

CHAPTER TWO

Of course I was a beautiful baby!

Why was I named Christopher?

I understood that I was expected to be a girl and the name Christine had been my destiny. Christopher it had to be. In fact my cousin Christine, daughter of Uncle Arthur, was born the day after me on the 8th. She was born in Mauritius and I don't think there was any collusion or knowledge of each others birth and name. I may be wrong about this and it is interesting to speculate.

Of course in those days predicting the sex of a child was by using a divining pendulum. Nowadays it is done using ultrasound; it is interesting to note that this technology was developed by Professor Ian Donald¹ who married Alix (>Eveline>Auguste).

From now on, especially for the de Chazal family, I will use the > symbol to show the relationship to one of the children of Joseph Antoine Edmond de Chazal from whom we are all descended. This can be confusing because our branch of the family is descended along the male line from Furcy whose son and our direct ancestor is Pierre Antoine Edmond. In fact he married his first cousin Lucie daughter of Joseph Antoine Edmond mentioned above. I will therefore take our family back to Lucie. It is important to get this straight before continuing---see the family tree.

1939 was the year that the Second World War broke out. There was a feeling of gloom and of course Chamberlain's "bit of paper" held aloft at the airport promising peace with the Germans. It was because of this that my parents decided to leave England to go to the remote and inaccessible island of Mauritius where my father hoped we would be safe and where he could possibly make a living as a big fish in a small pond.

What had he done in England? I think that he had kept in touch with his Mauritian roots. He had, I know, been a salesman for electric razors. He had worked in the City for Rogers and Sons (a Mauritian firm) either in the shipping dept or sales, dealing in guano from the area around New Caledonia. I do not think that he relished staying in England. For my mother it must have been an adventure and a matter of some trepidation to go off into the unknown like this with a newly born child. Had it not been for the war I doubt that they would have gone.

It took a year to travel to Mauritius—hard to believe now when it can be done overnight, almost any day of the week. Ships were in short supply, Mauritius had few passenger ships calling there and a war was brewing in Europe. Did they travel through The Suez canal? I don't know.

I believe that I had dreadful dysentery for weeks at a time. I doubt that it was dysentery but my system could not cope with whatever I or my mother was eating. I survived.

We at one stage ended up in Madagascar. My aunt Joy tells me that we were there for a full year; I cannot remember my parents saying that they travelled through S Africa. In Madagascar we stayed with Percy Mayer. He was married to Berthe Mayer, his first cousin (Berthe>Jeanne>Pierre> Lucie). He ran the Ford Motor dealership in Madagascar and flew a light aircraft around this large island², I had a joy ride in this plane, my first flight. I was about six months old. Percy continued his work in

¹ Look up in Wikipedia

² How large?

Madagascar while the war was on. The Island then was administered by the French, but France was divided politically. Madagascar was Pétanist or collaborationist.

There was “occupied France” that is to say the part of France that was occupied by the German Army and “Pétanist France” which collaborated with the Germans and was granted some autonomy by them. Marshal Pétain had been a First World War veteran who believed that collaboration with the enemy would bring them more benefits than being in opposition. In fact the Germans did as they liked and Pétain’s regime was a puppet government which had to supply slaves for the German factories and treated the Jews as enemies of The State. Whichever side you were on, you had a miserable time of it.

Percy Mayer was staunchly anti-German and he became a spy for the British. Because of his position and having free movement round the island he was able to give valuable information to The Allies. His wife Berthe was his wireless operator. Both of them took great risks with their lives. To cut a long story short it was this couple that made it possible for the Allies to take the island, landing troops in the north at Nosey Bay. Their roles in this exploit are recounted in a book “Secret War Heroes” by Marcus Binney (see review in appendix).

We got stuck in Madagascar. There are several photos of us there somewhere in the cupboard. I know we had one of my mother and I in front of the plane but I have not managed to find it. Did I pass it on to Tristan in Paris for the archives? I am of course writing these notes for this archive as well as for you. Where is this archive now? Are you able to access it?

I had several beautiful watercolours of Madagascar scenes, I sent them to Jean Pierre in North Carolina as his family was brought up in Madagascar and I thought he would value them more than I. In addition we still own the two wooden statuettes of Malgachy women. My mother had these on her mantelpiece all her life, I love them; the women have good bearing and look happy and confident. The simplicity of the carving is refreshing, pity the child’s leg is broken.

How we got from Madagascar to Mauritius I know not.

My first memories of Home are the house we occupied in Phoenix. It was next to the river, a wooden house with glassed in veranda at the front. Quite small, my cot was facing the road. This house was rented from a Mr Anderson who arranged every year to take us to the seaside. I don’t remember this man; we went in his car with the chauffeur. I remember going round a very sharp bend and being given some biscuits that were being made in a factory close by. It could have been the Manioc Biscuit factory. On another occasion I remember the chauffeur passing the airport along a straight road, we went at 60 miles an hour which translated to a mile-a-minute, I was impressed.

Our house was reasonably close to the centre of Phoenix one way and not far from the church in the other direction. The C of E Bishop lived within easy walking distance and we occasionally were invited to tea with him.

Mauritius had a Roman Catholic majority in our community. The white population and the creoles were all RC. The Hindus came next and then Islam. Many other sects and religions were represented but they did not really flourish. My mother was not all that interested but we went to the C of E cathedral when we could. This made us different from our relatives and others in our circle. I wonder if I was conscious of

this at this really young age. The fact that we spoke English at home I am sure made us different. I never knew which language I spoke, I think I was confused.

I had a nanny, "Mimi", she was a black Creole mamma, a kind, if uninspiring person. Every afternoon she would take me out in a pram or for a walk. We usually went toward the army camp. The troops there were The King's African Rifles, tall lean Zulus who would march to their distinctive African singing. This unaccompanied song was led by a leader who would chant the first line followed by a chorus of deep voices giving an answer; a really stirring sound.

My hair was very blond, I had a fringe and it was always being ruffled by the ladies. My mother cut it using the pudding basin method. My portrait signed "TKM 1942" shows this hair cut. "TKM" is Tomy Mayer who married Irmeline, they used to live in Notting Hill Gate and subsequently in Greenwich. He worked for Saddlers Wells as a scenery designer/painter. They have three children, their son is called Toby and when our first-born was called Toby they sent us £5 which they could ill afford, I was touched by their generosity. Their daughter Emily is a well known taxidermist/sculptor who has worked for Damien Hurst.

Our house was set back from the road; we did not have a car. My mother had some knowledge of German and she eventually got a job at the prisoners of war camp as a censor reading the private letters of the prisoners going in and out of the camp. She had a bicycle. This was secret work and I heard nothing of it, my mother would have been scrupulously silent on the subject as she had signed the official secrets act. I understood it to be not very interesting.

My father had a motorbike and he worked for the Mauritius Broadcasting Service (MBS). He was bilingual, had a good voice and among other things he read The News in English and French. I presume that we had something like Telex or telegrams that came in overnight. We had this when I was about nine, after the War.

I was young and remember few things. The front garden was mostly sunken with a tall monkey puzzle tree in the centre. As we came down the drive on the left there were Poinsettia, not like the ones we get which are miniature but there were about eight feet high.

My favourite was a bush opposite the front door which became my car, bus, vehicle or what-have-you. I could sit on a branch shake each branch or the whole bush and spent hours in that bush.

I think my mother did all the cooking; the dining room is where we had our meals. My father worked until about 9.00pm during the week. There was only a restricted amount and type of food. Vegetables were available, usually tasteless marrow type things, rice and the occasional chicken. There was virtually no meat, every now and then a ship would arrive with oxen from Madagascar, goodness knows how many carts-loads they had pulled but the meat was really tough and gristly.

I remember once leaning back in my chair and toppling backwards down about ten stone steps. I cut my head, my parents were much concerned, but it was nothing.

I well remember getting a new toothbrush which was exclusively for my use. To have something new like this was a really exciting treat.

We had a world map pinned to the veranda wall, we tried to follow the progress of The War on that map. I was too young to really take it all in,

The house was, as I have said, made of wood, the roof of wooden shingles (bardot, in French). None of this was really weather-proof. Our roof was riddled with holes and we had many buckets and containers over the floor catching the drips.

Cyclones³, although not frequent were regular occurrences. Because of the flimsy construction they caused real damage. Rain fell for days at a time. On one occasion we found several dead fruit bats and I am sure we had a go at making a meal of them although I cannot remember eating them, maybe we made a soup, I cannot imagine that there was any worthwhile meat on them.

The Creoles were not as fortunate; they had to go round looking for the corrugated iron with which their house had been roofed.

My best friend was David Stevenson who lived down the hill. His father was a botanist who was researching sugarcane yields. He worked for the Government, his wife was Marjorie. David eventually had a sister called Judith.

My mother was a life-long friend of the Stevensons. Marjorie was very laid back and smoked, she was good at crosswords. Steve had worked in Barbados before the war and returned there in about 1955. David was to go to King's School Canterbury and I think it was because of this that I ended up there too.

When we were five David and I went to a small private school/nursery not far from his house. There was a family called Pickering I think, who set it up for their two children. There should be a photograph of us all dressed in dungarees in the garden.

The only thing I remember about this is blowing a feather up and it really went far and high.

While on the subject of schools I remember going to another school and lining up for something. I turned my heels in, standing on the edge of my feet, which upset my teachers; it was this I think that drew attention to my flat feet which proved to be a problem until my late teens. I had to wear shoe-inserts for years.

Another school I went to was in Vacoas. The Rowntrees, the Wilsons and the Knights had three very large and imposing houses in a row. (Not far from M n il-see later). The Knight boy—Raymond--had an illness (possibly leukaemia) confining him to bed. We had some instruction in a shed in the garden. I remember little of this. I remember meeting a girl in London who told me she had known the Knight boy at the age of about sixteen but I thought he had died. I think the Rowntree's house is now the Indian Ambassadors residence.

Did I go to three schools or nurseries before the age of six? Is it possible that I remember them sixty four years later? I think the answer is "yes". My mother was not domesticated, my father worked odd hours, I think they wanted me to learn, and nursery or school seemed to them to be a good thing. Looking back I am not sure.

My mother wrote home and I had some of the letters. Regrettably they say nothing of interest. Those my Grandmother sent us also said nothing. It is such a shame because their worlds were so different. In Europe the war raged and in Mauritius we had practically nothing although I do not remember any rationing. Why did not my Grandmother complain about the lack of foodstuffs, doodlebugs and bombs? Tell us about Ted and Joy? Letters could have been really important documents but these are disappointing. Had my mother's letters said anything about my progress I could have included it here but I have nothing. It is interesting that Granny signed her letters Eddie Anderson, not "love from mummy" or anything like that. Was it that they were so Victorian and formal or was there a hint of rejection? I think it was just the way of things in those days when children did not speak until spoken to.

Mauritius was an unhealthy and humid place to be. People in England had no idea where it was and it was not easy to explain because even Madagascar was unknown.

³ Cyclones, hurricanes and typhoons: are they the same?

Worms were a permanent problem, I don't really remember them during the war but in 1948 I hated my monthly purge with castor oil.