**Louis Joseph Hugo (1777 - 1853)**

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When I was 15 years old I read a poem by Victor Hugo called 'The Cemetery of Eylau'. This reading had both disturbed and fascinated me. I had just discovered two worlds: that of Victor Hugo and the Imperial epoch. What I did not know was that the hero of the Eylau's cemetery, the one that the poet called 'Uncle Louis' was a real person and that he lived to the end of his life close to my hometown, at Tulle. The Hugo family gave to the Empire, of course [Victor Hugo](http://napoleonic-literature.com/AgeOfNapoleon/E-Texts/Hugo2.html#Battle), and the well known  General Joseph Léopold Sigisbert Hugo, the father of the Poet, but also, less known, Louis Joseph Hugo, brother of the General, the poet's uncle. You will find at [The Age of Napoleon](http://napoleonic-literature.com/AgeOfNapoleon/), an excellent site of Patricia Teter, some of Victor Hugo's poems and their English version. Knowing a little more of the hero's life, you may appreciate the poem even more. This is what I propose to you.

**Origins**

Louis Joseph Hugo, father of the one we are talking of, was a master-carpenter in Nancy. He formed part of the local lower middle class. Married to Marguerite Michaud, he will have a large family, some of the children coming from a first marriage. On 15 November 1773, Joseph Léopold Sigisbert was born, Louis Joseph on 14 February 1777, and finally François Juste in 1780. Thanks to their father, the children were able to attend to the Royal College of Nancy, which would be useful to them during their military career.

**The Revolution**

Because of the approching revolutionary storm, the father, with the prudence of a tradesman, remained closed-mouthed about his political opinions. The children, at first Joseph Léopold Sigisbert, then Louis Joseph, and later François Juste all answered the call of the threatened Republic. Louis Joseph, 15 years old, becomes a volunteer in 1792. He enlisted in the 6° Battalion of Meurthe commanded by the General Bournonville. He will learn very early the hard training of the war. The young Louis Hugo had trouble resisting the cold during the campaign of Trêves. He was found lying lethargically in the snow, and believing him dead, he was thrown in the middle of the corpses intended for the common grave. Miraculously, a quiver saved him. His health returned quickly and would have only the nuisance to note that his companions had divided his luggage, according to its usefulness.

**The First Battles**

On 24 November 1793, Louis Hugo fought at Kayserlautern. In 1794, his battalion was part of the 110° Demi Brigade of the army of Sambre and Meuse. He fought at Fleurus then Haldenhoven in front of Marshal Clerfayt. He was under the Jourdan's command during the campaigns of 1795-1796. In 1797, he was incorporated in the 20° de Line in the Army of the Interior. His education allowed him to advance quickly in rank. He was a corporal in 1798, fights in the campaign in Holland in 1799, and became a maréchal-des-logis in the gendarmerie-à-pied in 1800. That same year, he was promoted to second lieutenant in the 110° Demi-Brigade. He fought at Bilerach and Hohenlinden in 1801.

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**The 55° R.I.L.**

Louis's battalion was amalgamated to the 55° Régiment of Infantry of Line on 26 May 1803. He is sent with his company to Saint-Omer, under the command of Soult where he formed part of the 1° Battalion of 55° R.I.L. The regiment will follow the army to the camp of Boulogne.

**The Campaign of Germany**

Lieutenant Hugo was part of the encircling movement which caused the capitulation of the General Mack in Ulm. The 55°, under the command of Marshal Soult, forming the 4° Army Corps, was at Austerlitz. His division, commanded by Saint-Hilaire, took the Pratzen, and attacked Kamenski's division. He showed courage and was wounded in the leg by a bullet. His distinction gave him the rank of Lieutenant, probably to replace Lieutenant Toupé, who fell that day. On 14 October 1806, Iéna, the 1° and 2° Battalions were under the command of Colonel Silbermann and formed part of Saint-Hilaire's division. Louis Joseph again distinguished himself and a month later was named captain of the 1° Battalion of the 55°, by the Impérial Decree of November 23. His story was told in Victor Hugo's [Les paroles de mon oncle Soeur de Charité](http://napoleonic-literature.com/AgeOfNapoleon/E-Texts/Hugo.html#Paroles).

**The Cemetery of Eylau: 8 February 1807**

The 55° Ligne was posted near Eylau's cemetery with order to mantain the position. The cemetery surrounded the church in the center of the village. It was extremely cold, and ice and snow covered the battle field. Determined to re-take the village, the Russian commander, the General Bennigsen, at 7:30, concentrated an immense cannonade on it. The 55° Ligne was in the middle of the shells. Napoleon ordered Saint Hilaire's Division and Augereau's Corps to attack the Russian center. Joseph Hugo and 85 grenadiers of the 55° must hold the cemetery. A violent snowstorm plagued the troops. The Russian artillery almost entirely decimated Augereau's Corps. A round of grapeshot exploded close to Louis Joseph and he received a ball in the bicorne and a biscaïen hurt him in the right arm. He gave himself a hand-shake to make sure that he had not lost his arm. And fell inanimate on the snow. His lieutenant took command of the small troop, which had been decimated by the shells. When the Russian cannonade ends about 1800, there remained only three survivors in the cemetery, Hugo, the lieutenant and the tambour.

You can read the long and beautiful poem by Victor Hugo, [The Story of Louis Joseph](http://napoleonic-literature.com/AgeOfNapoleon/E-Texts/Hugo3.html#Cemetary) in 1810 (Victor was 8 years old), that was told to his brothers.

In the aid station, his money was stolen, but the bullet was taken out of him. A few days later gangrene set in, but no one was found to amputate his arm. Louis Joseph, by injections and quinine, saved his arm himself . The 55° lost Colonel Jean Baptiste Silbermann, on 4 March because of his wounds, but Louis Joseph would be decorated with the Legion of honor on 14 April 1807. Under the orders of his new commander, Colonel Schweiter, he apparently fought at Friedland.

**In Front of Spain, Kingdom of Fire**

On 7 December 1808, Napoleon, who signed all, appointed Louis as Chef-de-Battalion of the Regiment Royal-Etranger in Spain. There Louis found his two brothers: General Léopold Hugo and François Juste Hugo. The duty is very hard: With newly recruited soldiers, he had to guarantee the security of the Paris/Madrid road. On 29 June 1809 in Mengamnos, the treason of some soldiers put him in a difficult situation. With courage and clearness, and the benefit of the night, using a ruse to make them believe that they were more numerous, Louis and some of his troops broke out to safety. For this action he was promoted to Major on 12 September and became a Chevalier of the Royal Order of Spain on 25 October 1809. On 22 March1810, he was promoted to Colonel, with the command of Brihueta.

During 1810, he returned twice on mission to Paris. First to warn Napoleon of a plot and the second time to order (Order of the King Joseph Bonaparte) Madam Hugo, the wife of Léopold and mother of poet, to join her husband in Spain. The remembrance of the poem of Victor Hugo on Eylau comes from this first meeting with his uncle. On December 4 of the same year, Louis Hugo was given command of the Regiment Royal Etranger. The Royal Etranger was composed partially by veterans from the campaign in Prussia, but also of Spaniards, Swiss, Italians, and some enemy deserters. On 23 March 1811, at the bridge of Aunon, with 550 infantrymen he was attacked by 5000 Spaniards. His brother Léopold arrived with his troops to save him at about 1700 hours.

Victor Hugo tells us, according to the memory of his Uncle another episode of this war: [Souvenir des vieilles guerres](http://napoleonic-literature.com/AgeOfNapoleon/E-Texts/Hugo2.html#Guerres)

But Napoleon is in Russia, the army of Spain moves back and it is from the town of Bordeaux, that Louis Joseph Hugo will learn the first abdication. Thanks to his excellent service record and, like everyone, thinking of the future, Louis will serve the First Restoration. On 12 February 1815 he was decorated with the Order of Saint Louis and made an officer of the Legion of Honor on 14 February. Napoleon returned from Elba and Louis, still a Bonapartiste, becomes Colonel of the 2e étranger on 21 April 1815. But for him Waterloo will be the end of 24 years of military adventure in Europe. The second restoration will not forgive those which joined the 'Usurper.' For five years he will be one of the demi-soldes. Finally, on 15 May 1820, Louis Hugo will be named, 'temporarily', a member of the council of recruitment of Corrèze. But this is another story... until his death, December 18, 1853.

**Bibliography**

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