

Mumm's Cordon Rouge

Louis Prince

People used to ask me how I happened to become Honorary Consul of France, a position I held a number of years ago. I could always tell what they were thinking by the way their questions were phrased. "How did you get to be consul?" really meant "How did you get this job when *I* am obviously much more qualified? I am more important and have more money than you."

"How do *you* happen to be the French Consul?" translated into "*my* accent is impeccable and *you* are always forgetting the subjunctive or using it in the wrong place."

"Who appointed you Honorary Consul?" The *asker* evidently intended to contact whoever appointed me in order to promote himself for the job in the future, perhaps dislodging me in the process.

A little paranoia, you think? My therapist thinks so too. But I always answered such questions politely, and when I discerned genuine curiosity, I would come up with something like this:

Consulates are established by the French Government in the United States cities which seem important to French interests. Each of these Consulates is headed by a Consul General sent over from France. He in turn appoints delegates known as "Consular Agents" or "Honorary Consuls" to represent him in other cities within his area. In my time Cincinnati fell under the jurisdiction of a Consul General in Detroit.

Traditionally the Honorary Consuls were American citizens serving without pay who were somehow connected with or interested in France, who could speak enough French to get along, and who were deemed capable of associating with minor dignitaries without creating a social catastrophe. My predecessor was our esteemed Literary Club Associate Member, *Lucien Wulsin*.

To be specific, I sort of fell into the job. I had long been a Francophile, having received a B.A. and done graduate work in French Literature. At the local Alliance *Francaise* I had become a *platonic* friend of the President, *Yvonne* Kinsman, an attractive French widow, who resided here in the 1970's and 80's. The Consul General in Detroit had become *very* good friends with Yvonne, so, when Lucien left town, the Consul asked Yvonne if she would recommend someone to replace him. An important requirement was that the Consular Agent have a guest room available for the Consul General to use whenever he visited Cincinnati. Yes, he would have preferred shacking up at *Yvonne's*,

but that would have offended protocol as well as his wife.

Yvonne recommended me, so he appointed me. Our State Department approved the appointment. It was as simple as that.

The Consul General was not as simple as that. He arrived at our house in one of those tiny [LeCars](#) made by Renault. He had driven all the way down from Detroit in a heavy rain storm and lots of traffic, so I thought [LeCar](#) must be an excellent vehicle. I hurriedly bought one in a fit of [francophilic](#) enthusiasm without even test driving it [LeCar](#) was cheap, but, to my dismay, it was made of soup can tin. I promptly sold it to someone I didn't ever want to know.

A portly skinhead, the Consul General from Detroit resembled a Nazi [Sturm](#) Trooper in manner and appearance. He monopolized the conversation at dinner, in French, which my wife does not speak. His emphatic statements were polemic material from the far right, and by the time I had framed an answering argument with the subjunctive in the right place, he would be off on some other obliquity.

During dessert one night he asked abruptly where one could buy a [Cuisinart](#). These kitchen utensils had recently been invented and produced in France, but most were being exported, so they were hard to find over there. He wanted one to send to his mother in Toulouse. Obviously he expected me to buy it for him, but I thought of a better way. I told him how to find [Kenwood](#) Mall. Later I discovered quite by chance from his secretary in Detroit, who detested him, that after staying with us a few days he would routinely submit bogus hotel bills to the French Government for reimbursement.

My duties were simple: I acted as a Notary Public would, filling out and officializing documents for French citizens who lived here or were visiting. I went to wine shops to taste the [nouveau Beaujolais](#), I got an occasional young [infracteur](#) out of jail, and sometimes I would welcome a visiting French [VIP](#).

One French business man, I remember, wanted to visit some companies which manufactured certain metal items. He had their addresses and they were expecting him, so all I did was drive him around in my car, listening politely while he explained to me in detail how his family business had prospered making tank treads for Nazi Panzer Divisions during the German Occupation of World War II. At the end of the day, at the airport, he handed me a \$100 bill. Not having received a tip since working in the sandwich shop at college, I was stunned. I was about to give it back, but then I didn't want to hurt his feelings- and, after all, it *was* \$100. It took only one gulp to swallow my self respect.

["Wunderbar! Das ist zu viel, aber danke schon, und jetzt aufwiedersehen,"](#) I blurted

as I pocketed the C-note. He disappeared down the ramp. No time to apologize for having spoken the wrong language in my confusion.

I did feel strange about one special requirement: I was to gather and forward regularly, to the Consulate in Detroit, news about what influential local people were doing, or thinking of doing, or just talking about, that might be of interest to the French Intelligence or Board of Trade. Presumably I would receive such information by listening to conversations and reading things which would not normally reach the attention of the Information Bureau. Was I engaging in low level espionage?

Fortunately, from the chit-chat I heard at such places as the Literary Club or the golf course no secrets of international importance ever emerged.

Our family social activities expanded. We were invited to a reception at the Consulate in New York to meet the President of France, Francois Mitterand. Having been given some very good seats to an important Reds game on that particular day, I was about to throw the invitation in the wastebasket when my wife saw it.

It became a very expensive excursion, with the air fare, the mid-town hotel, my wife's new hat and gown, and other items. Finally I was in line to shake President Mitterand's hand- only two persons away- when his gorillas indicated it was time to go. They whisked him out, his peasant wife following at a respectful distance.

Later the same year the Ambassador, Monsieur Vemier-Paillez, decided to visit the General Electric Jet Engine Plant in Evendale. A new Consul-General in Detroit, a wimpy little man, threw all responsibility on me, so that if the visit was successful he would receive credit, and if something went wrong, it would be all my fault. Vemier-Paillez, the first non-career diplomat ever to have been sent to the United States as French Ambassador, had been Chief of Renault autos. He had made them the top selling brand in Europe, and he had made the one that I had owned.

I was directed to assemble several hundred prominent business men and community leaders to whom he could give an address while he was here. This demand, on short notice, stumped me. I received zero assistance from the Council on World Affairs probably because I had never been a member. I had a nightmare about trying to sell tickets for a subscription banquet at the Hall of Mirrors. Finally I got an idea. The Rotary Club of Cincinnati had over 600 members and they met every Thursday. He could speak before them for 20 minutes. Fine. But then the Ambassador let me know that he would have to speak longer than 20 minutes to say everything he wanted to say. I told his secretary firmly that he could not talk longer than 20 minutes, because Rotarians habitually get up

and leave at 13:30, no matter who is speaking.

The Ambassador seemed dignified, taciturn and withdrawn. So it was astonishing to see how, upon his arrival at the Rotary Club, he transformed himself all of a sudden into a genial, American salesman, slap-on-the-back **Rotarian** type. But his short speech on international problems of the day was serious and to the point. It was followed by a question period. The first question from the floor was:

"Ambassador, can you tell us where the best French Restaurant in Washington is?" (Catcalls and laughter).

The Ambassador replied promptly: "The best French Restaurant in Washington is, quite naturally, in the French Embassy. Furthermore, the most important person in the Embassy is not I, it is the chef."

Later that day my spouse and I gave a reception for about 200 people in his honor. For this affair the French Government had contributed one case of **Mumm's** Cordon Rouge. At the start we served one bottle of the **Mumm's**. After that all glasses were filled from bottles wrapped in napkins, a domestic variety of lesser importance. After the reception we took the other 11 bottles of Mumm's home. The Ambassador's visit climaxed my diplomatic career.

Just before I left office, however, somebody decided to give me a medal for meritorious service. A new Consul General came down from Detroit to award it at a small gathering of *ressortissants* and General Electric people. He had a very bad cold and was coughing and sneezing on everybody. I thought he would probably try to kiss me after the pinning, so I kept backing away from him until I found myself in a corner. He got me and I was in bed for a week with French sniffles and a fever.

My wife thought the medal was so magnificent that she once wore it on a black velvet cocktail dress instead of her grandmother's diamond pin.

Before concluding I must explain that I often exhibit masculine Type A behavior. For instance, I am greedy in financial matters, I am aggressive on the Interstate, I tend to be extremely rude at the bridge table, etc. Despite this rough exterior, what makes me such a charming popular and attractive octogenarian is not, strangely enough, my youthful good looks. It's my bashful modesty.

So I don't talk about all my medals, until you ask me, of course. In fact I have stuffed the two of them into a little envelope and hidden it somewhere so that no one can find them. Incidentally, so that you won't need to ask: my other medal was awarded to me by

my grandson for being Meanest Grandfather of the Year when I didn't buy him a motorcycle at age ten.

In closing, I invite all those who want to see the French medal, to come out to my house, and we'll root around 'til we find it. And I'll serve you some slightly over-aged Mumm's Cordon Rouge. Yes, it could be a little flat by now.

Louis M. Prince 28 March 2005