

B41 A FAMILY OF STRANGERS
PROJECT: EUROPE 2011
SUBJECT: B41 A FAMILY OF STRANGERS SCRIPT
DATE: 2 AUGUST 2011



The day came to leave the Belgian towns of Comines-Warneton along the French border and travel to meet the rest of our family...the ones with the last name DeTourmay. Jean Francois agreed to ride shotgun and navigate the way to Villereilles les Brayeux, a village south of Brussels. Louise was especially pleased to ride in Any's

car where she didn't have to wear protective headgear and shout instructions over the wind noise. As luck would have it, our destination was within shouting distance of the village of Waudrez, the home of Yolande and Georges Collet. For the past year we've been in contact with the Collets, Secretary and President, respectively, of the MG Club of Southern Belgium. Over that time we've developed an MG friendship and they invited us to spend the night at their home before driving to Liege for an MG Day Rallye.



To commemorate the special occasion, Georges popped what looked to be a bottle of champagne. Instead it contained what Belgium is most famous for...beer. Real high quality beer, so thick you could almost chew it. We were not surprised to see an MG club label gracing this special bottle.

While avid MG folks, Yolande and Georges have not limited themselves to collecting only one marque. He was especially eager to display the latest project in his garage. It was a 1960's Renault Alpine Coupe, very much in demand because so few were produced. Georges is a "hands-on" restorer doing most of the work himself in this garage hideaway. "I don't do paint jobs though," he said. "Too much opportunity to mess up." Remembering the trials suffered in the painting of the MG, I couldn't encourage him otherwise. Also housed in the garage is an MG B roadster and a 3 Series BMW sedan to run parts.



On our way to meet the DeTournay family, Yolande and Georges pulled off a bigger surprise. We stopped at a non-descript warehouse to see the rest of their collection. It started with a 1947 MG-TC, the model that first sparked my interest in sports cars



Georges began unveiling other fine MG examples. This is the MG A that they'll be driving to a club trip to Corsica.





To show they're not stuck in the 20th century they also own a more contemporary MGF F, a model last produced in 2005.

This has become a family disease with their daughter the owner of this beautiful example of the MG C GT.



For me the pièce de résistance of their collection is this XK 120 Jaguar drophead coupe from the early '50s that I first saw when new. I remember this model because it was more refined than the sports car. The dashboard was of burled walnut and the inside of the convertible top had a headliner, just like a sedan. I'd never seen that before and really lusted for it. As we left the building I told Georges that I felt like I'd been to a Disneyland for men. "You're not far wrong," he said. "I sometimes feel that way myself."

After digesting that feast of cars, our MG seemed just a little noisier and less sophisticated than it did before we entered that building. I didn't have time to brood over it because we were only minutes from the home of Marie Benedicte and Philippe Vallée. She is the daughter of Andre DeTournay whom I hadn't seen since he was a boy.



During military service in France I traveled to the home of Mary and Edmond DeTournay, a first cousin of my father. I spent a weekend with them, their five boys and my Aunt Renelde. Andre couldn't wait to present me with the photo taken in 1958 as a memory of that visit. What he remembers most is their father marching them all down to the local barber to give them all crew cuts...just like their American cousin. Unfortunately, the only survivors of this picture are myself and the two small boys, Andre and Raymond.



We all gathered around the kitchen table, drank wine and munched on snacks, just like any other ordinary family, except for the necessary translations when our conversations became complex. Andre's wife, Martine, spoke conversational English and was a helpful dinner companion for Louise.



I couldn't help staring at Raymond, Jean Francois and Andre, searching for some sort of family resemblance or a voice quality that I could connect with my father or grandfather. Either my memory had softened over the years or the resemblance just wasn't there because they were just three guys having a good time with the family. Could've been strangers but they weren't.



I was more surprised when I met Andre's daughter, Marie Benedicte. She was the image of his mother, Mary, whom I met in the 1958 visit. Unfortunately, she died of cancer soon after and her husband was left to raise five boys on his own.



She was also the soulmate of her grandmother, working quietly in the kitchen corner preparing a typical Belgian meal to feed a hungry group of noisy family members. The clamor brought back memories of my own U.S. Belgian family. They always talked at once at the top of their lungs without bothering to listen to a response. It's a family trait I recognized and was comfortable with. The dining room only quieted to consume the tray of vitoulet,

a typical Walloon meat ball along with the potatoes and assorted vegetables. The big change, for me, was the serving of Bordeaux red wine with the meal. I believe it was the first time I had ever eaten a Belgian meal without beer on the table however I have no problem whatsoever with that kind of change.



As the evening ran late the talk drifted from the American cousins to politics and primarily the growing contention between the Walloon and Flemish factions in the country. It's a problem that has been festering since the nation of Belgium was formed out of parts of France and the Netherlands in the mid 1800's. It is a matter that gets more heated on Belgium's National Day that celebrates their German king first setting foot on his new nation. That was on the 21st of July, the same day as the MG Day rallye in the city of Liege. That would be tomorrow...an early day for us.



When we kissed our goodbyes we were a family of strangers no longer...just DeTournays.

Louise and Ray