

Is Charles de Bourbon the great, great-grandson of Louis XVIII?

The realtor who would be king

By MIKE TRICKEY
Southam News

STOUFFVILLE, Ont. — Charles de Bourbon is living the good life.

He has a nice lakeside home in a posh rural subdivision north of Toronto. He has an attractive wife, successful children and a bevy of grandchildren. His real estate business is successful enough that he was able to take a year off to sail his 36-foot boat to Florida.

But don't ever suggest the 55-year-old Dutch immigrant is living a life fit for a king. That's a bit of a sore point.

Charles-Louis de Bourbon, Duc de Berry, King Charles XII of France.

That, he says, is who he really is, and if history had been kinder and if post-revolution France had been more fair, everyone would know it.

De Bourbon doesn't look particularly regal on this sweltering afternoon alongside Island Lake.

Dressed in beige pants and a red golf shirt, he tells in his quavering voice the tale of how the French crown jewels were stolen from him during the intrigue of the French revolution and restoration.

He is, he says, the great, great-grandson of Louis XVII, son of revolution victims Louis XVI and his famous wife Marie Antoinette.

Traditional history says that's impossible because Louis XVII died in the Temple Jail two years after his parents in 1795 at the age of 10.

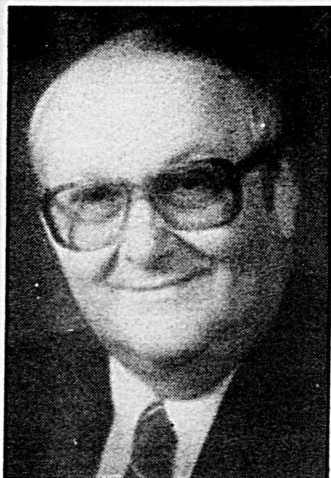
However, de Bourbon perseveres, claiming nearly all French historians now recognize that the young dauphin was smuggled out of the jail by zealous royalists, who substituted an ailing deaf-and-mute orphan who died shortly afterward. After the young prince was spirited from jail, he was taken to Germany and Switzerland where he became a watchmaker and grew to manhood.

Not only that, says de Bourbon, but he fathered seven children, invented the exploding grenade and became the head of the Dutch munitions factory.

De Bourbon says even his main rival for the French throne, the Comte de Paris, admits the young prince escaped. However, the "Paris pretender" maintains that as a young man, Louis XVII switched identities with a German acquaintance and lived an uneventful life before dying at an early age.

Charles says the body of the imprisoned dead boy was exhumed, revealing a skeleton of a 15-18-year-old and death by scrofula — something the allegedly dead 10-year-old Louis XVII never suffered.

But the would-be Charles XII



Charles de Bourbon, left, has done pretty well in his adopted homeland of Canada. He has all the trappings of success. But it's nothing at all like being the King of France, which is who he says he really is.

gets little support from Canadian historians.

"It's a wonderful story," says Dr. Brian Jenkins, head of the history department at Bishop's University in Lennoxville, Que. "And it's made more so because it's impossible to say for certain what happened to the young prince."

However, no matter how entertaining the de Bourbon scenario, Jenkins puts it in the same category as the story of Anastasia, a daughter of Russian czar Nicholas II who is said to have escaped execution in 1918.

A woman claiming to be Anastasia surfaced in Berlin in 1920 and fought a lifelong battle for recognition before dying in the U.S. several years ago. Her claim won support from important quarters but she was never successful in winning legal recognition.

Dr. Hubert Johnson, a University of Saskatchewan historian and author of a book on the French revolution, is less charitable.

"It's a fable, I'm afraid," he says. "It's a fascinating little story, but there's no truth to it. The prince died or was killed in prison. The possibility of anybody being able to liberate the dauphin is very remote."

Both historians say if the prince had survived there is no doubt he would have been given back his position during the restoration 20 years later.

De Bourbon says Louis XVII was one of seven men who claimed the throne in 1814 and was exiled to England because he knew too much that would embarrass the country if it came to trial.

The other imposters, he says, "including one colored fellow, can you believe that?" were imprisoned.

Despite official skepticism, de Bourbon is not without supporters. A group of French royalists

offered him a castle if he would return, but he opted to stay in Canada.

"I didn't really care for the group so I declined," he says. "They were a little too conservative. I've spent most of my life in Canada and I guess I've become too liberal. They would like a return to a monarchy that is totally undemocratic. That wouldn't be my style."

De Bourbon has never lived in France and speaks just enough French "to get by." Born in Holland, the son of a journalist and Dutch town mayor — or King Louis XIX if you will — he emigrated to Canada in 1951 because jobs were scarce in post-war Europe.

Two years later he married Arline-Marie Winchester, who didn't believe his story either.

"I mean, would you?" she asks now. The mother of four potential heirs to the French throne — one died in infancy — she now supports her husband's version of history.

The putative Crown prince became involved in real estate and now runs a successful operation in booming suburban Markham.

He produces a family tree dating to 1553 and Henry IV of France that shows how the Maison de Bourbon dominated Renaissance Europe. Even today, he points out, he is related to Spanish King Juan Carlos who is part of the de Bourbon clan that has been the Spanish monarchy since the early 18th century.

Presiding over the comfortable, but hardly palatial, living room of the Stouffville de Bourbons is an 1844 Alfred Clayton portrait of either a rotund Louis XVII shortly before his death or an imposter long afterward.

The oil has been in the de Bourbon family for more than 140 years except for a 35-year period after the 1914 German invasion of Belgium. De Bourbon's grandfather fled

fused even to part with it last summer when the city of Paris requested it for an exhibition honoring Louis XVII.

De Bourbon travelled to the exhibition, where he took pains to avoid his rival, the Comte de Paris, who by descendency from Louis XVIII (Louis XVII's uncle), who was put on the throne during the 1814 restoration, is generally recognized as the rightful heir to a crown that no longer exists.

"I don't think he even should have been there," Charles sniffs. "He's a great grandson of this fellow who voted to put the monarch to death and he comes to an exhibition honoring the son. It's not right."

In a parliamentary vote in 1792, Louis XVIII voted in favor of beheading Louis XVI and Marie Antoinette.

De Bourbon says he doesn't bear his rival or his family any ill will for trying to erase his own branch.

"But it's not very fair" the Comte de Paris has all those ancestral lands and the recognition of being royal.

"We hope to get some recognition by the French government," says Charles. "It would make us happy and close the door on this long and sad story."

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