

## JEAN HUGEL (1924-2009)

(Taken from a conversation with Nick Clarke MW on 9<sup>th</sup> February 2005, in Riquewihr)

Jean Frédéric (“Johnny”) Hugel was born in Riquewihr, Alsace, France on 28<sup>th</sup> September 1924, the middle son of Jean and Lina Hugel. His elder brother Georges was born in 1922, and his younger brother André in 1929.

After 3 years in Riquewihr primary school, Jean was sent to Paris for a few years “to lose my Germanic Alsace accent” and speak proper French, at the Lycée Pasteur in Neuilly, where his uncle taught. However, as most of the pupils were sons of foreign diplomats in Paris, it was perhaps not the best place to pick up a pure French accent ! Despite being “a country boy in the big city” his exam results were excellent and he did not feel out of his depth, so “the village primary school could not have been so bad after all...”

In September 1934 Jean entered the Lycée Bartholdi in Colmar (named after the creator of such monumental works as the Statue of Liberty, the Lion of Belfort etc., who was born and lived in Colmar). He studied there until 18<sup>th</sup> June 1940 when “we had visitors”... France had capitulated after the German invasion and troops crossed the Rhine to occupy Alsace. “Our friends across the river wanted to give us the benefit of their nationality”.

Jean continued to study in the same school, which on 3<sup>rd</sup> September was renamed “Matthias Grünewald Oberschule”, but from then on all lessons were taught in German. The French language was banned in Alsace and could not even be taught as a foreign language in schools. The Alsace dialect was tolerated so long as none of its sprinkling of French words was used, and even a symbol like the French beret (which in fact hardly anybody wore in Alsace) was banned because, according to Nazi propaganda, “it addles the brain”...

It was a lesson to Jean that it is important to be bilingual by birth, because French-speaking inhabitants of Alsace who were suddenly obliged to speak only German “were in a big mess”.

At the end of 2 years in this increasingly Nazified school, “they interfered everywhere”, Jean passed his “Abitur” (ex-“baccalauréat” in French, or “matriculation” = A-level equivalent in English) in June 1942, and “then the tragic, dramatic time began”...

The important date was 25<sup>th</sup> August 1942 when, Hitler needing more troops for the disastrous Russian campaign, the Alsace Gauleiter, Wagner, decreed compulsory drafting of Alsace men and boys into the German army, “beginning with the class of 1922” (like Georges Hugel). No exceptions were tolerated, those who deserted faced the death penalty and their families were held responsible for their conduct “to the third generation”.

The Swiss border was sealed against all those who tried to cross into neutral territory. “Some Alsace people still say ‘All week the Swiss worked for the German war effort then on Sundays in church they prayed for an Allied victory’”. For example, the boys from one small Alsace village near the border who were due for call-up fled into Switzerland but they were handed back to the Germans and “11 of them were shot 2 weeks later”.

Of 120,000 Alsace boys illegally drafted into the German army, “30,000 were killed, 40,000 wounded and 50,000 taken prisoner, of whom 11,000 died later in Soviet camps”. The Berne Convention, later the Geneva Convention, makes it illegal to draft people into an occupying army, but this was ignored by “the Nazis (who) did not consider Alsace as occupied France

but as liberated Germany". 90% of Alsace draftees were sent to the Russian front and so the casualties were very high "because you can not say 'sorry, wrong army'... and it is difficult to tell a Russian soldier you are French when you are wearing a German uniform". Although Alsace was annexed into Nazi Germany from 1940 to 1945, under international law its citizens remained French).

In June 1943 Jean was called up for "Arbeitsdienst" (war work), then drafted into the German army in September 1943 with "the class of 1924". Luckily he was sent to Italy, not Russia, and "I spent 2 years retreating and trying to sabotage everything I could. In Italy I retreated from September 1943 to September 1944, then I was sent to Germany and retreated until 7<sup>th</sup> May 1945, the night before the Armistice, when I decided to go home"...

In Italy, Jean's army "88" flak (anti-aircraft) gun regiment, ex-Afrika Korps, was seconded to the Luftwaffe (air force) so although he was enrolled in the army he wore a blue air force uniform. Then the flak guns were transformed for use as anti-tank guns and the regiment was sent to Monte Cassino. Jean decided to postpone being sent to the front by 4/5 months by volunteering to train as a medical orderly. "I spent most of my time playing billiards and learning Italian".

"As a medical orderly I just gave an aspirin to everyone". "That was the only medicine we had, apart from the 3 creams : clear vaseline for the skin, black cream to extract pus from wounds, and white cream for piles". He remembers that every morning on sick parade there was a queue of 150 Italian soldiers waiting for treatment yet only 2 or 3 Germans. An officer told him to dress up as a doctor in a white coat and stethoscope, and to give each malingerer Italian "a jab of distilled water from a syringe with a blunt needle". After a few days the queue was noticeably shorter because "they preferred to be sent to the front line !".

Jean became an interpreter and the camp entertainments officer, also running the regimental brothel where he recalls "the tips were very good". After 6 months, getting closer to being sent to the front, he noticed from papers he had to transmit to an officer that the Luftwaffe needed more fighter pilots and so any volunteers were not allowed to be moved from where they were until they had passed the necessary tests.

Jean therefore volunteered as a fighter pilot and stayed until he was sent to Verona to pass aptitude tests. The forms that volunteers had to fill in were pre-war, and included categories that no longer existed, so he chose one of these: "bomber navigator" and passed all the tests !

His group of 12 volunteers from Italy went over the Brenner pass to Germany for training in July 1944, only to find it was an indoctrination course for fighter pilots "to defend the Reich to the death" ! Jean decided to "act stupid" ("either you act stupid to survive or you try to win the war alone") and told the angry officer "sorry there must be some mistake, you want fighter pilots but as you can see from my papers I volunteered as a bomber navigator". He was told there was no need for bomber navigators, but before he could be posted somewhere worse, Jean asked "please can I go back to my comrades". When asked where they were, he replied "Monte Cassino" (being sure not to mention they were not actually in the front line) and so the officer, visibly impressed, immediately sent him back to... his brothel in Italy...

After the abortive 20<sup>th</sup> July 1944 bomb plot to kill Hitler, in which many Luftwaffe officers were implicated, 20% of Luftwaffe ground troops (around 10,000 men, including Jean) were forcibly transferred to the Wehrmacht (army) and moved to front-line units. The officer who

chose his unit's 20% selected the youngest. To avoid being sent to the infantry, Jean told the army selection board that he was in an 88 flak unit as "K2" (rangefinding operative) and so they posted him to the artillery, where "I again acted stupid because I had no knowledge of gunlaying"... and so he had to be sent on training courses. "I finished the war being trained about all sorts of weapons but I never used any of them" !

However, the war caught up with Jean and he was posted to the Eastern front. However, "just before I left Augsburg on 15<sup>th</sup> December 1944 on the 07h00 train to Poland", to take part in the German counter-attack against the Russian offensive that had begun on 12<sup>th</sup> December 1944, and already wearing warm new Eastern front clothing, he found he had a temperature of 37.5°C. By luck the doctor was a dental/ENT specialist and immediately sent him to hospital "with dyptheria", where Jean contrived to prolong his stay, aided by medical knowledge picked up in Italy and by a helpful nurse "for 2 very dangerous months", during which time all those who had left for the Polish front on that train were killed.

In the closing days of the war US and French troops arrived in Augsburg and "I decided to go home". Told that it would be quicker for him to do so on his own, Jean swapped his warm army coat for a civilian one, found an abandoned Alsace-registered car, "obtained" food and petrol from both French and German sources, then drove to Kehl on the German border with Strasbourg, where the car was promptly requisitioned by French troops... After spending the night with an uncle in Strasbourg, Jean's father (Jean "Papa" Hugel 1898-1980) arrived by car (his first trip to Strasbourg by car since 1940) to take him home to Riquewihr, where he arrived on 7<sup>th</sup> May 1945, the day before the VE Day Armistice.

Jean had had no news of his family since November 1944 but had feared the worst because a soldier in the hospital bed next to his in Augsburg, wounded at Béblenheim during the "Battle of the Colmar Pocket" (December 1944-February 1945), told him the neighbouring villages of Mittlewihr and Bennwihr had been destroyed. When Jean asked about Riquewihr he was told "the same" though actually Riquewihr could not be seen from where the soldier had been.

Riquewihr had in fact been liberated on 5<sup>th</sup> December 1944 by the 36<sup>th</sup> Texas Division, who advanced along vineyard tracks from Kientzheim that were normally impassable to tanks but could be used because they were frozen solid by winter temperatures, but then the front line stabilised just half-a-mile beyond the town. During the next 2 months of bitter fighting - in sub-zero temperatures - 28,000 American, French and German troops and civilians were killed before Colmar, 10 km away, was finally liberated.

There was no electricity in Riquewihr from early December 1944 to the end of August 1945, because the cables from Kientzheim crossed "Blood Hill" which was mined so the mines had to be cleared before the cables could be repaired. Wine had to be pumped by hand, the Hugel offices became a US Army canteen and field hospital, hundreds of refugees from Mittlewihr and Bennwihr were living in the cellars, "but life carried on". Luckily only a few houses were destroyed in Riquewihr, but many of the tiled roofs had been shattered by mortar fire.

What was Jean to do now ? University ? Further education ? "I was lazy and fed up with studying after having had to do everything twice, in 2 different languages". Having not been allowed to speak French for 5 years, it was practically impossible for Alsace people to pass the examinations they needed to enter the classic French higher education system of 2 years of "classes de préparation" before "Les Grandes Ecoles", and so as a result in a few years there would have been "nobody from Alsace in the governing élite that traditionally runs France".

So "someone in Paris" decided to exempt Alsace people from having to pass these entrance exams to "Les Grandes Ecoles" provided that after the first year their marks were at least one point higher than the class average. Jean was one of only 5 people from Alsace to be selected. So from September 1945 to June 1948 he studied at ENA Montpellier and graduated (with the 4<sup>th</sup> highest score of his promotion) as an Agricultural Engineer. "I have never worked so hard in my life as that first year in Montpellier, from 6am to midnight every day, even weekends !"

"You learn how to talk, even about a subject you know nothing about, and using the correct logic and vocabulary". His professor of viticulture was Mr Branas of Bordeaux, who taught him not just about viticulture but about farming in general. "I learned lot about the vine but nothing about vinification, because in France the AOC system controls the vineyards, not the vinification". Most of his colleagues became civil servants, but Jean was one of the few that went into wine production.

Professor Branas' parting words were "I hope you have learned something – now read my book !". His message was that in traditional wine regions, pruning and planting methods are the result of 5 to 600 years of experiments. "For the first 5 years do not change anything, just try to find out why it works before making any changes" and so far, adds Jean "I have found nothing to change !"...

"The land is given (soil, climate, angle to the sun) which is its growth potential. The greater the potential of the land, the more the vine will grow. More growth means later ripening. Rich soil is less good for quality than poor soil. So avoid too much vegetation growth. In rich soils like in Alsace, you must find a way to reduce the vine's growth or it will ripen later. Alsace vines are high on the trunk to draw the strength from the vine, reduce the circulation of the sap and so reduce vegetation. If a vineyard remains dark green in September this comes from the nitrogen in fertiliser, so if it rains the grapes will rot. The vine should always be stressed, so you should never use fertiliser. The first vineyard I planted in 1949 has just been ripped out in 2005. It has never had any fertiliser. Each year as the crop decreases the quality increases"...

"In Montpellier I learned everything about viticulture but nothing about vinification. My father taught me everything about vinification in a simple way : trust the grape ; use plenty of water for hygiene ; whatever you put in the barrel you will find later in the bottle ; and... once you have sold the best wine in your cellar, your second best wine becomes your best wine !".

"When I returned from Montpellier, my father looked after the vinification and his brother, my uncle Alfred, looked after the vineyards, so I helped both. In those days we worked with horses which is too much hard work. I gradually restructured and replanted the vineyards, not too quickly, to maintain a balance, as young vines have less quality potential than older vines, because this is in direct relationship to the volume of earth that is explored by the roots. Each year this increases and so the potential quality and the complexity of the wine increases too".

"The vine hates water, so the roots stop growing when they reach the water table, like on the plain, which is why these vineyards produce less complex wines than on the hillsides. New World vineyards are doing it all wrong. They feed the vines with fertiliser and water from the top so the roots all stay within 1m50 of the surface. If they stopped irrigating it would be a disaster because the roots never reach the subsoil. This explains why, with certain exceptions, most New World wines never have ripeness problems, they ripen fast and early, so they have

no time to gain complexity, they are high in alcohol but they have no staying power. But their "winemakers" (a word I hate) are clever, in place of complexity they have to give something else to the wine : oak (depending on the price, either oak barrels or oak chips or oak essence). This is just "make-up". It is sad to see French growers are following this trend, late as usual, they are timber merchants who forget to be winegrowers !"

"I tried to give my revolutionary ideas to growers at conferences. Fertiliser is un-necessary. They should try fertilising half a vineyard and doing nothing to the other half and watch the difference. They will get more grapes and better quality from the half that is not fertilised. We take cuttings from our own vineyards and produce our own clones, producing young vines that are replanted back in the original vineyards. We have less viruses and we save money ! I want the vine to work for me, not me for the vine, so you must not make life easy for it. The vine is a Mediterranean weed that will grow where nothing else will grow".

"I have lived through a fascinating period in the vineyards, with the evolution from horse and plough to the tractor. We imported our first tractor in 1955, an English make, Ransomes, that was first used during the war by airborne troops. Today there is no more hard physical work, you just sit in the tractor and work the machines. Soon there will be GPS and you can control the tractor from home !"

"I joined the family business on 1<sup>st</sup> October 1948. My job was assisting my father in the cellar and my uncle Alfred in the vineyards, and I gradually took over from both. As the vineyards were now better organised, I could take more time to travel, gradually. My first trip to the UK was with my father, in 1950. We had a tasting at the Savoy and there were still ration tickets. In the UK I learned 4 important things : to be on time ; to stick to your word ; to never make the same mistake twice ; and to be knowledgeable about claret and rugby ! Since then I have enjoyed every minute I spent in Britain as it suited my philosophy as an Alsace wine grower".

Jean was the 1973 Grand-Maître of the Confrérie Saint-Etienne d'Alsace. In 1974 the INAO board in Paris appointed him Chairman of the new commission that had been set up to define the exact limit of each Alsace Grand Cru vineyard. "After 3 years I was removed because the growers wanted the vineyards to be bigger and the yields higher, but the commission wanted stricter controls, so they appointed a new commission !" For example, the first vineyard under scrutiny was the Schlossberg in Kientzheim-Kaysersberg. The first commission examined the evidence (the terrain, the geology, the micro-climate...) and decided the correct size was 28 hectares. Certain influential growers wanted their vineyards outside that zone to be included which the commission refused to do, so the growers blocked its workings for 3 years until a new commission was appointed. The new commission increased the Schlossberg Grand Cru to 80 hectares (!) "local politics..." and within a few years had delimited 50 Grand Cru sites.

Late-harvest wines : "Before 1870 it was a tradition on both sides of the Rhine to produce a small amount of late-harvest, super-concentrated wines from over-ripe botrytised grapes, in certain years when Nature decided to cooperate. In Alsace these rare wines were promoted especially in the German period (1870-1918) as Spätlese (equivalent to VT), Auslese and Beerenauslese" (equivalent to SGN). After the second world war, the Germans began to ruin the reputation of their wines so my father had the idea of translating these German names we were using into French. The first vintage we produced "Vendange Tardive" not "Spätlese" was 1959. The first "Sélection de Grains Nobles" was 1971. The previous vintage, 1967, was still labelled "Beerenauslese" because we considered it was a generic term, but the Germans attacked us in Brussels for using a 'German name on a French wine' so we had to change".

The "HUGEL" Law : Alsace late-harvest wines had always been very rare wines, produced by a handful of growers. "But then some dear colleagues started selling Vendange Tardive but not to the same standard. The internal rule at Hugel was always a minimum of 105° Oechsle for Tokay d'Alsace and Gewurztraminer and 100° Oechsle for Riesling. (For example in 1970 our Riesling was 'only' 98° so we did not sell it as late-harvest but as Réserve Exceptionnelle. We were very strict on ourselves). Wine writers started to talk about these exceptional wines in France and overseas, which gave some competitors the idea to use the same names but not the same methods". (Off the record : "Dopff & Irion sold a 1972 Riesling Vendange Tardive that was less good than our basic Hugel Riesling and at half the price of a Hugel Riesling VT. Just being picked late does not mean it is better. 1972 was the most unripe Alsace vintage on record").

"The new EU regulations (of 1977) helped us because it was not allowed to put anything on a label that could give the impression of better quality unless the country had made a law to fix the conditions of production. No law existed in France for late-harvest Alsace wines, so after the 1976 harvest when many people had been able to make these wines for the first time, the INAO asked my father and I to draft a proposal for the new law, which in fact they adopted almost word-for-word. The law came into force in 1984, but already for the 1983 vintage".

It was a long and hard battle. "It was the first INAO AOC law ever written by a wine grower who knows all the tricks and wants to protect himself from temptation. The new law applies to the whole of France, but (for any other wine region) to use the terms (VT or SGN) it says that the minimum conditions must be at least as strict as in Alsace".

The characteristics of the law are :

- pre-declaration of intention to produce VT or SGN must be made before the harvest starts, late-harvest wine must not be an accident, it must be a conscious decision.
- the sugar content of the grapes must be checked before and after pressing.
- a certificate is delivered indicating the sugar content and the quantity of juice.
- no earlier than 18 months after tasting, after the wine has been bottled and before it can be put on sale, it must be presented to a blind tasting to check the vinification has been successful and that the varietal character and character of the vintage are intact.
- wines that do not pass the blind tasting (30% during the first 12 years !) can not be sold as VT or SGN and no allusion to "late-picking" can be mentioned on the label.
- it is the only AOC law to specifically forbid chaptalisation or the addition of alcohol.

"I was president of the Alsace VT/SGN committee from 1984 to 1999 when I retired and was succeeded by Pierre Trimbach. (Trimbach, Léon Beyer and Faller were three other historic producers of late-harvest wines in Alsace). At our first meeting in 1984 we were 7 producers, now we are over 500." This shows that "strict regulations create healthy competition between growers to produce higher quality and that is good for the reputation of the whole region".

"The law continues to evolve and become even stricter, for example originally in 1984 the minimum potential alcohol for Gewurztraminer SGN was 16.4%, it is now 18.2% !"

"People who like wine are nicer people than those who do not like wine !"...

(Collated by David Ling, February 2005)

