Note on the Sikivie family name

Over the years I gathered some information about the origin and meaning of my family name. I am glad for the opportunity to record and make available this information here. However let me first say a few things about myself.

My name is Pierre Sikivie. I am the second child of Armand Sikivie and Claire Roebroeck, who lived at 34 stationstraat in Landen, Belgium. I have an older brother, named Philippe, and a younger sister Anne, the latter no longer with us. Anne passed away in September 2019. Also my parents passed away, my father in February 2003 and my mother in June 2010. I was a student in the Patronaat school in Landen, in the Collège Sainte Croix in Hannut, and at the University of Liège where I got a Licence en Sciences Physiques. I went to Yale University in the USA for graduate school and got a PhD in Physics in 1975. I met Cynthia Chennault in September 1979. We were married in July 1980, and have two children, Paul and Michael. We both have had faculty jobs at the University of Florida in Gainesville, Cynthia in Chinese Literature and myself in Physics.

The name Sikivie is unusual. My father was a medical doctor specializing in dentistry. His father was Justin Sikivie, a blacksmith in a small village called Borlo. Justin and his wife Léontine Vrancken had three boys. My father was the youngest. His older brothers, Joseph and Marcel, were both priests. A cousin of my father named Bertrand and his children round off the list of all the Sikivies that I knew as a child. It was known to us that all Sikivie's related to my father came originally from a nearby village called Jeuk (Goyer, in French). We were curious about the origin of our name but knew very little.

Over the years, I have become aware of three items that may shed light. The first item is a saying I heard several times when I was a high school student in Belgium. I may have heard it earlier as well, when I was in primary school in Landen. The expression is in Walloon dialect from the region of Liège and sounds as follows using French phonetics: "Sikivie n'est nain muer". There is little doubt about the meaning. In French, it would be "Sikivie n'est pas mort". In English, "Sikivie is not dead". I did not know what to make of this at the time, and neither did anyone that I asked. People would say this to me out-of-the-blue, "Sikivie n'est nain muer" without themselves knowing what it meant. The meaning appeared lost. I thought it was a pun because Sikivie sounds like "Ci qui vit", short for "Celui qui vit", meaning "The one who lives". If so, the saying meant "The one who is alive is not dead" which seems rather trivial.

The second item is a genealogy established by my uncle Marcel Sikivie, who was priest in the village of Wintershoven, between Tongeren and Hasselt. Uncle Marcel had strong academic interests. He new classical greek and had taught this in a high school in Waremme. At family gatherings, he would not miss a chance to tell us about the lives of the saints, a topic about which he was an expert. He helped my brother Philippe during Philippe's high school years, tutoring him in various subjects. Uncle Marcel went to search archives in the village of Jeuk to establish a family tree. In a letter to my brother Philippe he describes what he found. I have a copy of the letter. I reproduce it here, in its original Flemish.

Wintershoven, 07.02.83

Beste Philippe, Annie en het Jonge Volk,

Wan uw vraag naar de oersprong van onze
familienaam, heb ik werk gemaakt, al is het misschien
niet met de groots mogelijke spoed gebeurd.
De stamvaarder van de Sikivie's van Limburg is in Jeuk
aangeland in 1810. Ziehier een lijst, al zal die u maar
matig interesseren.

Philippe Sikivie - Pinet Annie
1918 Armand Sikivie - Roebroeck Claire
1881 Augustin Sikivie - Vrancken Léontine
1851 Guillaume Sikivie - Monfrère Hortense
1817 Pierre Sikivie - Mignolet Lambertine
1781 Jean-Pierre Sikivie - Retro Anne-Marie

Jean-Pierre komt uit Lamine, département de l'Ourthe
(eens Lamisgne of Lamisgnie geschreven).
Zijn vader was Jean-Jacques gestorven in Lamine
in l'an 12 de la République Francaise.
Zijn moeder was Anne-Marie Detillieu (eens
Dethioux geschreven) geboren te Lamine.
Bij zijn aankomst in Jeuk wordt zijn naam Siquivie
geschreven, maar reeds vanaf 1815 Sikivie.
In de parochieregisters van Jeuk heeft Jean-Pierre
bij de doop van zijn dochter Marie-Catherine (1812) zijn
handtekening gezet. Zo iets gebeurt nooit; misschien
heeft de pastoor hem dit gevraagd om de eigenaar-
digheid van de naam. Met vast hand stond er

jean pierre squivéee (of squiviee).

Dit zal dan Squiviee
zijn, want 3 e's (Squivéee) achter elkaar schijnt wat
uitzonderlijk. De man was een metselaar maar toch
een "lettré" vermits hij met letters wist aan the gaan.
In 1700 was dat verre van gewoon.

In Limburg ben ik nu naar de eindmeet.
Er dient verder gezocht met de dorpsnaam Lamine
en dus in het Rijksarchief te Luik, want Lamine zal
wel het dorpje zijn tussen Waremme en Luik,
nabij Hodeige. Of dit département de l'Ourthe is,

weet ik niet.

*Wat de vorm Squiviee verder wordt is een mysterie,
voorlopig toch. Vooral voor 1800 ziet men niet op
een letter na en werd dan eens de naam, dan
weer eens de bijnaam ingeschreven.*

*Als het weer meevalt, ga ik eens naar les Archives
de l'Etat te Luik. Misschien kan Annie of gijzelf
daarvoor instaan. Eerts l'etat civil, l'an 12,
met Jean-Jacques. Verder les régistres paroissiaux
(voor beide) van Lamine.*

*Tot zover dit werkje. Het is niet erg moeilijk, maar vergt
soms wel iets geduld.*

*Ik heb vorige week vernomen dat Pierre en Cynthia
bij de doop van Fabrice zouden komen en daarom
moest met die naam van ons maar komaf gemaakt
worden.*

*Hopelijk zijt gij allen gezond ... en gelukkig!
Dit wenst u dan toch van harte*

Nonk Marcel .

P.S. ik ben een een tikje nerveus, vandaar dat gekrabbel.

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I translate the first few paragraphs as follows

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Wintershoven, February 7, 83

Dear Philippe, Annie and the Young Folks,

When you asked about the origin of our
family name, I went to work, even though this did
perhaps not happen with the greatest possible speed.
The founding father of the Sikivie's of Limburg
arrived in Jeuk in 1810. Here is a list, even if
it interests you only moderately.

Philippe Sikivie - Pinet Annie
1918 Armand Sikivie - Roebroeck Claire
1881 Augustin Sikivie - Vrancken Léontine

1851 Guillaume Sikivie - Monfrère Hortense
1817 Pierre Sikivie - Mignolet Lambertine
1781 Jean-Pierre Sikivie - Retro Anne-Marie

Jean-Pierre came from Lamine, Depártment de l'Ourthe
(also written as Lamisgne or Lamisgnie).
His father was Jean-Jacques, who died in Lamine
in the year 12 of the French Republic.
His mother was Anne-Marie Detillieu (also written
as Dethioux) born in Lamine.

Upon his arrival in Jeuk his name was written
Siquivie, but after 1815 Sikivie . In the
registers of the parish of Jeuk, Jean-Pierre
put down his signature when his daughter
Marie-Catherine (1812) was baptized. Something
like that never happens; perhaps the priest asked
him because the strangeness of the name. With
a firm hand appears

jean pierre squivée .

This likely should be Squiviee because 3 e's
in succession appears exceptionally strange. The
man was a mason/bricklayer but nonetheless a 'literate
person' sinds he knew how to handle words. In 1700
this was far was common.

In Limburg I have come to the finish line.

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The letter goes on by recommending further research in the Royal Archives of the city
of Liège, because Lamine is a small village near Liège, and some personal matters.
So we learn that Jean-Jacques Siquivie lives in Lamine, married to Anne-Marie Detillieu,
and dies there in the 12th year of the French Republic (Sept. 24, 1803 to Sept. 22, 1804).
They have a child, Jean-Pierre Siquivie, born in 1781. Jean-Pierre moves to Jeuk in 1810
and works there as a mason. When his daughter Catherine is born in 1812, Jean-Pierre
writes the family name as Squiviee. After 1815, the name changes to Sikivie. We may guess
a possible reason why the latter change occurred. In 1815, the French under Napoleon
were defeated at the battle of Waterloo which marks the end of the (first) French Empire.
Jean-Pierre Siquiviee and his family living in a Flemish village may have wanted to distance
themselves from their walloon origins and adopted a Flemish version of the name.
The information gathered by my uncle Marcel shows that Sikivie was originally a French
or Walloon name from the region around Liège. This jibes with the saying "Sikvie n'est nain
muer" being in Liège dialect. "Siquivie n'est nain muer" is likely closer to the original. But

what does the expression mean?

This bring us to the third item which I owe to my wife, Cynthia Chennault. She is a scholar of medieval chinese literature, her special area being the poetry of the Six Dynasties period. Her work causes her to spend many hours in the Library of Congress in Washington DC. In an idle moment there she searched for books on the origin of Belgian names and found "Dictionnaire Etymologique des Noms de Famille de Belgique" by Eugène Vroonen, published in 1957 by Charles Dessart, Editeur, Bruxelles. The book has an entry for Sikivie which I reproduce here in its entirety:

Sikivie. Profess. Si qui vi, "Celui qui voit" (Dialecte). Témoin professionnel (appelé pour la passation des actes). Synon.: Scu-, Sku- -vei

In the dictionary, "Profess." is an abbreviation for profession. The entry says that Sikivie means "He that sees", i.e. it refers to a professional witness to agreements and contracts. The names Scuvie, Skuvie, Scuvei and Skuvei may be synonymous.

When I read this, the meaning of the expression "Sikivie n'es nain muer" suddenly became clear. It means "He that saw is not dead". As such, the expression is loaded with meaning: He who witnessed agreements and contracts is not dead. Since he is alive, he can still bear witness to them. Presumably the agreements and contracts were made orally. Someone was called to be witness. Later that person was referred to as Celui qui vit. In French, the word "vit" has two distinct meetings. "Il vit" means "he lives" or it means "he saw". When I was a kid in Belgium, it did not occur to me that "Ci qui vit" may mean "He who saw".