

Nedenstående interview blev optaget til CONTACTS LE JOURNAL DE L'ASSOCIATION AFS VIVRE SANS FRONTIÈRE under Returnee Day på AFS Centennial i November 2014.

Interviewet blev optaget på engelsk, oversat til fransk til Contacts og senere igen oversat til engelsk af Michèle Ruffat, som er bestyrelsesmedlem i Cercle des Amis, (franske AFS Alumni)



Kirsten M. Anttila and Bernie Cheyne

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Sharing memories was one of the objectives of the Returnees Day. With Kirsten and Bernie being present, no way we could miss that objective!

The Returnee Day was an occasion to savour French cheese, wine and products. There was a jazz concert too, a one-man show, and workshops to discuss AFS issues. But overall it was 600 AFSers of all ages meeting at the Convention Center (Palais des Congrès) in Paris to meet old friends and other AFSers. Among them were Kirsten M. Anttila and Bernie Cheyne, who met in the United States 59 years ago.

From listening to them telling anecdotes and finishing each other's sentences, you could believe they had never been apart since... "We have known each other for such a long time, but we had never met again for exactly 58 years to-day!" says Bernie. "Kirsten had me come all the way from New Zealand", she adds to explain her presence. "When I found Bernie's mail, says Kirsten, since I knew that the Centennial would take place in Paris, I asked her, "Why don't you come to Europe to celebrate? And we will have a get-together in Denmark later in November, so we will have more time to leaf through our albums with photos from our youth".

Introductions

These two women have been through so many events that introductions are quite lengthy. Kirsten explains first, "I worked for a few years with local AFS associations, then since the end of the 80's I got more deeply involved in an international network which fosters collaboration among educational institutions through Internet being one of the founders of the Danish branch. Being a teacher at the start, teaching at primary, lower secondary levels, as well as in Service training for teachers in both Denmark and in various EU projects. I worked for two years in Africa, Tanzania, too so my life..." and you got married!" adds Bernie. "I married a Swedish engineer I met in Tanzania, our daughter went to Latvia with AFS, you might meet her here because she is filming, being herself a member of the board of AFS Alumni Denmark too". Bernie tells her own story, "I was a teacher for a long time too, at the primary level first, then in secondary schools (high schools) then at university level, then teaching adults". For the last years I was a chaplain in a hospital, then in a retirement home. On the AFS side, my family hosted a young American and my mother launched a local AFS branch in the small town where I lived in New Zealand. I always kept an interest in AFS, three nieces and two nephews were AFSers, and my family felt rewarded by her involvement in the program. It changed my life. And by the way I am a Dominican sister, a nun, but I did encourage a lot of people to apply for AFS».

Letters from Stephen Galatti

When it comes to tell about their stay in the US, the two women are unstoppable. Bernie recalls that travelling has not always been as easy as it is to-day. "There were 17 of us when we embarked on the ship from New Zealand, and we were told, "You are ambassadors from your country". The sea journey to San Francisco lasted for 21 days, where we had a training session». There is one thing Bernie will never forget about this training session, it's the presence of Stephen Galatti himself, who chaired AFS after A. Piatt Andrew. "He came all the way to San Francisco, we knew him well at the end. He was a wonderful person, few people to-day in Paris can boast to have known him".

Kirsten was one of that happy crowd, and is proud of it. "Stephen Galatti was a treasure, we met him several times. We had a meeting in Syracuse, New York in March 1956, and he asked me to tell the story about AFS, even though he was one of the founders, and I'll never forget that! And he wrote to our parents before we left for the US, I still have his letter. At a time, Bernie and myself were in a group which was regularly invited to deliver speeches about our own countries, so we almost knew each other's speeches by heart at the end. Somebody got qualms about this, fearing that going out three or four times a week might be too much. Stephen Galatti wrote to Kirsten's parents, "Don't worry about that, she is OK". Can you imagine, There were 650 AFSers in 1955-56, and he provided individual care for each of us!".

Bernie recalls the motto of AFS after the war, "Walk together, talk together, all ye people of the earth, and then we can have peace". She reminds us that it was Stephen Galatti who decided to bring down the students' age on departure, which was targeted toward college students before, a decision that was much appreciated by the two women. She adds a quotation by Stephen Galatti about the need to know the other people in order to avoid wars, but the former leader of AFS was not the only topic to be discussed. Bernie says about the "bus trip" that "It was fantastic, it lasted three weeks and it was one of the highlights of the experience. All 19 buses travelled through many states and met in Washington on the same day...and President Eisenhower delivered a talk to us on the White House lawn, it was a tradition".

The travels are very present in the two women's memories, and the return trip seems to have had a strong impact on them. "When we came back to Europe in 1956, says Kirsten, Bernie was with us. She was very bright, and she said that she would like to do a tour of Europe before going back to New Zealand, so she came to visit my family for a week". Bernie goes on, "We were on an old ship sponsored by AFS to bring us back to Europe, and I had a map of the continent on the table of the library. All the AFSers came by and said "Stay with us!" or "Can I stay with you?" The rest of the trip left a strong impression on her, "With a girlfriend who was an AFSer too, we stayed with a German family, even if it was really a short time after the war, Helmut's father had died in the war, we were virtual enemies, but we were there anyway and welcomed in his family".

A family testimony

When Kirsten's daughter arrives to ask her mother to come with her, the opposite occurs. Birgitta is the one to join the discussion with her elders. Did her own AFS experience change her life? "Oh yes, absolutely. I went to Latvia right after the iron curtain and the Berlin wall fell, so it was really a different world. I would not have become an anthropologist without that exchange, I think." As Bernie recalled, a phone call home was impossible at the time. Birgitta mentions the negative effect of modern technologies which might make adaptation of the youngsters to their new countries tougher, because they remain closely linked with their own countries and families. "Now, they live in a kind of bizarre in-between, which tends to be superficial. Loneliness is part of the experience, it's a negative feeling but it's what makes you stronger and changes your life in the long run. One must remember bad things and learn from them".



The three women do not have precise ideas about the future of AFS, but they expect a few changes anyway, "AFS is 100 years old, maturity must bring adaptation to modern times", says Birgitta, who adds that the future of AFS lies in even closer collaboration between returnees of all ages. For Bernie, "The essence (gist) of AFS, the link between people and values that comes from them must remain the same, but, as Birgitta says, we must find new ways to implement them Kirsten reminds that someone called AFS "a treasure" and adds that "it must be used a lot more in the future". Anyway, if its future is yet to be written, its present state is more than satisfying, "Look at all the energy you can feel to-day, it's so... electrifying" says Bernie. Kirsten takes up, "Yes, it's fabulous. Really".