

Francis Cammazets, SOE agent - obituary

The great oak in our family has fallen

Michael Morpurgo

Francis Cammaerts died last month in his beloved France. He had just celebrated his 90th birthday. He was my uncle, but as I wrote in this paper some time ago I thought of him very much as my grandfather, a grandfather's grandfather. He was a regular Guardian reader, so he had been following my column and would sometimes write me a card commenting on what I had written. In the last letter he wrote me he said he felt I had been too hard on my particular generation of grandparents when I suggested we had squandered the benefits of prosperity and peace his generation had bequeathed us. He had a longer perspective, he said, and thought we had done no better and no worse, that I should castigate myself so much. He was like that; always direct, positive.

After I had named him as my adoptive grandfather, he wrote me one of his cards. It began "Dear Grandson". When I went to see him two months ago in France, he greeted me warmly, as he always did, but this time with the words: "Hello Grandson". I felt honoured, and more moved than I can say. It was a moment I shall never forget. I think he would not mind if I told you something of his life, for my uncle and my "grandfather" was an extraordinary man.

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The truth is that for most of my life he was not someone I knew well until late in both our lives, and I held him in great awe, so conversation was not easy. For Uncle Francis was a legend in the family, and with good reason.

For a start he looked the part. At 6ft 4in he was a hugely imposing presence. He towered over everyone, and age never diminished that. And his voice had a deep resonance that was as compelling as the unflinching look in his eye. But it was what he had been, what he had done in his life that made him legendary to everyone in the extended family.

He had grown up between the two world wars. Conventional schooling did not make him conform. Already a teacher at the beginning of the war and a confirmed pacifist, he refused to join up. He was a conscientious objector until his brother Pieter was killed in 1941, when he found he could not stand aside any longer. He became an agent in the SOE (Special Operations Executive), and spent most of the rest of the war on operations in France. He was captured and only saved from the Gestapo firing squad by the heroic intervention of a friend in the French resistance. But his war experiences, he always insisted, were just an episode in his life. He did not allow it to dominate his existence after the war. A man of strong socialist principles, he was determined to make a better world out of the misery of the war. He went to be a teacher again, became a great teacher, eventually moving to Kenya to help establish teacher training there. He believed that the best way for a school to enrich the lives of children was to provide them with inspiring teachers. And this for him, along with his family and Nan, his beloved wife, was the meaningful part of his life.

We talked a lot, wrote each other letters. He came here to Devon with Nan and his family. We went to see them in France. Already a grandfather myself, this is where I really got to know him. With each visit the legend fell away and I began to know the man. My uncle became my grandfather. We learned how to be silent together, to be comfortable with each other. I knew with each visit we were on borrowed time, and I treasured every hour. He had a good end, the end he deserved. Just a couple of weeks before he died he celebrated his 90th birthday. His family, his real grandchildren and his friends were all there. The mayor of the village made a wonderful speech. He was a much honoured man, a much loved man.

The great oak tree in our family has fallen. This grandfather has lost his last grandfather.