

The People in the Photo

Hélène Gestern

Translated from the French by Emily Boyce
and Ros Schwartz

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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