

The Change of Time, The End of an Era

On July 26, 1956, in foggy weather, the ship Andrea Doria collided with the MS Stockholm, close to the American coast by a hundred miles and sank. The Arosa Kulm was too far away to help, but the passengers of both ships were saved by American coastguards and other ships in the area, i.e. the Ile de France. An AFS-ER who had missed the departure of the Arosa Kulm unfortunately happened to be on MS Stockholm and escaped unharmed.

At the time, and even during the voyage, the future of AFS is discussed, with the fervent wish to see the organization live and grow. The possibility of intra-European exchanges is voiced. The final word belongs to a student from Pakistan who delivers a freely adapted version of President Lincoln's famous address at Gettysburg, applied to AFS: «It is for us, the returnees, to be dedicated here to the unfinished work which they who came back on this ship have thus so nobly advanced. It is for us who are here to be dedicated to the great task remaining before us – that from these honored returnees we take increased devotion to that cause for which they gave the last full measure of their time – that we highly resolve that they have not returned in vain – that this organization under God shall have a new birth of friendship – and that returnee committees of students, by the students, for the students shall not perish from our little world».

In the middle of the sixties, planes took over from ships. It was the end of an epic period for AFS. In 1997, the MS Queen Elizabeth put out to sea for a nostalgic journey from Southampton to New York with a crowd of some 1200 AFSers aboard, including seven former ambulance drivers from 1944, to celebrate the 50th anniversary of AFS programs. The institution would live on.



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Life on the Arosa Kulm and the Seven Seas

by Michèle Ruffat AFS 1956-57 Cercle des Amis AFS France



Michèle Ruffat - May 2015

America! America! From Sea to Shining Sea...

A wistful old French lullaby hovered over the decks of the ships which carried AFSers from one side of the Atlantic to the other until the mid-sixties. It sung about a father's qualms when sending his little girl out to sea... For sure those ships had little in common with the legendary transatlantic steamers. They were seasoned carriers whose greatest achievement, under the label «Liberty ships», was the transportation of American troops to Southampton in order to get ready for the battle of Normandy.

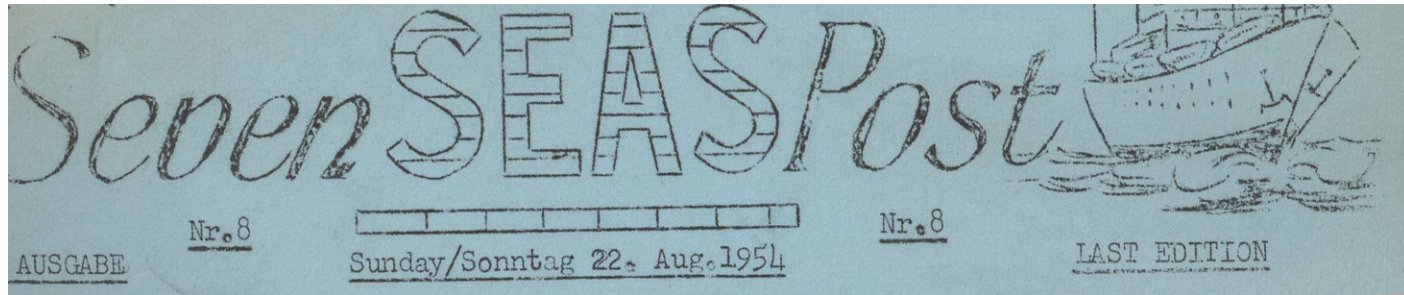
The Seven Seas, true to her name, was dedicated to the transportation of immigrants in the post war era from Germany and the Netherlands to Canada and Australia, then used by the Netherlands to bring back from Indonesia soldiers and their families, or ship Moslem pilgrims from Indonesia to Mecca.

Anyway, such various assignments were of no concern for AFS students. Instead, they sure danced a lot, as to belie the fretful father in the song, but they had very serious preoccupations as well. They launched a lot of activities, which probably shortened the ten days of crossing and made them unforgettable. The only hardships were the bouts of sea sickness, which hit hard on those old fashioned ships in rough weather.



The Bulletins, Ideas, Initiatives & Debates

On both ships, wannabe journalists published everyday a four pages Bulletin which was a true reflection of the life aboard, overflowing with ideas and initiatives. The Seven Seas was on her way to America in September 1954, the Arosa Kulm was coming back to Europe on July 1956: Thanks to the topics covered by the bulletins published during those trips that have been kept by several of us in their personal archives, we can to-day get the flavour of the atmosphere aboard.



On the Seven Seas, echoes of the world reach our budding journalists through the news picked up by the ship's radio. The current topics are developed, like the earthquake in Orleansville, Algeria, Dulles's promises to Chiang Kai Chek, Senator Mc Carthy's setbacks in Congress, the election of an advocate of racial segregation as governor of the state of Georgia, the launching of a program of distribution of food surplus overseas by President Eisenhower.

But the construction of Europe looms large in those young peoples's minds and it had just suffered a setback. The plan of a European Defense Community has been rejected in August by the French National Assembly. Pierre Mendès France, Prime Minister, has invoked the solidarity of the members of the Atlantic Alliance and had asked them to «allay French fears of a German rearmament and affirm its openness to dialogue with the Soviet Union». The positions of Germany, France and Italy on EDC and the reasons for the failure of the plan are at the center of passionate debates among the students, the United States being for German rearmament and the creation of a European army able to check the Soviet Union, France fearing a resurgence of German military power.

The Italian group holds that «freedom of business and movement across Europe would entail a more even distribution of population and boost prosperity, while raising an army in common could be a decisive factor in the arm race between the US and the Soviet Union». However, it concludes that «since nationalism and culture are still so much alive in all countries, an education conducive to pacific co-existence could be just as beneficial, diversity being the salt of life».

Apart from political life, comparisons between education styles in Northern and Southern Europe abound. According to our young observers, the «classical» or «academic» model of education, which aims to teach «not only the cult of beauty, but the use of reason», would be best equipped to spread knowledge as largely as possible. The «practical» model, on the other hand, would let every student develop his own interests and give him a better chance to find his place in society, because «you learn much better when you are motivated». Overall, «the academic system would be a preparation for life, while practical education would be life itself».

Young Americans Experiencing Post War Europe

The young Americans who had spent the summer in Europe with AFS and were on their way back were aboard too. They ponder over the significance of their stay in Europe for their understanding of their own country and its commonly held views on the rest of the world. Life in Tito's Yugoslavia is rather favorably seen by some, with progress made toward freedom and better standards of living. «Since Tito has wrung the country from Russia, controls have lessened and relationships with the Western world have intensified... The Yugoslavs are proud of their country and have no desire to live in the US». However, it is noted, day-to-day life remains tough. Families spend 50% of their budget on food, and 30% on a pair of shoes.

The observation of political, cultural and economic facts is not their only concern. Sports are an important component of the news. Matches at the Yankee Stadium and the performances of the Red Socks are followed closely.

Information conferences on various aspects of life in America are attended by many, and so are English courses. Classical music concerts, cinema, folk dances, bird watching on the deck, theater, photography, workout sessions, talent shows, discussions on literature, violin recitals, guitar and songs, even philosophy («What is the Good Life ?») all flourish and thrive.

Religious services are offered for Catholics, Protestants and Jews. One group, probably bent on sociology or gifted with a strong imagination, wonders about what would happen if the Seven Seas would roam the seas forever, as a modern version of the vessel carrying The Flying Dutchman of the opera: what kind of society would appear then ? along which pattern ? Robinson Crusoe or Plato's Republic ? Anyway, all agree on one project : to hold a giant party, «the Party to end all Parties»...



The Cultural Exchange, Leaving Home and Coming Back...

In 1956 two years later, the Arosa Kulm is on its way toward Europe. The daily Bulletins have the same purpose of informing the students about the activities going on aboard and about the current international news, as well as offering a soundboard for the issues that are discussed. Comparisons are the order of the day. Group discussions compare education and juvenile delinquency in Germany and in the US and social security systems on both sides of the Atlantic. The ship itself draws attention, visits to the machinery and explanations about the engines are appreciated. Anecdotes begin to circulate. It seems that during a previous voyage the hull of the ship was so covered with shells that its speed was reduced to three knots (5,5 km) per hour...

The issue of European political unity is still very much on the students'minds. «The US have managed to unite for sure, but it was a new country. Most European countries have existed for 1000 years, many are still monarchies, how could a union be achieved ? Even in the United States, it was at the price of a civil war... If England joined such a union, it would be the end of the Commonwealth, and for France, the end of the colonial Empire». West Germany had recovered its sovereignty the year before (1955) and the yearning for reunification is clearly stated. Nationalism is considered as the best and the worst of things, being both «a source of cultural identity and a risk of conflicts, which AFS could contribute to appease».

Sometimes American and European students do not hold the same views on teenager life in the US . The «dating system», for instance, seemed quite odd to some Europeans used to less formal relations within their peer group : it did not suit everyone. «They date too early, not because they want to, but because they are expected to do so», observed one of them. American teenagers are described as overly preoccupied with dates, sports and clothing. Debates on the American way of life could grow hot between supporters and critics, not necessarily split along national origins. Overall, there was often a time lag between Europeans who had completed their senior year already and were more mature than their American schoolmates. Anyway, the attraction of the host country and the lure of emancipation have fully played on many. A young student from Germany advises his fellow returnees to avoid chewing gum, cigarettes and lipstick back home «for fear of shocking their parents».