

OBITUARY

FLQ member Jacques Cossette-Trudel took part in 1970 October Crisis kidnapping

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Jacques Cossette-Trudel was a member of the Front de libération du Québec (FLQ) who later renounced violence. He was one of a group of young Quebecers who kidnapped British diplomat James Richard Cross, sparking the 1970 October Crisis. A notorious figure because of his involvement in the kidnapping, Mr. Cossette-Trudel was also a filmmaker, educator, lifelong socialist, activist and writer. He died of cancer on March 14 at the age of 76.

As a young militant Mr. Cossette-Trudel was a committed socialist dedicated to Marxist thought. The “Libération” FLQ cell to which he belonged was distinct from and often opposed to the “Chénier” FLQ cell that kidnapped and murdered Quebec deputy premier Pierre Laporte.

After holding Mr. Cross captive for 59 days, Mr. Cossette-Trudel and his associates handed him over to authorities without injury when their hiding spot was discovered.

The October Crisis is an extremely sombre moment that remains “a very important page in the history of Quebec and Canada,” Concordia University sociologist Jean-Philippe Warren said. It was the culmination of seven years of FLQ violence, including bombings and bank robberies. The two kidnappings led then-prime minister Pierre Trudeau to invoke the War Measures Act, sending troops to Montreal. While hundreds of suspected FLQ supporters were arrested, few were charged.

“October, 1970, was a turning point. It brought out the worst on both sides,” said historian Louis Fournier, author of *FLQ: Histoire d’un mouvement clandestin*. “After that a certain equilibrium was re-established.”

Prof. Warren reflected that in today’s Quebec, however, Mr. Cossette-Trudel “is no longer important. He was a socialist who supported independence. ... His vision is not really a political option for any party today. His combat of 1970 was not picked up by future generations.”

Jacques Cossette-Trudel was born in Shawinigan on Feb. 15, 1947, to parents Alphonse Cossette-Trudel and Charlotte Lizotte. In 1990, he wrote, “I was born Catholic, petty bourgeois and French Canadian.” His father was a high-ranking civil servant for the federal

government at the time of the October Crisis. Alphonse offered to resign his post when Jacques was revealed as an FLQ kidnapper, according to the younger Mr. Cossette-Trudel, but Mr. Trudeau refused, stating, “A father cannot be blamed for the stupidity of his son.”

Mr. Cossette-Trudel became politicized as a college student and teacher in Montreal. He was a leader of student protests over a number of social-justice issues in 1968 and 1969 at the Collège de Maisonneuve, a CEGEP. He and his partner, Louise Lanctôt, were expelled as a result. At that stage Mr. Cossette-Trudel “was a leftist, a bit of an intellectual leftist along the lines of the Waffle wing of the NDP. He had charisma and a powerful presence,” according to Marc Laurendeau, a journalist, documentarian and professor of journalism at the University of Montreal.

After the CEGEP protests, Mr. Cossette-Trudel and Ms. Lanctôt moved on to more radical stances. Within a year the couple joined the FLQ and went underground. Mr. Cossette-Trudel abandoned his post as a supply teacher for a Montreal school board. On Oct. 5, 1970, when Mr. Cross was kidnapped, Mr. Cossette-Trudel drove one of the getaway cars, conveying the British trade commissioner to an apartment in north Montreal.

During this period, Mr. Cossette-Trudel assumed the alias of Jacques Tremblay, a faux Radio-Canada journalist, which enabled him to move about Montreal even while Mr. Cross was being held.

“Revolution was in the air,” Mr. Fournier said, describing the context of Mr. Cossette-Trudel’s extreme actions. “May ‘68 in Paris, the Black Panthers, the Weather Underground, the Tupamaros of Uruguay – rebellious young Québécois were influenced by all that.”

Ms. Lanctôt, who eventually divorced Mr. Cossette-Trudel and became a writer and publisher, said that their actions arose from a sense of injustice because francophones were treated as second-class citizens in Quebec at that time. “We sometimes didn’t have the right to speak French in our workplaces,” she told The Globe and Mail in an e-mail. “We struggled to preserve our culture and language in the anglophone sea of North America. The world was boiling over. Young people had had enough.”

By December, 1970, Mr. Cossette-Trudel and Ms. Lanctôt were tracked down and arrested. The remaining members of the Libération cell negotiated the release of Mr. Cross in return for exile to Cuba. Once installed in Havana, Mr. Cossette-Trudel underwent a period of self-critique in the Marxist tradition. He soon publicly renounced violence. In a joint letter

with Ms. Lanctôt to a Montreal journalist, they wrote, “The critical analysis of the so called ‘October Crisis’ has taught us that armed agitation must stop. FLQ terrorism is a two-edged sword which has begun to cut off the Québécois themselves.”

Frustrated by the lack of opportunity and largely isolated from the francophone world in Cuba, Mr. Cossette-Trudel and Ms. Lanctôt negotiated a means to switch their place of exile to France in 1974 along with their two children, Alexis and Marie-Ange. Living in a working-class district of Courneuve in Paris, Mr. Cossette-Trudel was employed as a desk clerk in a cheap hotel and as a milling machine operator. By 1978, the couple expressed their desire to return to Quebec.

Upon his return, Mr. Cossette-Trudel was convicted in the kidnapping of Mr. Cross and spent a year in jail. Released in 1980, he took up a discreet life as a writer, often working for government ministries and as an independent television documentarian. His transition to mainstream society was not unique. “There were hundreds of FLQ sympathizers. Not all were arrested. Many people associated with the FLQ pursued careers in academia, journalism and politics. They were reintegrated and accepted,” Mr. Fournier said.

Mr. Laurendeau first contacted the exiled couple in Cuba and then interviewed them in Paris. “They said they had an hour or two. We ended up talking all night.” The journalist remained in touch for the rest of Mr. Cossette-Trudel’s life. “He was a source, not a close friend, but I appreciated his intelligence, sense of history, critical thinking and humour,” Mr. Laurendeau said.

The final interview between the two was broadcast in September, 2020, as part of an October Crisis 50th-anniversary radio special on Radio-Canada. In the lengthy interview, Mr. Cossette-Trudel said learning of the murder of Pierre Laporte “was a turning point in my political thinking and my life. ... I had a horrible night and was ashamed of belonging to the FLQ from that moment on.”

He also reflected on his own role in the October Crisis half a century earlier. “Personally I live with the consequences right up until now. Exile and de-exiling is complicated because it cuts one off from one’s origins. ... When I returned I was no longer completely Québécois. I had a lot of trouble reconnecting. My life was ruined to a certain degree. I could have had a more interesting life. One has to think before doing violent or radical acts.”

Prof. Warren, the sociologist, said, “To him the killing of Mr. Laporte was unforgivable. It took a lot of courage on his part to say so.”

In a 1990 essay for *Liberté*, “L’histoire séquestrée” (“History Held Captive”), Mr. Cossette-Trudel wrote about learning of Laporte’s murder: “The death of this man was the death of all of us.” Yet in the same essay, Mr. Cossette-Trudel mocked Mr. Cross, writing, “His greatest misfortunes were without doubt missing a bridge game planned for the evening of October 5 as well as having to eat Quebec food for 59 days. Eating pâté chinois [shepherd’s pie] in North Montreal? My Lord!” In the article, Mr. Cossette-Trudel did not evince sympathy for the diplomat, whom he and his colleagues held handcuffed for close to two months, or for Mr. Cross’s family.

For his part, Mr. Cross never forgave his captors for what they did. “I hated the lot of them and would have cheerfully killed them if the opportunity arose,” the diplomat said in a 1996 account of the kidnapping that is part of an oral history project at Cambridge University.

The 50th-anniversary broadcast provoked controversy over Mr. Cossette-Trudel’s recounting of a moment in October, 1970, when he claimed FLQ militant Paul Rose put a revolver on a table between them, saying he wanted a hostage to be killed. That account sparked denials from the Rose camp and a renewal of tensions between surviving FLQ members. “It’s not surprising they don’t agree now. They didn’t then,” Prof. Warren commented. Mr. Cross recalled in the Cambridge interview that his kidnappers “had a lot of heated arguments” among themselves.

In 2020, Mr. Cossette-Trudel released *Une révolution tranquille au Québec, 1960-1980*, an ambitious documentary series broadcast by Télé-Québec and other francophone networks in Canada and abroad. The series was nominated for a Genie award. It paints a portrait over time of the cultural and economic development of Quebec during the 20-year period. It’s nationalistic, yet comprehensive and critical. “He was not a failure. He had talent,” Mr. Fournier said.

Mr. Cossette-Trudel spent his final years dividing his time between an apartment in Montreal and a small community south of the city. When he died, he had received financing from cultural agencies and was preparing to make a film based on his experience in exile. He leaves his spouse, Chantale Bujold, a film producer; son, Alexis Cossette-Trudel, a video-blogger who has promoted conspiracy theories; daughter, Marie-Ange Cossette-Trudel, who teaches philosophy at Collège Montmorency, in Laval, Que.; and former wife, Ms. Lanctôt.