

Driven by her faith, she took courses in theology and made pilgrimages to Lourdes and Fatima among other places.

It was thanks to his involvement from 1976 to 1983 in the basketball club Le Mans, the Modern Sporting Club, of which he was president, that my parents' commitment to Lithuania was born. In September 1980, the draw for the European Cup named Kaunas as the opponent of basketball club Le Mans. In January 1981, my father discovered this country whose name was wiped off the map. On the bus that took the team from Vilnius to Kaunas, he met Stephanie, who acted as his interpreter. The rest I cannot tell well, but when I was passing through the family home, I heard about Stéphanie, Vaclovas, Sigutė, Dalia, Neila, Birutė, and many others. They fought for Lithuania, my parents led in the name of freedom. Freedom to believe, freedom to learn, freedom to undertake, freedom to choose one's life.

From 1991 to 1998, my parents invested themselves in two themes that they had at heart to share, nature and culture. My father became vice-president of the travel organization called Nature et Culture for which, together, they designed and organized cultural trips: major American parks, Lebanon, the Baltic countries, and especially the English gardens that they have traveled to so many times in the company of a small group of visitors. My parents' approach was plural: they evoked a little of the botanical aspect but above all placed them in the aesthetic, musical, literary, and poetic framework of their historical period. To do this, my mother, who was a perfectionist, spent a lot of time studying documents at the National Library of France in Paris.

My parents were great travelers. They regularly crisscrossed the different regions of France, England, Ireland where the family still has many cousins, and Canada of course where a crowd of friends and cousins were always happy to welcome them. But they also explored more distant lands, stepping off the beaten path of ordinary tourists. My father continued his travels after my mother left in 2003. 139 out of 198! This is the number of countries my father has visited, 139 on the current list of 198 countries in the world. Nothing frightened my parents: sleeping on the ground in Yemen, sailing for 3 days on a

canoe in Papua, wearing a chador to visit Iran, walking in full sun to admire the pyramids of the black pharaohs in Sudan in November of last year, designing his own itinerary in a Saudi Arabia barely opened to tourism in February this year.

From 2000 to 2003, my mother fought with all her might against cancer, which eventually won. In 2007, my father wrote his first book, - Wind from Ireland, - a testimony to his faith and his love for my mother.

This first book gave him a taste for writing and seven books followed.

In 2009, Daily Lithuania Portraits of a Renaissance.

Followed:

When Papua wakes up,

Where is Kenya going?

A Human Approach to Globalization Testimonies from Africans, Middle Easterners, and Europeans,

Living in a Fatherless France: Politics in the Age of Social Networks,

Migrant builders in British Columbia

and his last, autobiographical, The Horse, the Mouse, and the Virus.

At 90, my father was still very active.

Friday, April 22, he organized for a group of dozen friends, the visit of the horticultural exploration taken over by my brother Jean-Philippe as well as the lunch that followed. On Sunday, April 24, he scoured the lilies of the valley fields to make sure they would be ready in time for the traditional May Day lily of the valley bouquets.

He also liked to meditate in his garden. In the blue and yellow garden, he had created shortly before my mother's cancer took her away in 2003. He walked there, taking care of it as a witness to my mother's last days.

He left us in turn, on Monday, April 25, 2022.

As a return to the roots of his childhood, as a last tribute to Mouton, Coquette, and Carbone, he who all his life had been in a hurry, in a hurry to undertake, in a hurry to help, in a hurry to travel, Jean chose to get to his resting place to the sound of the hooves and the slow step of the two horses which took him from the church to the cemetery where he joined Margaret, his eternal love.

Caroline Bigot Charron, August 28, 2022