

You are reading a shared article

Register with a few details to access more articles like this.

Roger Grosjean: The double agent, his lover, and the file MI5 refuses to release

Charles Bremner, Paris

Friday June 05 2020, 5.00pm BST,
The Times

Defence

D-Day

History

Germany

Europe



Roger Grosjean in his Bloch MB152 in 1941, and his wife Sallie
FRANÇOIS GROSJEAN

Share    

A young French fighter pilot fell for a beautiful Englishwoman in London during the war and swept her off her feet. But Lieutenant Roger Grosjean was also a double agent mistrusted by MI5, who may have sent “Sallie” to seduce and spy on him.

Nearly eight decades later, their son wants to know the truth about his mother but has hit a wall in his efforts to obtain their files from the British security service. After 16 years of appeals and despite the release of wartime files of other agents, MI5 is still refusing. “They have locked this file up and I can’t get at it,” said François Grosjean, 74, a retired university professor living in Switzerland.

Mr Grosjean wants to lay to rest a ghost that has haunted him since his parents cast him off as an infant to foster families and Swiss and English boarding schools. He wants to understand the hostility from his mother since birth and his estrangement from parents who quickly divorced and made separate names for themselves. Sallie, the daughter of a well-to-do family whose real name was Angela Pratt, became a leading model in Paris, then a successful racehorse breeder in Italy. Roger earned fame for his archaeological discoveries in Corsica in the 1950s and 1960s.

Mr Grosjean stumbled on their secrets after he began seeking his parents' history in 2003. "I thought it was about time I discovered who I was," he said. His father had already been dead 28 years and his mother, from whom he was long estranged, brushed off his requests.

A trove of his father's papers revealed Roger's time as MI5's Agent Fido in the [Double Cross System](#), part of the deception that fooled the Germans into believing that the D-Day forces would land near Calais. The story was enriched in 2009 by Sallie's unpublished memoirs and photographs that Mr Grosjean obtained after her death that year.

Aged 22, Roger Grosjean volunteered to spy for Nazis, who helped him to leave Occupied France for England in 1943, where he offered his services to the British and joined the Free French air force.

Under British orders, the pilot, whose MI5 role has been documented in accounts from the period, sent invisible ink messages to "Pierre", his German master, hidden in letters to a supposed lover in Barcelona. The British were having doubts about Grosjean's loyalties when he met Sallie, a part-time employee in the Free French club. Within weeks they were living together. She gave up her main job, in the theatre, and, in an extraordinary act for the times, she moved in with him at RAF Caistor in Lincolnshire and changed her name by deed poll to Sallie-Henriette Grosjean.



François Grosjean's mother modelling for Jacques Griffe. She died in 2009
FRANÇOIS GROSJEAN

Roger doubted her sincerity. "Does she really love me? As much as I love her? Why would she? I don't think she's after something," he wrote in his diary. Sallie gave birth to their daughter in 1944. The couple's relationship was tempestuous from the start and fell apart after Grosjeans moved to newly liberated Paris in early 1945 where François was born months later, an unwanted child.

In her seventies, Sallie wrote of her son's aversion to her: "He knew that I had wanted to get rid of him and he was not wanted."

Mr Grosjean says he only learnt of this as an adult but as a child his mother had always terrified him with what he now sees as bipolar behaviour. "I distanced myself from her, despite my craving for maternal love," he said. He only visited her occasionally over the years as she modelled for Jacques Griffe couture under the name Sallie Shipway and later settled in Italy, living with a succession of rich men.

A possible explanation for his mother's attitude slowly dawned on Mr Grosjean: "Could it be that MI5 had asked Sallie to keep my father under surveillance during his stay in England, and that everything that had happened from that time on was due to it?" He mused that the reluctance to divulge his father's file could be "that they do not want to admit that young English women were sometimes used for surveillance duties of agents during World War II, and that there were unwanted consequences from time to time."

Mr Grosjean believes the circumstantial evidence is powerful. “Why would she change her name? And to a French name and she didn’t even speak French. Why would she give up her job? I think there’s something there,” he said.

His repeated requests to MI5 have been rebuffed since 2004, including intervention on his behalf by a senior Conservative MP in 2014.

“Each time that I discovered new material linking my father to MI5, I would write to them to ask to be able to see his file. Invariably, I would receive a negative response,” he said. “They turned me down when I went to the Investigatory Powers Tribunal. I don’t know why they’re doing that. Maybe she was still an informant for many years after that.”

A Home Office spokesman this week gave the standard response that “we do not comment on security matters” but he noted that a specialised unit at MI5 handles written requests for information from relatives of deceased MI5 personnel. Mr Grosjean, emeritus professor of psycholinguistics at the university of Neuchâtel, said that he had long ago tried all the official channels to no avail.

The Franco-Briton published the tale of his parents in Switzerland a few years ago and now hopes to find a British publisher for the English version of *In Search of Roger and Sallie*.