

Religious and spiritual quest of Pierre Miville dit le Suisse

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In this present article, we will propose to the readers an innovative methodological approach in order to better know the personality of our ancestor Pierre Miville dit le Suisse. His mysterious and disturbing life, in many regards, goes beyond the historical facts and suggests instead various meanings which enable his descendants to allow better self-identity and to deepen their self-knowledge starting from the past experiences and events belonging to this memorable ancestor. Thus from some writings that we consulted briefly, it is interesting to study his psychology and to notice partly and indirectly his personality traits that are the genetic codes transmitted over time to his descendants. It is therefore permissible to speculate historically about his state of mind and to look back in order to discern in seeing some historical facts about his life while searching to answer the following questions: What were the values that our ancestor was ready to defend? What were in reality his unspoken concerns? What was really his quest coming to the New World?

Born in 1602 in a region in Switzerland probably the canton of Fribourg - no official document has yet been found - Pierre Miville dit le Suisse was a master-carpenter by trade. In his early twenties, he is, like many of his fellow Swiss countrymen, enlisted in the French army of the King Louis XIII as a mercenary. Thus the grenade in the coat of arms of the association *Les descendants de Pierre Miville* represents his military training. He took part in the Larochelle Siege (1627-1628) under the leadership of Cardinal of Richelieu who put forward his strategy called "Diviser pour régner". This military prelate decreed, using the reason of state, that soldiers could have the moral authority to eat eggs and cheese during the period of Lent. Pierre Miville dit le Suisse probably has, as a master-carpenter, taken part in the building of a dike 1,500 meters long and 20 meters high which imprisoned the Rochelais - Huguenots Protestants - who were compelled to eat horses, cats and rats for survival. Of the 28,000 Huguenots citizens, only 5,500 survived and were forced to capitulate unconditionally. All were eventually pardoned by the King Louis XIII and were granted freedom of conscience and the right to practice their religion according to the terms of the Edict of Nantes, prescribed 30 years earlier. As a Swiss soldier, Pierre was not a fearful man, as a French Marshal asserted in these fateful times that "a Swiss corps in the French army is like the bones in a body; not only for their values, but especially for their discipline and patience, as they do not get discouraged by defeat or delayed action" ⁴. To this effect, the motto of the association *Les descendants de Pierre Miville* is very evocative and is summarized in these few words: "S'unir pour construire". We also find on this heraldic symbol the leaves and acorns which explain the name of *Deschênes*⁵.

Apparently disgusted by a fratricide war between Catholics and Protestants, he was above all searching for a better life under new skies animated by a Christian faith and leading to the growth of extraordinary beliefs. In fact, for him, this religious war was wrong. He then met his wife, France Charlotte Maugis, and got married in Brouage around 1629 when he was about 29 years old and she was about 24 years old. They had seven children between

1630 and 1640: Gabriel (died at the age of 5 years old, 1630-1635), Marie (1632-1702), François (1634-1711), Aimée (1635-1713), Madeleine (1636-1708), Jacques (1639-1688) and Suzanne (1640-1675). His determination to come to the New World imposed some suffering on his wife and his young children -ranging in age from about 9 to 17 years old - who were forced to accept the dangers of this perilous crossing on high seas of the Atlantic Ocean, which could easily lead to illness and/or death. Thus after living 15 years in Brouage, Pierre Miville dit le Suisse's family arrived safely in a foreign land in 1649. It is interesting to note that this family was one of the largest to ever settle in the colony of "Nouvelle-France". Upon arrival, the Governor Louis d'Ailleboust, Sieur of Coullonges and d'Argentenay, granted to our ancestor and his family a part of the "Côte de Lauzon" which was located just opposite the Plains of Abraham at the foot of Quebec City and was separated by *la Grande Rivière de Canada*; known today as the Saint Lawrence River. This land grant was three "arpents" wide by 40 "arpents" deep. Having a motivated and full initiative personality, Pierre Miville dit le Suisse stayed mainly at "Côte de Lauzon" even though he had a house on Saint-Louis street in the lower town of Quebec City, that was given to him by Jean de Lauzon named "The Father", Sieur and Intendant of "Nouvelle France". He was also granted some land parcels of an area of 20 by 40 "arpents" at the *Grande Anse*, conceded by the Governor Alexandre de Prouville de Tracy, in the so called *Les Cantons Suisses Fribourgeois*, land which had been granted to him, his sons and other Swiss companions in July 1665, but had not been exploited successfully in terms of agricultural growth. In fact, his success as a farmer was not too good because he had to continually defend his territory, here and there, against the Mohawk raids as he was named second-in-command to the militia captain and explorer Guillaume Couture.

An event that we cannot put aside and avoid took place about the end of June 1664, five years before his death. The harsh conditions and large amount of work needed to clear his land required some assistance from colonial authorities, but his requests for some survival help and support was repeatedly denied. He did even return to France some years prior in order to hire workers, in spite of ocean crossing dangers, but without conclusive success. He then committed a seditious act by kidnapping men in a ship coming from Normandy. However, these workers were not destined to help him. Being put in jail when this act was committed, Pierre Miville dit le Suisse was abruptly judged by the Sovereign Council, who issued an inhuman verdict in banishing him for life from Quebec City. He also had to pay a fine of 300 pounds which was a fortune at that time. From this severe judgment, since he was unable without help to fulfill his pressing family duties, the agricultural obligations to his land, and the armed protection of his territory, he never entered Québec City again because of the threat of hanging. Only his spouse was allowed to perform administrative duties under his name in the capital. As already mentioned, the fact that he received from the Seigneur Tracy a land grant at *Grande Anse*, one year after this regrettable event, constituted in itself a forgiveness; an incident that many people wanted to forget at all cost. It is also important to underline that this prejudice, even a curse, is a stain to his memory and requires, in our opinion, a complete rehabilitation by today's civil authorities regarding this obvious historical mistake as Pierre Miville dit le Suisse did not lack faithfulness, courage, dedication and generosity towards his homeland. These qualities are profound character features that have been actually communicated to his current descendants.

Through these different roles and occupations, we observe that our ancestor had a real passion to live and a strong determination to protect his interests for the common good, the safety and the durability of the family patrimony. As we can see, even if his trade is modest but honorable, Pierre Miville dit le Suisse did not come from the upper class, but he knew very well the key persons needed for spiritual progress and the socio-economic survival of his family. Thus, we can rightly consider him a “commoner builder” that is to say a simple settler who was trying to live as peacefully as possible, according to his ways and means, without having nobility.

In brief, Pierre Miville dit le Suisse was surely, as mentioned, a hot-tempered and even a choleric character that certainly enabled him to react efficiently to the difficult living conditions in a time when military conflicts in Europe and America happened frequently. His complex personality was rooted by the courage to live without limits and his infinite strength of character. This is manifested in the coat of arms of *Les descendants de Pierre Miville* by the Ouroboros which means “the snake who bites his tail”. This representation was inspired by the coat of arms of Seigneur Jean de Lauzon, and is the revelation of an eternity symbol. His descendants have surely inherited this ancestral blessing. Besides, our Canadian ancestor must have been fundamentally religious even though he did contest sometimes, as we observe, the colonial authorities in those tough time, in this dark and difficult era.

Definitely, our ancestor and his descendants took part actively in the territorial settlement that became the future Canada, as we know it today. Pierre Miville dit le Suisse died during the evening, about 10pm, on October 14th 1669, at the age of 67. He received the last Catholic rites and was buried ironically at the “Côte de la Montagne” cemetery in Quebec City; the social community which rejected him when he was alive⁶. For all intents and purposes, our ancestor was an adventurer who succeeded with his family, as many other Canadian ancestors, in establishing a new life in an unknown and hostile land, a life founded on hard work without fully realizing all the consequences of his gestures. This settler also transmitted to his descendants the dignity of religious meaning and even a spiritual way of living for the progress of humankind. This is the prolific legacy revealed through generation to generation by our brave ancestor that is still evident today from the vibrant experience of the Christian faith and life affirmation in perpetuating, here and now, to the people of our Homeland.

Bibliographical notes

4 Vaillancourt, M. (2010). *Petites histoires de nos ancêtres en Nouvelle-France : Pierre Miville dit le Suisse*. <<http://histoiresdancetres.com/vaillancourt/pierre-miville-dit-le-suisse/>>.

5 This name was adopted in 1669 by the second son of Pierre dit le Suisse, Jacques, who probably wanted to please his spouse Marie-Catherine de Baillon, “mademoiselle de naissance”, who had a noble title, being part of the feminine contingent of “Filles du Roi”. It has been said that she was a descendant of Charlemagne, King Louis VII and Aliénor d’Aquitaine, queen of France and England. They had 7 children together. Both died a few hours apart in 1688 probably of epidemic case. Another explanation is attributed to the location where Jacques lived at *the Grande-Anse*, a land situated at Rivière-Ouelle in the Kamouraska region, which had oaks.

6 The end of life of Pierre Miville dit le Suisse’s widow, France Charlotte Maugis, was tragic. Avoiding the guardianship, it is François who became the guardian of his mother who died on the 10th of October 1676 to the sorrow of her family.