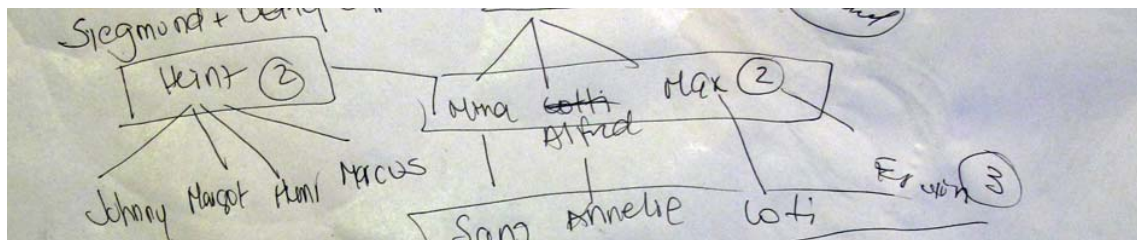


From the Kitchen

27 October 2010



A pleasant exhaustion envelops me as I sit in a crowded Jumbo, waiting to taxi for take-off from Heathrow, to head east; back to the familiar from what was unfamiliar and became familiar very quickly.

Back in London for a day, I had to get used to not asking whether the person on the other side of the counter spoke English, as I had been doing in Nederland and Belgium. Dutch / Flemish was fine, French and German were okay. With the two-and-a-half-day Cohn family Summit, it was a mish-mash of English, Dutch, German, French and Spanish. Yes, I met previously unknown and undreamed-of relatives from Peru.

While we are all descended from a Jewish couple of the eighteenth century, this group of 'cousins' now includes Jews, Christians and atheists (and possibly more beliefs) and blood from Europe, Africa, South America, North America, the Middle East and Asia. Ages range from six months to ninety-one years. Much of the conversation had to do with getting clear on relationships – second cousin, third cousin twice removed ... The fact that a number of times in the past cousin married cousin, made this more complicated. At the level of my paternal grandmother's parents' generation, the tree could be split into three branches, but parts of these branches were fused with others through the intra-marriages.

How do we now draw such clear family trees, with their tessellating branches in an age when sperm and eggs may be donated by anonymous people? Does it matter? Perhaps it does when there is the possibility of siblings falling into relationships with their true status unknown to them. Clear family lines may once have been important for reasons of political alliances and property succession, but they also serve to prevent the consequences of inbreeding.

I realised in those two-and-a-half days that family connections mean more to me than I had realised or admitted to myself. I have been too blasé about it. I like to be able to explain things, including why I do or don't do certain things, or feel a particular way. Having no explanation for the sense of family bond, I have been denying its importance – even its existence. Being with over fifty people, with all of whom I am related, put the lie to this. They were all friendly, warm, welcoming people. But there was something else, something I cannot put my finger on. That I cannot explain it, does not make it not so, which in itself is a lesson.

To learn so much about my familial origins and connections meant a lot to me and this surprised me. Different members of the different branches were able to tell different parts of the story and these parts overlapped in complex and fascinating ways. I found that even I, with limited memories of my grandmother (I was seven when we moved to Australia in 1955), was able to add pieces to the overall understanding of the relationships; for instance that she came to Australia four or so years after we did with the intention of emigrating

(she came with a one-ton crate of belongings, including furniture) and that, although she didn't stay, she did visit again.

There are many stories of family members being killed by the Nazis in the 1939-45 war and other stories of those thought lost being found. Many talents and occupations were represented and bonds formed through shared interests. And there was discussion of doing it all again in some years' time in Peru or Australia, with the possibility of a larger gathering as more relatives are discovered, and more are born.

I have never been attracted by Facebook, with its instant broadcasting to 'friends' of one's activities and commenting on those, and then commenting on the comments. However, I can see its value in us staying in touch through this medium, having made the connections in a real way first. Perhaps that is what it is meant for anyway, rather than random requests from people I've never met or even heard of asking whether they can be my friends. I don't expect complete strangers to walk up to me on the street and ask that I accept them as an instant friend, although there have been instances of such strangers requesting I take them home for the night. Then, I suppose, the majority of the people I spent the last weekend with were strangers to me until less than a week ago. And, it turns out, in many ways I am a stranger to myself. Strange world.