

A SUMMER IN SWITZERLAND WITH A SWISS FAMILY

Pat Edwards

In 1958, “When I was one and twenty” I graduated from a Catholic college for women in Baltimore. After four years of study, essay writing, exam taking, classes in English literature, French and religion, and summers spent typing to earn spending money, I began to realize that there was a larger world than Baltimore or even the United States. It was waiting for me and I was waiting for it.

Somehow, without a computer, I discovered a program called “The Experiment in International Living” which offered a summer in Europe, living with a European family for the sum of \$500. While I had minored in French, reading, writing and learning pronunciation, I could barely speak a word. This was the opportunity I sought to become conversant in my adopted language.

I learned that opportunities in France were nil, but there was a canton (state) Vaud in Switzerland where French was spoken and that is where I would go. I borrowed the money from my mother, packed my bags and set sail on the *Arosa Kulm* leaving from NYC in June. Packed in with a thousand other adventurers we sailed for ten days across the ocean, reading, talking to others, attending orientation classes centered on our adopted country. What I remember most was the evening singing of folk songs in all the European languages. In French were “*Chevaliers de la table ronde*” and “*Halloo, halloo James, quelle nouvelle?*” which I can still sing today.

Thus our group of ten young women from across the USA (*Pat Edwards in the upper left*), some in college, others graduated, followed our leader from Rotterdam to Paris to Geneva by train. The train continued along Lake Geneva (*Lac Léman*) to the small ancient city of Nyon which was settled by the Romans over 2000 years ago. We were parceled out to families



in the region. Some were with farmers, some stayed in Nyon, and I went to live with the Pariat family in a small village called Signy outside of Nyon. My Swiss father was a master mason with



a wife and two young daughters at home. Other daughters had married and lived nearby, one to a Swiss farmer, un *paysan*, whose dirt ground floor was taken by animals, their feed, and farming implements. They lived upstairs.

The Pariats did not speak one word of English. Their small tidy house faced the postcard-perfect Mont Blanc. Each day after breakfast I would sit in the sunshine on the front steps facing Mont Blanc in the Swiss Alps. Our village was spotless with surrounding views of the Alps and older Jura mountains. Cleanliness and orderliness were Swiss virtues and they imbued all that I beheld. I was given a bicycle to ride since the young girls were still in school. (*The two Pariat sisters with Pat Edwards in the center are shown at right.*)



Madame would not let me wash the dishes but I was allowed to dry them with her supervision. I was shown how to remove the *duvet* from my small bed every morning and hang it out the open window to the wind and sunshine.

One connection we shared was religion. They were Catholic as was I and we went to Mass *en famille* on Sunday. I was shocked that the women went bareheaded. I always carried my mantilla. But the liturgy was the same, all in Latin, so I was at home.

Madame Pariat was a superb cook and her omelets floated to your plate. Her soups were tasty and filling. A fresh and crusty baguette was always served with meal. I was told that my chore was to visit the bakery and bring home the daily bread. “Good for my French to interact with others in the village,” said Madame. Of course, there was the day that Madame said “the villagers thought American people were rude because when I walked down the street, I did not acknowledge those I encountered.” “But what should I say or do, Madame?” “You must look them in the eye, smile and say “*Bonjour messieurs, ‘dames.*” Easy. You just had to ask and the Swiss went straight to the right answer, no dodging the obvious.

Our Swiss leaders were a pair of single sisters, les Aubersons, and they were meticulous in arranging our weekly get togethers. The food they served for us was ample and delicious. Here was our first encounter with Swiss fondue made from local cheese, white wine and a *soupçon* of *kirschwasser*. And there was always a glass of the same white wine which we learned never crossed the Swiss border.

After two weeks of family living, with my Swiss sisters I joined the rest of the group to spend two weeks of travel around the country. We first went to the mountains where the lovely brown Swiss cows and their clanging bells were taken for the summer. The German Swiss accompanying the cows wore lederhosen, stockings and stout shoes, with always a ready smile and a “*Grüss Gott.*” The hostels where we stayed were rustic, but spotless, very Swiss.

When we entered the medieval Chateau de Chillon, of which Lord Byron had written, the Swiss sister of one of our group, pointed to a 14th century escutcheon in the great hall which said "De Tscharnier." Her name was Alyette de Tscharnier. Her handsome father and beautiful mother had turned their waterside manor house into a small hotel, and they kindly hosted one of our group.

We visited another French-speaking canton in the mountains, the Valais. We saw the Rhine River tumble in waterfalls in a canton near Germany in the northern part of the country. Our last stop was in the canton of Berne, famous for its bears. As I walked down the street, I asked my companion, "Do they speak French or German here?" A passerby said "*Moitié, moitié, mam'zelle,*" half and half.

Thus, passed six weeks of kindness, small adventures, delicious food, the beautiful countryside of mountains and lakes, and my great leap of learning and using the French language to converse daily. I have managed to keep the flame alive over almost sixty years, traveling in Europe, twenty-five years of a winter stay on the French island of Saint Barthélemy in the Caribbean. In Annapolis I was one of the original members of *Le cercle français* which gathers monthly for lunch and French conversation.

And then I joined the *Alliance Française* which meets the first Monday of each month to speak French and drink wine. Together we celebrate *La fête de Noel, le quatorze Juillet* (Bastille Day) where we all stand to sing "*La Marseillaise.*" The Naval Academy sends its band and a troupe of **Midshipmen** to join us in a special ceremony on the grounds of Saint John's College. There is a large statue placed to honor the French who came to this country to give their lives for the success of the American war for independence. You have heard of the young Marquis de Lafayette but remember it was Admiral de Grasse whose victory in the Battle of the Chesapeake led to the siege of Yorktown and Lord Cornwallis's surrender, the final battle of the years long war.

Thus, my luck to open the door to another way of living, eating, listening, an example of frugality and kindness which lives with me to this day. That plus an ability to speak another language, far from perfect, but *pas mal*.

Vive la France et vive la belle Suisse! ■