

CHAPTER 10

I started school in the Garrison School at Vacoas, they were the only school that taught in English. Eventually I had a bike, which I think had belonged to one of the Rowntree children, and had lunch every weekday at “The Pavillon” in the grounds of Mesnil; David Ardil lived in the Pavillon with his parents and sister, and he also went to the Garrison school.

Mesnil: was the huge family home in which lived my Uncle Marco (>Lucie) and Tante Denise, with the Baissac family upstairs. It had large grounds going down to the river. The garden produced much produce and there were woods at the back.. This is the house which was built by Pierre-Edmond Lucie loved roses and Mesnil was known as “Mesnil aux Roses”, Tante Denise kept these roses going. Pierre-Edmond entertained lavishly and well. The veranda was wide and agreeable to sit in with its wickerwork seats.

Oncle Marco had been a mining engineer in South Africa and he had some trouble with his lungs. Tante Denise was a member of the Mauritian Legislature, at the time, the highest authority in the Island. They were gentle people full of kindness. Eventually Tante Denise took to her bed and one went to see her with some pleasure as she always had something to say.

I remember Anne Baissac’s 21st Birthday party held in style in the dining room. We had a sumptuous meal in wonderful surroundings. Fresh water shrimps and palm hearts, a speciality of Mauritian cooking at the time.

The house was set on a rise and had a large lawn and a drive which swept up in a curve to the front door, A Magnolia tree blossomed profusely every year.

The Rev John de Chazal has a small painting of Mesnil in his living room (in Sydling-St-Nicholas), a really lovely picture which I hope the family will cherish.

I think that David still owns the Pavillon but Mesnil was sold to a Hindu who has let it go. In 1990 we saw it behind an ugly wall; it no longer has any charm or grandeur about it.

Just down the road was the Governor’s Secretary’s House and the road in which it stands is Doctor de Chazal Road.

Harry and Mado(>Mark>Lucie) Ardil were good friends of my parents, they had a “Hillman” car with “flashes” each side of the bonnet. Their son David was also at The Garrison School. In later years he had The-Best-Job-In-the-World, he was Fisheries Officer in the Seychelles and at the same time adviser to The UN on fishy matters. His Uncle, Jean Baissac, had distinguished himself during the war and on his return to Mauritius had no employment and was deputed to be “Fisheries Officer”. He made a very good job of this and predicted by means of water temperature readings that the seas off Agellega and other islands would be teeming with fish in the pristine seas which had not been fished before 1939 (refrigeration was not easily accessible), the war precluding any peaceful action in that area until 1946. He was proved right. He taught David all he knew and when David came to UK to study Marine Biology at St Andrews University I drove him there in my grandmother’s car. I think it was the first time I had gone north and it was interesting to see the wonderful countryside contrasted with the dirt and grime of the Midlands.

David’s speciality was the reproductive process of the lobster—a complicated subject by all accounts.

Harry was in Education. He was Irish and consequently “neutral” where the UN was concerned. UNESCO wanted someone in the Congo so they went there. A war started out and they just got out in time. They then went to The Lebanon where they had a

delightful time. Harry was one of very few people who could cross the border into Israel whenever he wished: a war started and they just got out in time. Their third posting was to Afghanistan. Yes! A war started and they just got out in time. Finally they retired to Todi in Italy where they bought an old farmhouse: my mother made up the plans for its restoration. Toby and Ness visited Mado there in 2007, despite Mado's advanced age she entertained them well and I was pleased that they had seen her and the house.

David's sister Caroline, lives in Norwich. In 2007, Thelma and I went to see her and her daughter Ruth, she was very welcoming and we saw her grandchildren.

Harry and Mado have two other children, one in Ireland and the other in Germany; it seems that Italy was a sensible place to retire to.

The Army Garrison School was well run on presumably military lines. Some of the teachers were very good. I have an envelope with some stamps in addressed to KR. 2640 Sgt. Vielle, L.M. HQ., C.S.D. Vacoas, Mauritius. I know nothing else about him but I do remember that he had a knack of imparting information.

Incidentally the stamps are from Reunion. One has "France Libre" overprinted on it and another shows Félix Eboué 1884-1944, "resistant of the empire". The French colonies in Africa brought out a joint stamp issue honouring his memory. This shows that Reunion was neither occupied by the Germans, nor collaborationists but followed de Gaulle.

In the evening when returning home by bicycle I would pass the field in which was played *The Retreat* at the end of the day. It is a moving ceremony. I then had to climb the hill which wound up towards Curepipe, lovely view from that hill which I think I never conquered on my bike.

I won a cup for athletics there—I keep tooth-picks in it. It is the only cup I have ever won. The inscription reads: "MAURITIUS GARRISON SCHOOL, ATHLETICS CHAMPIONSHIP, UNDER11 YEARS, 1949, CHRISTOPHER de CHAZAL"

In theory the head of The Family was Uncle Arthur who was the eldest but Uncle Dick was the business-man and probably did more for the family than anyone else. Mauritius is small (720 square miles, as big as Surrey) and the family kept close as did the white population.

Early on we stayed for a weekend at Uncle Dick's campement in Pérybere and I remember Paul calling me a "macquereau". I think this is a type of parrot and not really unkind, boys will be boys. At this stage I spoke hardly any French and I must have been an "odd-ball" to them.

My French must have improved because I moved on to Marie Mazerieux's school in Royal Road Curepipe. She ran this from her home; there were about six classrooms in the back. This was formal French education which was not the same as I had been used to. As an example, in geography, we had to learn a paragraph by heart about weather systems or wheat production—things that had no relevance whatsoever to my circumstances. Were they trying to teach us geography or the discipline of learning by rote? I do remember having a Chinese teacher for whom I had much respect but what he taught I cannot now remember, it may have been science. Ever since then I have had a soft spot for the Chinese civilisation and culture which Mao and his gang completely destroyed.

I had a friend there, Lindsay Cummings, I wonder what became of him? Did he consider me as a friend of his? I cannot remember him coming to my home. In fact I remember nothing about him apart from the name.

I remember having a lesson outside and my cousin Denis who was at the same school walking along to one of the classrooms looking at us, he walked straight into a pillar holding up the roof; I laughed for a long time and am laughing still—thanks Denis.

Eventually I was given a new bike, a Raleigh “sit-up-and-beg”. I was unable initially to reach the pedals and had blocks fitted to the pedals until I grew into the size. On this bike I could return home to lunch. Kassim would cook me curry and rice followed by banana and custard every day, I never grew tired of this; I think it was because he was a good cook. Perhaps we did not return to school after lunch and I went to Tante Olga across the road.

My father would come home at about two for a rest. He would sleep for an hour or two and return to work for the evening shift. He spent considerable time at the Curepipe Bridge Club. His afternoon rest period was important to him and he was not to be disturbed, specially by any noise from me!

Our address was Rue Bernardin St Pierre but the road at the back was Rue Pope-Hennessey onto which our garage gave. On the other side of this road was the extinct volcano “Trou aux-cerfs”. This was covered in vegetation, bizzie-lizzies were abundant and in the humid sub-tropical atmosphere everything grew profusely. I remember my father allowing me to reverse the Rover out of the garage, which I successfully managed. On going forward I got the front offside wheel in the ditch. Passers-by hauled us out and all was well. In 1990 we visited that ditch again and took a photo.

Have I told you all I remember, or more than you could possibly be interested in? It all seems so insignificant to me, I do hope someone reads this.

I remember: Spending time in Pointe Jérôme which belonged to The Beau Vallon Sugar Estate run by Oncle Guy Harel.

Oncle Guy was married to Tante Gladys>Edgar>Lucie. He had an operatic deep voice that boomed whereas Tante Gladys had quite a high-pitched voice. They had a charming tropical house just off the main road, complete with outhouses and balconies verandas and so on.

I remember staying at Pointe Jérôme, the Wilsons and the Rowntrees had bungalows a short way round the coast at Pointe D’Esny towards Blue Bay.

Pointe Jérôme was special, as its name suggests it was on a promontory with no water or power of any kind. Water was delivered by “tanker”, a metal tank pulled on an ox-cart. To get there one had to pass the mud shed in which the oxen which pulled the cane-carts lived, the sweet smell of dung hung in the air.

The sun rose over a silken sea with the island “isle aux Aigraites” in the foreground and reefs at the back. The view was towards Lion Mountain. There was a dry-stone wall which stretched for about half a mile toward Mahebourg cutting off a large area of water; the Barachois. The tide penetrated the dry-stone wall but the barachois was quite shallow but not without danger, one had to contend with electric eels, stinging poisonous fish and mud. The fish were prolific, of all types. One could fish in several ways: at night with flares one could find the fish (cordonier) asleep ready to spear with a two pronged trident. This was easy, but Cordonier can give one nightmares if eaten at night, they also had spines on the back, if one was pricked the story was one had to bite the tail off; I believed this and got laughed at for my pains! One could fish by shooting them from special wooden towers erected at certain spots in the barachois. One could use a rod and line but I do not remember doing so. Getting crabs

out of the cracks in the wall with a bamboo, splashing about in the shallows could sometimes yield a result. Using a “cassier”, a fish trap, to catch fish was common near the reefs and was used sometimes. Along the shoreline were mangroves harbouring all sorts of marine biology.

There were shells of all sorts, I have a largish snail type shell which I buried for quite some time and then emptied of the stinking flesh, it is in my drawer at 10A.

I think the Barachois was used during the war as a resource for fish.

The Rowntree Boys had a small dinghy and we did a little sailing but they were older than I. I remember having lunch with them one day, they had a lobster in a cage near the jetty, keeping fresh. This lobster had caught a fish which itself was eating another; nature in the raw.

Beau Vallon had to forfeit this land to The Government as it was not sufficiently used; it was no good for sugarcane. In 1990 it was settled by Creoles who appeared to be jobless and probably unemployable. One boy was flying a kite; the south east trade winds are steady in that most beautiful spot.

At the end of that road which was unmade-up when we were there is Blue Bay. We could use the bungalow at the top of the rise at one end of the beach. The portrait of me on the stairs done by Mr Stevenson was painted while I sat on a rock there, I am in a green jacket with square buttons, I liked those buttons. Interesting that I do not look confident or happy, a picture often tells a true story. My mother’s “pudding basin” haircut is also noticeable. The painting in our living room by Frank Wilson is of Blue Bay. In 1990 we went there and I took photos of these places, it was run-down with bus parties of Creoles enjoying a day out.

I remember: A party of creoles appearing out of the “Filao” (casuarina trees) all dressed in robes and having a full immersion Christening ceremony in the sea as we bathed, long horned cattle roaming in the hinterland, huge ray fish ‘flying’ around the small jetty which terrified my mother as she was in the water at the time. Perhaps the strongest memory of that area was of charcoal smoke as all cooking was done on charcoal, I like that smell. The Rowntree father was a bird watcher and I remember going out with him and his boys; I was bored! I am sure he had a lot of interesting facts to impart; why was I not more interested?

We must get back to The Family in Beau Vallon: This home was a cheerful noisy place, with seven children, it was inevitably so. These seven children have produced a dynasty of their own all allied to the good families of Mauritius, Hart, Mayer, Le Breton, Lagesse, Chevreau amongst others.

Son Alain was born in 1927 so was someone to look up to. He used a gun and had a bad accident when he put a harpoon through his foot. He married Laurence Vinson (her mother was a Leclézio related to the Nobel Prize winner for literature 2008). This wedding was a very special occasion. I think he asked her to marry him under a moon lit sky at Pointe Jérôme, everyone looked forward to this celebration.

Weddings were held in a “Sale Verte”, this was a hall built of bamboo and covered in umbrella palm, thick enough to withstand rain, however I seem to remember a large house with quite a few steps going up to the back veranda. I don’t remember any exotic foods, everything had to be local. I do however remember the ice cream, delicious stuff, “home made” and an unlimited supply. I loved the pistachio one.

It was on this occasion that I think we got Paul drunk, we were naughty and irresponsible. He was born 13th December 1944 so could only have been five years old at the maximum. I expect he slept it off and he will tell you he cannot remember a thing. We cousins had a great time at this party. That is not the end of the story. The next day I went for a pee and it was GREEN! Oh Dear, had the naughty boy done

something for which nature was getting its revenge? No, my mother assured me it was the excess of pistachio ice cream.

Elaine I don't remember, but Lucie I do. It must have been in an interim period of my education but when? Was it before I came to England? Between the Garrison and Mazerieux? I am not sure. Lucie was to give me individual tuition. She did her best and I did my best to distract her. I remember going out in the morning to see how the "pattisons" (Custard marrows) were growing and going out in the afternoon to see if they had grown bigger. Lucie enjoyed the kitchen and one day she was making guava jelly. She was using a pressure cooker, guavas have many seeds or the cooker was too full, it burst and spread sticky jelly over the whole kitchen. That was an exciting day. Lucie, in 1990, was still in the kitchen specialising in cakes and their decoration. Lucie is a super person married to Rico Chevreau, a big game hunter amongst other things. I think they have seven children. The Le Breton bungalows are in Cap Maleureau and her daughter Régine kindly invited us to dinner there in 1990, They were all very kind to us. Régine worked for a chicken producing company, I liked the Chaucerian name of the firm "Chaunteclair".

After Lucie came Genvieve, Olga and Jean-Pierre, born in '32,'35 and '42. I did not really sit well in this age bracket but Genvieve is the one I remember best. She and her sister always seemed to do things together. In 1990 Genvieve and Denis were living on a property on which were housed all six of their children and some of the grandchildren too. Son Sylvain was an architect and had designed and had built all their houses, it was an amazing little family village.

Perhaps I should move on? Are you still with it? Well done, and thank you for reading my jottings. Another short chapter and then we may get to England again.