

An Acknowledgement

It is 8 May 1995. Fifty years have passed since the end of the Second World War. Andrée White stands in the main square of Charenton-le-Pont in Paris by the memorial to the dead of the First and Second World Wars, the town church in the background. The ‘Marseillaise’ is playing. Some of the ‘Anciens Combattants’ are bearing the French flag, the Tricolore. The flags are slowly lifted. The music stops. Alain Griotteray, Mayor and Member of Parliament (and, coincidentally, Andrée’s brother), moves forward. From a velvet cushion he slowly lifts the medal of the Légion d’honneur, the highest award given by the French Republic.

‘In the name of the President of France, François Mitterrand, I award you the Légion d’honneur *a titre de résistants particulièrement valeureux* [for your exceptionally brave actions during the Second World War].’

He pins the medal onto Andrée White’s jacket, smiles and kisses her on both cheeks. Her daughter and son are there to witness the event, along with three of her grandchildren and her son-in-law. The square is full of people watching this special and unusual event; many of whom have known Andrée for many years. It is not the first such award she has received, however.

Ten soldiers salute the new Légionnaire. Andrée stands to attention. She wears a midnight-blue wool suit with gold buttons that shine in the sunlight. Her blond hair is cut short. On her suit the ribbons of her other medals have already been sewn onto her jacket, as is the custom in Europe. Her new medal sits on the blue background. Shaped like a five-sided double-pointed star, it is made of white enamel. It is encircled by a green wreath

of oak and laurel leaves and surmounted by a smaller similar wreath. The head of Marianne, the symbolic figure of the Republic, appears on the front of the medal, the tri-coloured flags on the back. The inscription on the front reads: 'République Française' (French Republic) and on the back: 'Honneur et Patrie' (Honour and Motherland). The Légion d'honneur was created in 1802 by Napoleon Bonaparte. It is the highest award given by the French Republic for outstanding service to France and is given regardless of the social status or the nationality of the recipient.

The 'Marseillaise' is played again. The band stops. Andrée and her family leave the square. The soldiers and war veterans march away. The crowd disperses. That night there will be fireworks in Charenton-le-Pont. France is celebrating fifty years since the end of the war. She is also celebrating the victory of a new Gaullist president, Jacques Chirac. It is a warm evening and the streets of Paris are alive with people. The Champs-Élysées had been brought to a standstill that afternoon. Just before the fireworks begin, a special speech is to be made before a crowd of more than a thousand people.

In that speech, Alain Griotteray will recall the dark days of the war and the suffering endured by millions. He will describe the Resistance group he established, and the dangers he and his colleagues faced during the four years of German occupation – four years in which so many Frenchmen and women were deported to Nazi concentration camps in Germany and Poland, never to return. He will recall a time when citizens were often starving; when German soldiers patrolled the streets of Paris; when French signs were replaced by their German equivalents; and when the French flag had to be hidden away.

Above all, he will talk about the contribution his sister made to France's ultimate liberation – a contribution so great that he will say it is 'impossible to measure its true value'. He will pay tribute to her bravery at a very young age, to her unassuming modesty and energy, and to the inner strength that enabled her to risk her life repeatedly in service to the Resistance. He will praise her as 'a true patriot, French through and through', and one who expected no reward or recognition for her actions. He will end his tribute with the following words:

AN ACKNOWLEDGEMENT

Today, as we celebrate the fiftieth anniversary since the end of that war, I think back to the enormous risks I asked my sister to take on behalf of me and our group, risks which could so easily have led to her death many times at the hands of the Gestapo and the Nazis.

The Making of a Resistance Fighter

What made Andrée and her brother Alain into the kind of youngsters they were? What was it that encouraged them to join the French Resistance and risk their lives? How did their involvement with British Intelligence, the Office of Strategic Services and the French intelligence network come about?

The question of what makes us who we are is endlessly fascinating. Is it your genetic make-up that determines your personality? Do the lives and characteristics of our parents, grandparents and ancestors mould us into the people we are? Can language skills and exposure to other cultures and ways of living shape our destiny? Does personal grief or pain alter the way that we choose to live our lives?

Descending from a line of proud and patriotic French and Belgian families, both the Griotterays and the Stocquarts were renowned for their fierce independence, presence of mind, confidence, eccentricity and initiative. At the outbreak of the Second World War, Andrée and Alain would not be slow to display these characteristics.

Edmond Griotteray, Andrée and Alain's father, was a small, plumpish, energetic man with an authoritarian yet fun-loving nature, fiercely loyal to his country. His father raised him that way: a few years before his birth, Alsace-Lorraine had been annexed by Germany in 1871 following France's defeat in the Franco-Prussian war. It was a bitter blow for Edmond's family and their fellow patriots. Neither he nor his father were ever to acknowledge Alsace's changed legal status, and there was much rejoicing when the area was joined once more to France under the 1918 Treaty of Versailles (though the Second World War would bring further upheaval when Alsace again fell under the rule of the Germans after France was defeated in 1940).

Edmond traced his Savoie ancestors back to Jean Baptiste Griotteray, whose French naturalisation papers had been signed by Louis XV, 'Roi de France et de Navarre' and by the French regent, le Duc d'Orléans, in 1716. Jean Baptiste was recorded as having been a merchant of Catholic faith, living in Montvalezan in 1680 with his parents, Jean Antoine and Pantaléonne Brun. During the seventeenth and eighteenth centuries the Griotterays prospered, serving as lawyers, judges, mayors and merchants in the small alpine community. In 1832 Edmond's father, Thelcide Constantin, moved to Paris, looking for a more interesting lifestyle. In 1848 Thelcide is recorded as working as a chemical engineering merchant in Paris, then a highly unusual professional occupation. It was around this time that he fell in love with Rosalie Weiler, the Swiss-born daughter of a Geneva banker whose beauty and energetic, enterprising personality endeared her to everyone she met. Thelcide and Rosalie went on to marry and have three children. The eldest, Julie, worked alongside her brother in his chemical engineering company (most unusual for a married woman). Her husband Paul was a cousin of Fernand Labori,* the lawyer who defended Émile Zola in the infamous 'J'accuse' trial of 1898.† Edmond and Julie had regularly attended private soirées and dinners in Paris in the presence of Zola, at which the Dreyfus affair was discussed, and the Griotteray children often heard their parents talk about the case with anger, many years after the event.

Thelcide's and Rosalie's oldest son, Marcel, served in the First World War and was killed at Verdun in 1916. Like so many others, the family

* According to Griotteray family documents, including Andrée's birth certificate, Labori was always spelled with an 'e' at the end, though this does not correspond with what has been written about the Dreyfus affair.

† On 13 January 1898, Zola published an article in the newspaper *L'Aurore*, accusing the French government of anti-Semitism in their campaign against Dreyfus, a Jewish army officer who was infamously accused and convicted of treason, stripped of his rank and service medals and sent to Devil's Island to serve out his sentence. Zola, meanwhile, was prosecuted for criminal libel. The Dreyfus Affair ultimately resulted in the resignation of the Home Secretary (the Minister of the Interior) and almost brought down the French government.

mourned his death deeply, searching to make sense of the futility of the events unfolding around them.

Edmond, their second son, who had been born several years after the Franco–Prussian War, in 1874, had chosen to study architectural interior design at the École Boulles in Paris, where – according to his son Alain – he met Auguste Rodin. Rodin’s generosity towards his students and friends was legendary and he once gave Edmond a marble bust, which has been passed down to subsequent generations.*

Graduating from the École Boulles, Edmond soon started up an architectural interior decorating business on the rue Auber near the Place de l’Opéra, opening an antique shop to help his clients furnish their houses. At some point during the autumn of 1919 he was introduced to a fair-haired and blue-eyed young woman by the name of Yvonne Stocquart, who at twenty-seven was nineteen years his junior. The couple were married within six weeks of meeting.

Yvonne Stocquart was a confident, attractive young woman who was descended from an established family of Belgian lawyers. In the mid eighteenth century her great-grandparents lived in a house on La Grande Place in the centre of Grammont (Geraardsbergen) in central Flanders, whose town square is a mini replica of the Grande Place in Brussels. During the seventeenth and eighteenth centuries the area known today as Belgium came under Spanish rule and it was from here in 1835 that Yvonne’s grandfather, Charles Josephus Stocquart, left Grammont for Ixelles in Brussels, where he joined his uncle’s law firm and helped draw up Belgium’s new constitution. Yvonne often referred with grandeur to ‘les oncles’ and their family home in Grammont stands to this day, having benefited from huge government investment due to its architectural heritage.

Yvonne’s father, Arthur, a sophisticated, aristocratic-looking and impeccably dressed man, who at 1.9 m tall towered over his friends, had been appointed Professor of Law at Louvain University when he was just

* I still remember to this day the warm smile on the model’s face looking down at me when I stayed at my grandparents’ flat near the Quai d’Orsay as a small child. The colour and texture of the marble stood out against the dark decor, and seemed almost to glow at night.