

Class of '57 Notes February, 2003

Hal Smith writes that the Government of France awarded him the rank of Commander in the Legion of Honor at a ceremony in Washington last April, for his work while serving in the Clinton Administration as Assistant to the Secretary of Defense (Nuclear Chemical and Biological Defense Programs) from 1993-1998. Hal, a Distinguished Visiting Scholar and Professor in the Goldman School of Public Policy at Cal Berkeley, notes that the ceremony was held in true, grand French style at the residence of the Ambassador to the US on a lovely spring day before a group of colleagues from the Pentagon, France, and members of his family.

Peter Sinz now semi-retired, finds time to do some traveling and in between keeps busy giving training sessions on fire protection, sprinkler system design, and fire fighting, both in English and Spanish.

Ilmars Hofmanis sends the following narrative about the search for his roots. I was fortunate enough to be able to emigrate to the US in 1950 after spending five years in various displaced persons camps in Germany. Soon after arrival I was drafted, but that made me eligible for the GI Bill, making it possible for me to go to MIT. After graduation I worked for 32 years in the aerospace industry, during which time I could not have any communications with people from my native country, Latvia, which was then part of the Soviet Union. Since retiring I decided it was time to visit the country of my birth in hopes of finding out the destiny of relatives left behind, especially my father who had made arrangements for me, my sister, and mother to travel from Riga to Germany by train to escape the communists in 1944. It was about midnight when I stepped out of the plane in Riga and saw a distant cousin, Gundars, whom I recognized from a picture he had sent me. He was holding flowers, a customary greeting for visitors. It was Gundars who started me on my search for my family by remembering a picture of my father with a group of other employees at a factory, which had appeared in a newspaper about 20 years before. Unfortunately, the factory was now bankrupt, but a lady still working there was able to search some dusty personnel files for names of younger people who had been employed there in the past. I got five names from her and found two of the five in the Riga phone book. Neither knew my father but one of them promised to call friends who had also worked at the factory, and a few days later I got a call from a man who had assumed my father's position when he retired. Sadly he told me that my father had died some years ago. He could not recall the exact year but he knew that he was interred in the Second Forrest Cemetery in Riga. Our next stop was the cemetery to find my father's grave. Finding the granite tombstone engraved Janis R. Hofmanis was among the saddest moments of my life, for my father had died in 1987 at the age of 90, just a few years before my retirement made it possible to visit Latvia. The cemetery records showed that Arnolds Hofmanis, from a small town called Tukums, had made arrangements for my father's burial. I remembered that Arnolds was the name of my father's younger brother. I did not have much hope of locating him, and upon driving to Tukums we found that the street names and house numbers had been changed. Someone suggested that the address we were looking for might be Main Street now. We drove down Main Street and stopped randomly at an apartment house where Gundars went inside to find out if anyone there knew of the Hofmanis family. When he finally came out to me sitting in the car he said, "Come and meet your Uncle Arnolds." We had a tearful but joyful reunion after more than fifty years. Arnolds was 99 years old, in good health and mentally alert. He was living with his wife and told me of my two cousins and their four children. I learned from him that my father was sentenced to 12 years at hard labor in Siberia by the Soviets in 1945 because he had been the regional director of Latvia's railroad system since the German occupation of Latvia in 1941. He survived the exile to Siberia, returned to Latvia, remarried and found employment with the Red Star Motorcycle factory. My uncle, having a less responsible job under the Germans, was sentenced to two years of hard labor, during which time he worked on the restoration of the White Sea Onega Canal. Visiting the country of my birth, finding close relatives who survived the War and the Communist Regime was one of the most memorable experiences of my life.

I close this month with notice of the death of two of our classmates, Michael Schneider on September 6, 2001 and Kenneth Maas on April 1, 2002. Mike had retired from Data General where he was VP responsible for the development and marketing of hand-held computers for the medical market.

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