

Hugel on Hugel: Ambition, Per

By Ron Shaffer

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Max Hugel, using his own particular blend of persuasion and propriety, raised himself from an impoverished childhood in Brooklyn to the lofty life of a millionaire businessman, the head of a multinational corporation doing business in 100 countries. It was almost enough, he said at the height of his power, to make him feel like an emperor.

He achieved this through ambition, persistence, sharp business instincts and — by his own admission — through occasional lies and deceit.

A successful businessman, he says, has to have a good memory and must be perceptive.

"I have an excellent memory, although I don't know where I got it," he says. "I am also perceptive, and the source of this is a mystery, too. Maybe having been such a small boy forced me to sharpen my wits so that I could be surer of survival."

This success story is chronicled by the foremost expert on the subject, Hugel himself, in a 278-page unpublished, ghost-written autobiography completed in 1974. It was written on the recommendation of associates in his corporation, who hoped its publication would boost the company's stock.

In *The Making of a President — Brooklyn Style*, as he entitled it, Hugel tells how he parlayed a hunch about the domestic marketability of Japanese sewing machines into a realm of import-export endeavors (typewriters, knitting machines, computer printers) ruled by Max Hugel. Sometimes, as he put it with a touch of self-satisfaction, he made a dozen phone calls a day to his representatives in different capitals of the world.

This was the result, as he saw it, of growing up short (5 feet 5), poor, and fatherless: "a tremendous inner drive to achieve, to succeed, to be somebody, to be willing to work my a-- off to get ahead."

In the manuscript Hugel matter-of-factly describes some of the things he did in his eagerness to succeed: misrepresenting himself to banks and customers, even to his own cousin, and trying to steal ideas.

Hugel was born in 1925, shortly after his father's death from a congenital heart condition, and in his first years his mother was so pressed to support the family that he and his sister were temporarily put in an orphanage. After rejoining the family in boyhood, he began to realize that he would have to be a scrapper and "that I would have to live by my wits."

"When you are a short person, as I am, you learn early in life to anticipate your problems so that you can avoid them," he says in his autobiography. "Determined, I began to develop traits which were to serve me better in later life than I could have imagined at the time. I became a fast reader. I developed what was virtually a photographic memory. I acquired a strong sense of competitiveness, knowing that I either had to compete or fade away."

By his own account, the twist of fate that shaped his life began with a lie. He was drafted shortly after his 18th birthday in 1943, and fearing assignment to the infantry and what he felt would be certain death he told a recruiter that he spoke Japanese.

In infantry training, he suffered through discrimination "because of my size and my [Jewish] religion." At the same time his company commander gave him a "secret assignment," as he put it.

"I was, in effect, the platoon spy," Hugel says in the autobiography. "Every week I had to write up a report on any criticisms I heard in the platoon regarding the Army, the country and the war, and I mailed it to a post office box." He gradually began adding some complaints of his own, to the point that when he was selected for a mysterious rendezvous with an Army officer, he worried: "Did somebody find out my spy reports were mostly fiction?"

The officer instead explained that he was from Army intelligence, had noted Hugel's linguistic ability, and wanted to recruit him for Japanese language school at the University of Michigan.

sistence — and a Bit of Deceit

Upon realizing that Hugel did not know the language, the officer turned to leave. Seeing this opportunity as "a chance of a lifetime . . . a chance to save my life," Hugel turned to his wits.

In desperation, he engaged the officer in conversations about the man's family, religion, hometown and college, and his own eagerness to learn. The impressed officer finally recommended him for language school, even though he lacked the required college credits and training.

Competing against people he termed socially and educationally superior, Hugel passed the lengthy and rigorous course, became an Army lieutenant, and was assigned to Japan just after the war ended in 1945.

Following his discharge in 1947, he returned to Japan, hoping to cash in on his knowledge of the country's culture and language. He formed a business venture with two friends, but immediately ran into a series of problems.

At one point Hugel and his partners found themselves stuck with 30 old DeSoto taxicabs, which they had imported at a cost of \$18,000 only to have them impounded because of bureaucratic obstacles.

"Month after month, the cabs rotted on the open pier as we tried to figure out a way to get at them or get rid of them," he recounts. The autos stayed there for a year. "They were getting so rusty you could put your fist through a door without any effort or pain."

Hugel and his partners solved the problem by persuading a Japanese auto repair shop owner to buy the cabs sight unseen for \$30,000, on their representation that the cars were in "fine" shape.

"Sometime later we heard that the man had been unable to salvage as much as a usable screw from the cabs and that the man went bankrupt. We felt sorry for him, so we gave him a job with our company."

Hugel and his partners had failed to find "who we had to pay off" to free the cabs.

In his early business days Hugel recalls that he was continually getting into tight situations by representing himself as something other than what he was.

In Hong Kong, Hugel's book says, he tried to borrow money for the struggling partnership. "I made a big pitch to the bank official about what a thriving company we were in Japan, but he decided to find out for himself by telephoning our Tokyo bank," Hugel wrote. "When he hung up he looked at me and said, 'You've got to be kidding.'"

But an insurance agent overheard the conversation, Hugel wrote, and liked the young man's spirit. He recommended a number of business contacts in other countries.

Around 1949, Hugel went into partnership with a Japanese sewing machine manufacturer to market the machines in the United States, where Hugel correctly felt there was a great demand for a cheaper but well-made machine. Hugel headed the distribution arm, called Brother International, and used that as a springboard to wealth.

Going to school at night while he built his business empire, Hugel graduated from the University of Michigan in 1953 with a specialty in Japanese economics.

Hugel says he learned that he could become successful by working harder than his employes, being attentive to detail, having a "game plan" for himself and his company, allowing democracy among employes, treating women fairly, and rewarding his employes for their work.

In the 1970s Hugel spent more and more of his time involved in Republican politics, which is how he met CIA director William Casey, philanthropy, and teaching young people good business practice.

Through all of his autobiography there emerges his theme that man can make of himself what he wants: "Just about everything that happens to people, good or bad, is done to them by themselves."