

The three figures in the photograph are frozen for ever, two men and a woman bathed in sunlight. All three are dressed in white and holding tennis racquets. The young woman is in the centre; the man on her right – who is quite tall – is leaning towards her as if poised to tell her something; the second man stands on her left at a slight remove, bending his knee and leaning on his racquet in a playful Charlie Chaplin pose. They all look about thirty, but the taller man is possibly a little older. The tree-covered Alpine slopes in the background are partly blotted out by a sports centre, and the snow-capped peaks on the horizon lend the scene an unreal picture-postcard feel.

This group portrait exudes carefree frivolity. Yet there is an air of seriousness about the young woman which her smile and the twinkle in her eye cannot quite disguise. She, too, is tall, less so than the man speaking to her but enough to give an impression of harmony to their appearance. Her body is slender, her beauty somewhat austere with her long face and high, round cheekbones. Her thick hair, cut short in a bob, brushes against the

hollows of her cheeks. And her white hat, worn at an angle, completes her elegant look, reminiscent of the Seeberger brothers' early fashion photographs.

The man closest to her is thin, almost too thin for a man. His hair is blond (or mousey brown? It is hard to tell in black and white), wavy, cut short at the sides. The liquid limpidity of his eyes suggests the irises are blue or a very pale grey. He has a pleasant-looking face, slightly angular with sandy eyebrows, delicate features and thin lips.

The last of the trio is also the shortest. His chest, beneath a light-coloured polo shirt, is lean and sinewy; he sports a pencil moustache and a straw boater that would not have looked out of place on a dandy. Judging by the smirk on his face and his pose, he is not taking his immortalisation on film altogether seriously, as evidenced by his teasing sidelong glance at the young woman in the hat.

The picture is grainy, fuzzy on close inspection; the paper it is printed on has aged, imbuing everything with a sepia tint. The image illustrates a newspaper report on the victory of Madame N. Hivert (Ladies' Singles) and Monsieur P. Crüsten (Men's Singles) at the Interlaken Amateur Tennis Tournament, held late afternoon on 16 July 'under a clear blue sky'. The article states that the winners respectively took home a Daum *pâte de verre* cup and a writing folder. It does not, however, disclose the identity of the second man, nor explain why he is present in the photo. At the top of the clipping, a handwritten note reads 'N., Switzerland, Summer 1971'.

Ashford, 25 March 2007

Madame/Monsieur,

I have only just read your advertisement ref. 284.220 in *Libération* of 12 February.

I believe I may have some information concerning the person you are enquiring about: I am convinced it is my father, who often used to spend his summers in Interlaken. I am enclosing the photocopy of his Geneva Tennis Club membership card from the 1960s, which I have among my papers. You will see his photograph on it.

Could you tell me how you obtained his name and why you are seeking information about him?

Yours faithfully,

S. Crüsten

Paris, 1 April 2007

Madame/Monsieur,

Thank you for your letter, which I was no longer expecting. It has been over a month since I placed the advert in several French and Swiss newspapers, and the two responses I have so far received seemed fairly implausible, given the places and dates. Yours, on the other hand, leaves me in no doubt: you are the son or daughter of the 'P. Crüsten' whose name and photograph I found among my family's papers. The woman standing next to him in the picture is my mother, who passed away when I was three or four. Her married name was Nathalie Hivert (I don't know her maiden name).

My father rarely spoke of her. He died three years ago, and my adoptive mother (he remarried) has been in a nursing home for the past six months, suffering from final-stage Alzheimer's. While hunting for her medical records in my father's study, I came across an unlabelled folder containing just this newspaper clipping, which I have photocopied for you. It seems my mother and

the man in the picture, your father, competed in a little tennis tournament near Interlaken and both won their categories. A local paper published an article about them and printed their names in the picture caption: it was this tiny nugget of information that prompted me to place the advert.

I know very little about my mother, and have no family to help me fill in the gaps. I am an only child and my father's two elder sisters died several years ago. I am intrigued by this photograph and would like to find out more about the people in it. Is there anything else you could tell me about your father? Do you know how he knew my mother? Is he still alive? And if so, do you think he would agree to speak to me?

I hope you don't mind me asking all these questions. Any information you could offer would mean a great deal to me.

In the meantime, thank you once again for replying to my advert.

Kind regards,

Hélène Hivert

Ashford, 17 April 2007

Dear Madame Hivert,

Forgive my delay in replying to you – I am just back from a week abroad, in Johannesburg as a matter of fact, where I was attending a conference (I am a biologist).

I am delighted that my letter was helpful to you. There is no need to apologise for asking so many questions, your curiosity is perfectly understandable, and I myself am keen to find out a little more about a period of my father's life that is a mystery to me. But I'm afraid you won't be able to talk to him, since he died last year of a pulmonary embolism. So I can only give you second-hand information about his life, in the hope that it will shed some light.

My father's name was Peter Crüsten, but most of his friends called him Pierre. He was born in 1933, in Besançon, where his Swiss father had settled in the twenties and become naturalised. His mother was French. I never knew my grandfather who died quite young of a heart attack, having founded a flourishing printing works. It's still there – Crüsten Accounting

Stationery. My father studied chemistry to quite an advanced level, as well as being a musician – he was said to be a gifted pianist when he was young, but eventually he decided to become a photographer, much to my grandmother’s annoyance, apparently. I know he was an army photographer during his military service, as I have seen pictures of him in the family album, posing in uniform beside his camera. After his military service, which he spent in Algeria, in conditions that were tough but could have been a lot worse, my father worked as a freelance photographer in Paris. Family legend has it that he spent some time at the Harcourt studio, but I don’t have any evidence of that. He produced some impressive photos of the city in winter: the stray cats of Père-Lachaise among the frozen tombstones, the banks of the Seine covered in snow ... Then he left and set up on his own in Geneva, where some of his relatives lived. He soon became a respected photographer in his chosen field – family portraits. By the end of his life, he had several assistants working for him, trained in his ‘style’; he had all but stopped taking on commissions himself.

However, he always carried on with his own work, right until the end. He was not without talent, but he never sought recognition. In Geneva we still have several hundred albums, especially landscapes and architectural complexes. One that particularly fascinates me is a series of over a hundred views of Parisian

arcades, all deserted (I don't know how he miraculously persuaded the local residents to stay out of the way). His entire oeuvre is made up of beautiful, enigmatic photos in which there is hardly a single human being. My brother and I imagine he must have grown tired of photographing faces all day long.

I don't know exactly when my parents met: my grandmother told me about a dance organised in honour of the girls from the school where my mother was a boarder. A photographer was hired to record the event for posterity, and it was my father who was given the job. My mother must have liked the photo: they married in 1962, and I was born two years later. I also have a brother, Philippe, who is two years my junior. We lived in Geneva, but my grandparents owned a little chalet in Interlaken where we often used to spend our holidays.

In your advert it was the mention of that resort connected to the name Crüsten that immediately caught my eye. And, incidentally, I can tell you who the third man in the photo is: he's Jean Pamiat, a friend of my father's from his army days, who was a few years younger than him. They went through quite a lot together in Algeria, and Pierre hired him afterwards as first assistant photographer. My father asked Jean to be my godfather when I was born. I'm grateful to him, because Jean has always been like a second father to my brother and me. He is still alive and I visit him in his retirement home in Lausanne every couple of months or so. But his health has deteriorated considerably since

a stroke paralysed his right side and impaired his speech.

My father was quite a solitary, taciturn man who spent most of his time in his studio, or outdoors, in search of subjects to photograph. I know little about his past. I only have a few photos of all four of us – the shoemaker’s children always go barefoot! Although my mother was much younger than my father, she died in 1994 of breast cancer, and from then on he retreated into almost total silence. And so your mother’s name is not familiar to me, and I don’t think I ever heard him mention her.

There are several dozen boxes of photographs in the basement of our family home, which still hasn’t been cleared. When I next go to Switzerland, for I now live in Kent, I will have a look through them to see if I can find any trace of those visits to Interlaken. Thanks to the newspaper clipping you kindly sent me, I now know what your mother looked like: I could leaf through the albums and try to find a photo of her.

In the meantime, I’m enclosing the photocopy – apologies for the terrible quality – of a self-portrait my father did the year he turned thirty-eight, and which used to hang in the chalet at Interlaken.

When I took it out of the frame to photocopy it, I found an inscription on the back, but I can’t decipher the second part and I don’t know who wrote it. In any case, I’m enclosing it as well.

This photo of my father is probably the one I like best, because he looks cheerful. In the newspaper

cutting, he is wearing that same expression which we so rarely glimpsed. What a pity I can no longer ask Jean about what happened that summer of 1971.

I will of course write if I find something that might be of interest.

Kind regards,

Stéphane Crüsten

The man has chosen to pose in front of a large mirror so that the camera mounted on its tripod is in the frame, which also encompasses the far side of a room cluttered with a work bench, mounts and various prints. On the wall is a noticeboard pinned with snapshots, advertising postcards and two pictures of mountain peaks lost in the clouds. Despite the sheet of paper masking one side, it is also possible to make out an old photograph, probably taken from a newspaper, showing four young men in tennis whites gathered around another man wearing a black suit. A few film posters and an Art Deco-style flyer for a performance of *Véronique* at the Opéra-Comique with Paulette Merval in the title role. The man's shoulder blocks out the bottom left-hand corner of a large art print hanging midway up the wall: recognisably a Hopper, the picture shows a woman sitting alone on a bed staring straight out of the window in front of her. Despite the colours being reduced to black and white, something remains of the quiet intensity of the painting which seems to condemn its subject to brutal, eternal, stony silence.

Although there is nothing to measure him against, it feels as though the man is taller than average. He is wearing a light-coloured short-sleeved shirt and front-pleated trousers held up with a smart leather belt. No tie, though; the only thing visible around his neck is a half-moon pendant on a fine silver chain. Under the magnifying glass, however, it appears to be the top of a ring with a textured surface. His body is slim, almost thin: his collarbone shows through his shirt and the fingers of his left hand, pressed against his thigh, are slender, the swollen joints incongruous. The wedding band sits low on his ring finger as though it has slipped down a few millimetres, while his right hand is tucked casually in his pocket in an attempt to look natural, probably just after he had pressed the self-timer button.

The man stands facing the mirror in the late-morning light, which casts pale rectangles onto the wall. His hair catches the sun's rays, gleaming like an animal's pelt. Two expressive lines stripe the space between his eyebrows like inverted commas. Yet his light eyes are unblinking; the scattering of crow's feet suggests their owner is approaching forty.

Haloed by the slanting shaft of light, he looks into the mirror with a knowing expression as if his picture were being taken by a loved one and not by the lens of a Flexica. On the back, the neat inscription in French reads 'Self-portrait, studio. May 1971'. Then, in clumsy, faltering Russian, as if written by a child, are the words 'моей лисе'.

Paris, 9 May 2007

Dear Monsieur Crüsten,

Thank you for taking the time to write such a detailed response, and for the photograph. I must admit it was a bit of a shock to learn your father is no longer alive, but I was heartened to hear about your collection of old photographs. Perhaps they will tell us something. I think this could be a fruitful avenue to explore, and I'm grateful to you for opening it up to me.

Your father was a very handsome man and I can see why you like that portrait of him – he looks like a matinee idol! I should love to see some other examples of his work at some point, if possible. I confess my interest is both personal and professional: I happen to work at the Museum of the History of the Postcard as head of the pre-1930 visual artefacts collection. This means I am regularly sent collections to catalogue, sometimes from individuals (it's not unusual for them to arrive in a shoebox). Opening them up and delving into strangers' lives is definitely the most exciting part of my job; that moment of discovery gives me such a thrill, it's almost

addictive. There is something very moving about the thought that just two or three sources can be enough to build a picture of an entire life.

Anyway, I digress. Although my Russian is very basic, I can just about translate the words on the back of the photo: 'For my fox'. The writer was not a Slavic speaker; you can tell by the way the letters are formed, as if they have been copied. The ink used does not quite match the inscription in French, which is a little darker, though it's hard to tell from a photocopy. I do think, however, that the lines from both alphabets were written by the same hand. Perhaps the note in Russian was simply added later? We would need to get an expert to look at it to be certain.

Did your father speak Russian or have any Russian friends? Do you know anyone to whom he might have given that nickname?

For my part, I'm pursuing my enquiries, but progress is slow. I'm frantically busy at work – I'm putting together a catalogue on the postcards of the 1900 Exposition Universelle – and haven't been able to get back to the flat to continue sorting through my parents' papers.

In the meantime, I will of course let you know if anything else comes to light.

Best wishes,

Hélène Hivert

PS My heart leapt when I saw the *Véronique* poster in the photograph. It was my stepmother's favourite operetta; she used to sing arias from it while we cooked together.

Ashford, 30 May 2007

Dear Madame Hivert,

I am intrigued by the Russian inscription which you kindly translated. Intrigued and somewhat perturbed, since I find it hard to imagine my father giving my mother such a nickname. I wonder whether he might have taken that photograph, which appears to be a gift, for someone else. And of course I'm curious to know who that someone else could be. To be frank, your letter has reawakened an old sense of unease and suspicion; for a very long time I have been wondering what really went on in my parents' lives.

To return to the subject, as far as I know, my father did not have any Russian friends, but I know that Jean Pamiat spoke the language fluently (where had he learned it?), and had connections with several St Petersburg families. He called my father *tovarish* (I'm not sure of the spelling), as a joke, and actually it took me ages to realise that it wasn't a first name, like Igor or Sasha.

I also went with my father, once, towards the end of his life, to the Russian Orthodox section of Thiais

cemetery. He was already very frail, but he insisted that I take him there. I don't know which grave he visited, because he asked me to wait for him at a distance. Nor do I know the reasons for this pilgrimage. It is a tenuous clue, but it confirms that there could have been a Russian link. That seems to be where this trail is leading us.

Let's keep each other posted.

Kind regards,

Stéphane C.