

Switched at Birth, Two Canadians Discover Their Roots at 67

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By **Norimitsu Onishi**

Norimitsu Onishi reported from Sechelt, British Columbia, and Winnipeg, Manitoba.

- Aug. 2, 2023Updated 11:15 a.m. ET

Richard Beauvais's identity began unraveling two years ago, after one of his daughters became interested in his ancestry. She wanted to learn more about his Indigenous roots — she was even considering getting an Indigenous tattoo — and urged him to take an at-home DNA test. Mr. Beauvais, then 65, had spent a lifetime describing himself as “half French, half Indian,” or Métis, and he had grown up with his grandparents in a log house in a Métis settlement.

So when the test showed no Indigenous or French background but a mix of Ukrainian, Ashkenazi Jewish and Polish ancestry, he dismissed it as a mistake and went back to his life as a commercial fisherman and businessman in British Columbia.

But around the same time, in the province of Manitoba, an inquisitive young member of Eddy Ambrose's extended family had shattered the man's lifelong identity with the same genetic test. Mr. Ambrose had grown up listening to Ukrainian folk songs, attending Mass in Ukrainian and devouring pierogies, but, according to the test, he wasn't of Ukrainian descent at all.

He was Métis.

And so, after a first contact through the test's website, and months of emails, anguished phone calls and sleepless nights in both men's families, Mr. Beauvais and Mr. Ambrose came to the conclusion two years ago that they had been switched at birth.

The mistake occurred 67 years ago inside a rural Canadian hospital where, born hours apart, Mr. Beauvais and Mr. Ambrose say they were sent home with the wrong parents.

For 65 years, each led the other's life — for Mr. Beauvais, a difficult childhood made more traumatic by Canada's brutal policies toward Indigenous people; for Mr. Ambrose, a happy, carefree upbringing steeped in the Ukrainian Catholic culture of his family and community, yet one divorced from his true heritage.

The revelations have forced the men to question who they really are, each trying to piece together a past that could have been his and to understand the implications.

“It's like someone going into a house and stealing something from you,” Mr. Ambrose said. “It makes me feel I've been robbed of my identity. My whole past

is gone. All I have now is the door I'm opening to my future, which I need to find."



For Eddy Ambrose, a happy, carefree upbringing seeped in the Ukrainian Catholic culture of his family and community, yet one divorced from his true heritage. Credit...Nasuna Stuart-Ulin for The New York Times

The first time the two men interacted, in what could have been an uncomfortable phone conversation, Mr. Beauvais broke the ice with a joke. The Beauvais parents, he said, "looked at the two babies, took the cute one and left the ugly one behind." But as the two men began talking about serious matters, they confided in each other that they wished the truth had not emerged.

"We both agreed that if we opened that up and nobody else knew about it, we would have just shut the book and we wouldn't have told anybody," Mr. Beauvais said. "Just let our life go."

Born in a small, municipally run hospital in Arborg, Manitoba, a town about 70 miles north of the provincial capital, Winnipeg, the two boys' paths diverged from the start.

Two couples had come from nearby towns to the hospital for the birth of their sons.

Camille Beauvais was French Canadian and his wife, Laurette, was Cree and French Canadian, a Métis.



Camille Beauvais was French Canadian and his wife, Laurette, photographed here with her sister, was Cree and French Canadian, a Métis. Credit...Nasuna Stuart-Ulin for The New York Times

The couple lived in a town called Fisher Branch, in a small, poorly constructed house that, like most houses in the town in the 1950s, lacked indoor plumbing, according to three people who knew the couple and still live in Fisher Branch. Camille Beauvais worked in maintenance for the national railroad.

“He was a real gentleman, he was polite and greeted everybody very nicely,” recalled Cubby Barrett, 91. “I was a friend of his.”

Gladys Humeniuk, 96, said that Laurette — who had moved from a long-established Métis settlement called St. Laurent where Cree and French were spoken — “always kept to herself because she couldn’t speak English.”

By contrast, James and Kathleen Ambrose were the children of Ukrainian immigrants. They were prosperous farmers and also had a general store and post office in a town called Rembrandt. By the time they arrived at the hospital, they had three daughters, so that Eddy “as the only son, became the world to mom and dad,” recalled the oldest sibling, Evelyn Stocki, 75. “He had such a close bond with our dad.”

Eddy Ambrose described his father as a “mentor,” adding, “I wanted to be like him.”

In an interview in Winnipeg, in a modest home that he shares with his wife, Mr. Ambrose remembered growing up cherished and protected by his parents and three older sisters.

“Richard should have had my upbringing, in a loving family,” Mr. Ambrose, a retired upholsterer, said. “That should have been him. He should have had that love.”



Mr. Beauvais and his dog Sam at his home in Sechelt, a coastal town in British Columbia, on a sprawling property where he and his wife keep horses. Credit...Alana Paterson for The New York Times

When the two men first talked by phone, Mr. Ambrose couldn’t fathom the childhood trauma of Mr. Beauvais.

“Richard told me I probably wouldn’t have survived — it was that brutal,” Mr. Ambrose said. “And I figured, well, maybe I’m glad I wasn’t there, but, in a way, it’s sad for him to say that.”

Mr. Beauvais's understanding of his boyhood is drawn from memory fragments and "bits and pieces from people," he said in an interview at his home in Sechelt, a coastal town in British Columbia, on a sprawling property where he and his wife keep horses.

Mr. Beauvais's father died of an illness when the boy was 3. His mother, Laurette, took him and two sisters to her hometown, St. Laurent, the Métis settlement. They lived with his grandparents, in a log house separated from a highway by a swamp that was passable only in fall and winter. The family spoke Cree and French. His grandmother made dandelion wine and heated rocks in a wood stove that she would use to warm up the children's beds.

"The sad thing is I don't remember her name," said Mr. Beauvais, adding that he knows only his grandparents' last name — Richard, his given name.



Mr. Beauvais's understanding of his boyhood is drawn from memory fragments and "bits and pieces from people." Credit...Alana Paterson for The New York Times

After his grandparents died, the weight of taking care of his siblings fell on him. He remembers the blood after accidentally pricking a sister with a diaper pin. He remembers going through a dump for food. He remembers waiting for his mother outside the "ladies' door" at the local bar.

Then, when he was 8 or 9, came what he called "the worst day" of his life. Government workers swooped into the log house to take custody of the children, who had been left by themselves.

Mr. Beauvais remembers hitting and kicking a worker who had slapped a sister, who was crying, then being thrown off a low roof. The children were eventually taken to a room with pink walls where, he said, they were picked “like puppies” by foster parents and he “was the last one to go.”

“There was no compassion,” Mr. Beauvais said. “If you were Native, the government workers didn’t care.”

Later, he would learn that the children had been removed as part of the [Sixties Scoop](#), a Canadian assimilationist policy that disregarded Indigenous welfare issues and instead carried out large-scale, sometimes forcible removal of Indigenous children from their families for adoption by white families.

Fortunately, Mr. Beauvais said he eventually ended up with a caring foster family, the Pools, with whom he has kept ties to this day. He learned English, but lost his French and Cree. Mr. Beauvais recalled going to court one time when his mother tried unsuccessfully to regain custody of her children.



A bust of Louis Riel, the storied political leader of the Métis people, sits outside Le Musée de Saint-Boniface, a keeper of Francophone and Métis heritage in Winnipeg. Mr. Ambrose wants to be officially recognized as a Métis. Credit...Nasuna Stuart-Ulin for The New York Times

Living in rural Manitoba, where Indigenous and white communities have often rubbed shoulders since the fur trade, he said he slipped easily between the two worlds.

At 16, he moved to British Columbia to become a commercial fisherman. He eventually became the owner of a welding company and of commercial fishing boats, hiring Indigenous and non-Indigenous crew members.

He never attempted to gain official recognition as a Métis and, as a result, never received any special government benefits. He watched how Canada's policy toward the Indigenous changed radically.

Canada has shifted from the forcible assimilation of Indigenous people to reconciliation through apology and compensation and the celebration of their culture.

"It was tough being a Native in my time," he said. "It wasn't cool like it is today."

Today, Mr. Beauvais feels the same way he did during his first conversation with Mr. Ambrose. He wasn't sure what to do, if anything, with his new identity.

"I'm 67 years old, and all of a sudden I'm Ukrainian," he said. "I've never been around Ukrainian people.

"I've told Ukrainian jokes, you know, but do I really want to look forward to it?" he said of the possibility of looking into his newly discovered ancestry.



James and Kathleen Ambrose were the children of Ukrainian immigrants.
Credit...Nasuna Stuart-Ulin for The New York Times

Since that first phone call, though, Mr. Ambrose has embarked on an intense search for himself, bonding with a biological sister who happened to live nearby and starting beadwork, a traditional Métis craft. He is the driving force behind a lawsuit that their lawyer, Bill Gange, has filed against the province of Manitoba, seeking an apology and compensation.

An official for the provincial government said that it had no comment because the hospital where the mistake occurred was owned and operated by the town of Arborg at the time. A spokeswoman for the hospital's current owner, Interlake-Eastern Regional Health Authority, said records of the births were no longer available.

Mr. Ambrose wants to be officially recognized as a Métis, partly so that his grandchildren can qualify for grants earmarked for the group — even though he acknowledged that he had never suffered discrimination as a Métis.

“I can get what’s rightfully mine,” he said. “I didn’t ask for this — switched at birth.”

As for Mr. Beauvais, he said he wouldn’t change the life that he had led.

“If I could go back today into that hospital room and switch, I wouldn’t do it, because I got two beautiful daughters, a beautiful wife, three beautiful granddaughters,” he said. “Sure, you would have that with somebody different. But it wouldn’t be those kids or that wife.”

Still, he felt a sense of loss after the genetic test showed he had no Indigenous roots.

“The Native thing was something that I had, that nobody could take away, I guess,” said Mr. Beauvais, who still uses “us” and “we” in referring to Indigenous Canadians. “Just because I’m not Native now, in my mind I always will be.”



For Mr. Beauvais, a difficult childhood was made more traumatic by Canada's brutal policies toward the Indigenous. Credit...Alana Paterson for The New York Times

Norimitsu Onishi is a foreign correspondent on the International desk, covering Canada from Montreal. He previously served as a correspondent in the Paris bureau, and as bureau chief for The Times in Johannesburg, Jakarta, Tokyo and Abidjan, Ivory Coast. [More about Norimitsu Onishi](#)

https://www.nytimes.com/2023/08/02/world/canada/canada-men-switched-at-birth.html?campaign_id=61&emc=edit_ts_20230802&instance_id=99042&nl=the-great-read®i_id=82410691&segment_id=140925&te=1&user_id=b63fb89e313fc1b21e5e0b19f098edc2