

THE ASSOCIATION OF MIT RETIREES



MEMOIR COLLECTION

March 2012, #2

ABOUT THE MEMOIR CLASS

*The Association of MIT Retirees introduced a memoir writing workshop for members in February 2011. This class of dedicated writers is led by **Nita Regnier**, Association advisory committee member and former instructor in MIT's Program in Writing and Humanistic Studies in the Writing Center. The writers have produced fine work which they wish to share. While the stories represent a wide range of experiences and generations, some reminiscences may resonate with you and perhaps inspire a flashback or two.*

New members are welcome to join the memoir class! Please contact the Association at 617-253-7910 or retirees.assoc@mit.edu for information.

*During 2012 the Association will feature work by each class member. Our second featured story of the memoir collection is by **Bill Snow**. After a decade in academia, Bill spent another 15 years in the employ of the U.S. Government, both in uniform and as a civil servant. He then became a technical staff member in the Aerospace Division of MIT Lincoln Laboratory, retiring in 2009.*

WHY WRITE NOW?

Nita, you asked why I joined the Association of MIT Retirees memoir writing class. In a word — poor planning. Just when I've finally learned a little on the way up, just when I might ensure that others don't make the same mistakes I've made, the top of the escalator is right there in front of me. I'll have to step off soon. All that time I've wasted on the way up — I need it now. But there's no running back down. Hordes are behind me; only few elders ahead. (Notice how I avoided the "d"—word? Nita has lots of writing tips to share.) Is memoir writing, then, my Plan B? I thought so a year ago when I joined. But now — maybe it's been Plan A all along!

— Bill Snow

MADAME BOISVERT

"That's it! C'est fini! I'm done with choir — Father Landry or no Father Landry! That woman can't even read music — and she's tone deaf!" Our mother stormed into the house much earlier than usual from her Thursday evening choir practice. Snatching from her head the then-compulsory mantille, she threw it down on the telephone table in the hall.

"What's more, she's torturing that pathetic little girl. Madame Boisvert — telle, une telle — such a bitch!" Childhood forbiddances prevented profanity in her mother-tongue.

Corinne, our mother, had sung in St. Catherine's choir soon after her arrival in Maine as a new bride before any of us arrived. She hadn't continued for long; although she had plausible reason for quitting — the arrival of the first of us — the real reason: Madame Boisvert.

Our mother had received only minimal formal music training from an aunt, but she possessed a great deal of innate musical ability and she read music well. She often accompanied herself on the piano, singing with a velvet soprano voice. Father Landry, the young newly assigned assistant pastor at St. Catherine's, also had a beautiful singing voice. Soon after Christmas he announced at Sunday mass his intention to strengthen the choir and specifically that he would lead rehearsals for the upcoming Easter celebrations.

Despite the absence of musical talents, Madame Boisvert had been the organist at St. Catherine's for decades. She, like our mother, was an immigrant from Francophone Canada; but she belonged to the preceding generation. Mme. Boisvert always wore some gaudy bonnet, often adorned with a pair of peacock tail feathers attached far back on the hat and sweeping forward over her head to ensure that her short rotund self could not be overlooked. As she bobbed back and forth on the bench playing the organ, the faux-eye feathers seemed to be

watching as they communicated the tempo — right or wrong — to the choir members. Evidence abounded that she could not tell one note from another. Whenever she included an obviously dissonant note within a chord, she'd continue to sound it for the full duration scored instead of instantly changing to the correct one, tormenting any congregant, chorister, or cleric who had even the slightest sense for music harmony. The loud and low pedal pipes were her favorites. During such bombasts Father Landry, at the altar, would shake his head from left to right as if his liturgical concentration had been trespassed against. Our mother characterized Mme. Boisvert's style thus: "If she's sure of the note, it's so loud up there in the loft we can *feel* it; if she's not sure, then it's so quiet we're left on our own." All that aside, no matter the function — mass, wedding, funeral, choir practice — and no matter the day or time, Mme. Boisvert was at the organ console.

Jeanne, her six year old granddaughter, sat on the choir chair closest to the organ bench. She never smiled, she never sang, she never spoke; whether she was devoted to her grandmother or was subjugated by her depended on one's perspective. Her function appeared to be to sob audibly whenever a disapproving remark was made regarding her grandmother's execution of the music.

St. Catherine's, founded by Pastor Flynn, had been primarily Irish immigrants. But by the mid-1940s, French-Canadian immigrants more than doubled the congregation's size. The parish was active then; some ceremony occurred in the church nearly every day of the week. Mme. Boisvert rendered inimitable intonations at each and every function. It was rumored that she received no payment for her services. Rather, Monsieur Boisvert, her forlorn-looking husband, being of adequate and secure financial means, may have underwritten her position. He was one of the most generous donors to St. Catherine's many collections and to any and all special appeals. St. Catherine's brought M. Boisvert salvation — of a sort.

The choir loft at the rear of the church seemed to be an architectural afterthought. It had certainly not been sanctioned by any building inspector or fire marshal. Basically, it was a large waist-deep wooden box-like balcony held aloft on tall posts and attached by some means to the back wall of the church. The organ was completely contained within the

loft box, its low-profile console positioned diagonally, facing the choir chairs that were arranged on a slightly raised dais. Ranks of pipes, all specious — the organ was totally electronic, were displayed across the rear of the box, forming the choir backdrop. Both sides and the balcony front edge were topped by hand rails. Wooden cabinets containing the organ loud speakers stood in the back corners of the dais. Such was the fiefdom of Mme. Boisvert. She believed her organist position to be her *true function* in life. In this loft she reigned and, indeed, she did cling tenaciously to her realm.

Her kingdom was accessible by a narrow, straight and very steep staircase. Viewed from the loft, anyone contemplating descent wondered whether descending backwards, as on a ladder, might be preferable. Normal descent, once on the staircase, gave the impression that one was about to pitch forward onto the church floor. (Then again, the Almighty would surely not allow such harm to befall anyone intoning His praises!)

Unfortunately, the Almighty's attention was diverted early one Sunday afternoon. The eleven o'clock high mass was at long last over and the parishioners had departed. Jeanne

descended nimbly, ahead of Mme. Boisvert. The queen of the realm tumbled headlong down the staircase, behind; her trademark bonnet miraculously still ensconced upon her head. The two ocellar feathers had broken off and lay beside her on the floor, staring up deliriously.

The indomitable Mme. Boisvert lay equally immobile; she had broken the fibulae in both her legs. Jeanne's uncontrolled wailing alerted Junior, the sacristan, who summoned the fire company from across the street. In short order, Mme. Boisvert was strapped to a gurney and transported to the hospital in the adjacent town.

As fate would have it, on Monday, the very next morning, a funeral service was scheduled for nine o'clock. By expediencies known only to long-suffering M. Boisvert (and perhaps to Jeanne — who, of course, would be forever mum), Mme. Boisvert was seated on her throne at the organ console. God knows how long she'd been there. Jeanne's quiet sobbing accented her grandmother's pitiable state. But



this funeral service turned out to be unusually serene, due in large part to the absence of Mme. Boisvert's customary pedal pipe emphases, which were precluded by two knee-to-foot plaster casts. All that counted for little. Mme. Boisvert recovered fully.

Father Landry's recruitment efforts succeeded. The choir size doubled and enticed our mother back into its ranks. A new chorister was Helen; she was also a soprano and a young mother, and of Francophone Canadian heritage. Once choir practice began for the Easter celebrations, she and our mother, Corinne, became good friends and confidants.

A wedding mass was scheduled during March — the Knights of Columbus Grand Knight's granddaughter, no less. There had to be a bit more pomp and circumstance at this event. The Grand Knight's wife requested "Ave Maria" sung solo early in the wedding ceremony. The special request had to be honored. Mme. Boisvert selected Helen as soloist.

Helen, though familiar with the melody, was uncertain about meter, emphasis, etc. since she barely read music. She asked Corinne to help her memorize all aspects of the piece. Our mother was eager to help her new friend and invited Helen to our house where they'd both benefit from the piano. The practice session went well; Corinne complimented Helen on her mastery of the piece.

Afterwards, as they chatted at the kitchen table over coffee and sweets, our mother — from past experience with St. Catherine's organist — reminded Helen that she should not be thrown off by any of Mme. Boisvert's mistakes. Helen might consider performing the "Ave Maria" unaccompanied, thereby enhancing its intended spirit of pure innocence. But that would require Father Landry's intervention because Mme. Boisvert would not cede her function in this special solo event. Helen felt confident that she could perform unaccompanied. "I like your idea, Corinne. I will speak with Father Landry."

Our mother nodded pensively. "Speaking of Father Landry, who is the young woman who's been following him around all during Lent?" Our mother was by no means a prude, but she was uncompromising in matters of decorum.

"Oh, that's Yvonne Lambert; she's my neighbor, poor soul. She lost her husband in an accident at the shipyard; what a tragedy. They'd been

married little more than a year. She says she helps keep Father Landry's vestments clean."

"His vestments get soiled a lot, *do* they? Helen, Pastor Flynn was not born yesterday. Vestments clean! Your neighbor is doing Father Landry more harm than good. Perhaps she's having a tough time right now, but she's putting Father Landry in an awkward position. Pastor Flynn, there — he's never been too enthusiastic about his new French assistant." Our mother, then in her late 20s, invariably cut through pretense. As a recent immigrant, she found security and strength in adherence to what she knew to be correct and proper.

As for Helen's "Ave Maria", it was punctuated with organ exclamations. Father Landry did achieve some successes in his choir rejuvenation but they were temporary. Pastor Flynn's suspicions about the young widow were substantiated. Within three years Father Landry would be reassigned out of St. Catherine's parish.

The Thursday choir practice for the Easter celebrations started off well enough. Father Landry stood next to the organ console and sang along with the choir as he indicated tempo with his right hand. All choir members appreciated his presence. Mme. Boisvert did not; he was usurping her dominion. Jeanne stared at him defiantly and remained dry-eyed.

That evening's music was for the Good Friday evening service. They were rehearsing an excerpted version of Bach's "St. John Passion". Father Landry had already selected two solo arias and identified soloists: tenor Mike, and soprano Corinne, our mother. The first run-through of the choral portions was finished and he was about to rehearse the two soloists. Just then, Junior appeared at the top of the stairway. Mrs. Griffin — only recently transferred from home to a nursing facility — had taken a major turn for the worse and requested the presence of a priest. Junior knew from experience not to arouse Pastor Flynn from his evening scotch-enhanced slumber in his favorite easy-chair. Father Landry left straightaway.

Now Mme. Boisvert had regained her domain. She began where they had left off; the soprano aria was next. She interpreted the music in her characteristic mechanical metronome manner, not to mention the occasional dissonance

effected by sounding an incorrect note. After struggling through the first attempt, Corrine said, "The score is marked 'Cantabile' and the noteforms indicate that the next-to-last note in each bar is held, like: '1 2 3 - 4', rather than '1 2 3 4.'" She sang a portion a cappella. Jeanne sobbed softly.

"Again." Mme. Boisvert was a person of few words.

The second run-through was the same stilted error-infused interpretation. Frustration flushing her face, Corinne exclaimed, "Two hundred and fifty years, and now — Madame — *you* would change it!"

"*You* sing what *I* play."

Whereupon Corinne put the score down on her first-row chair, went over to Jeanne, bent down, hugged her gently and said, "Please don't cry, sweetheart." Then, she picked up her handbag, smiled faintly toward the astonished choir, and disappeared down the staircase.

Helen, her fellow soprano and aria second, clambered down after her. "Don't go, Corinne, Don't go! We can't disappoint Father Landry."

"No, Helen. That woman is a *disgrace* to music! I'm done with her."

I always wondered why my mother responded the way she did. Both she and Mme. Boisvert were immigrants from the same humble background in Francophone Canada and both had come willingly to Maine to find better lives. Why not simply go along to get along? I suppose that the answer involves coping strategies — how to overcome the insecurity inherent in leaving behind birthplace and acquaintances, and adopting a new and different life situation. Mme. Boisvert and my mother dealt with that vulnerability differently. Two strategies — *take charge*, and *adhere to principle*.

Mme. Boisvert could feel secure only when she was in control of the situation. To cope with her new reality, she had to cast aside self-doubt. Clearly, the organist position, sustained by hook-or-crook, afforded her such control. (The department of M. Boisvert indicated that her take-charge compulsion extended beyond

her function as organist.) She must have been aware of her limited music ability. Compromising artistic integrity was secondary to her overpowering need to be in control. Madame firmly believed she'd regained her realm when Father Landry left to minister to Mrs. Griffin. She could not let her command slip — even if that meant perpetuating error. To accept Corinne's interpretation ceded control.

My mother's assurance came from her personal probity which applied to all aspects of her life. Fidelity to the music, especially to such a master as Bach, could not be compromised; if she were to give way on that, what next? Her need to be true to herself outweighed any esteem that might accrue from performing the solo aria. She could no more perform the aria incorrectly than steal from the collection basket.

Mme. Boisvert persisted in her position for many years. After my mother's departure, the first St. Catherine's ceremony at which Mme. Boisvert did not play was her own funeral. And my mother never again sang in the choir, though she did continue to sing as she played piano and, during holiday get-togethers, she always enriched our family sing-alongs with her beautiful voice.

— *Bill Snow*



The mission of the **Association of MIT Retirees** is to provide opportunities for members to engage with the Institute and to develop programs and events that will be of both interest and fun. We strive to be an active component in the MIT family by keeping our members in touch with each other and with the Institute, and to forge new friendships.

Nancy Alusow and Jane Griffin are co-chairs of the Association. The organization is supported by Traci Swartz and Chris Ronsicki of the Community Services Office.

Please send your suggestions for activities to:

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