IMPRESSIONS

OF A

PASSIONATE TRAVELER

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by
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Over the past 20 years I have had the good fortune to travel through much of Europe, Greece, the Aegean, the Mediterranean, and Canada with an expressly heavy concentration on France. In working with The Experiment in International Living, I have had the opportunity to live for 2 summers with a French family in the south of France and a francophone Swiss family on a farm near Geneva. Oftentimes, I have conducted high school and college students as well as a number of adult friends. Without exception each and every time has been a virtual odyssey and a revelation. Rather than give you a travelogue of Bob's peregrinations as some of my Athenaeum colleagues are "want" to do (and, I might add, none do it better than Wendell Rorie replete with audio-visuals), I want to share my personal observations of travel vis-a-vis the American pilgrim to Europe and France and signal some important differences.

Having just returned from a 2-week visit to Luxembourg and France to visit friends and to host a reunion in Paris of 12 foreign exchange students who lived here in Hopkinsville and attended UHA this past decade, my thoughts are still nestled comfortably in Europe.

It's surprising how easy it becomes to digest historical facts when walking around inside the Louvre. Or to learn about the art of the

Renaissance while viewing the DAVID in Florence. Or to appreciate the importance of the COMMON MARKET by strolling about the center of Brussels, Europe's most international city. What was once a matter of dull and routine information comes to life as one is challenged day after day to assimilate a whole panorama of different faces, colors, sounds, and new ideas.

But there is a difficulty which Americans traveling abroad often encounter. It's easy to get lost in an ocean of details; to become baffled and confused by the changing scenes, and to come away from the experience with only a blur or a vague feeling to show for it. Of course, it helps to have an idea of what to do beforehand -- to plan a suitable itinerary and stick to it. Europe is big, and very often things change dramatically in a matter of just 50 miles. It's impossible to cover much territory in just one trip. That's why I always select and concentrate on those cities and towns which are representative of each country, and which promise the most rewarding experience.

For example, a person could devote a whole lifetime getting to know Germany. An entire summer would only scratch the surface. But quite a lot can be accomplished in just a few days if you know what you're doing. There is Cologne, one of the most attractive and

important cities in Europe, whose cathedral is among the most renowned of all Gothic monuments. Or Bonn, where the bustle and commotion immediately announce that you are in the capital city of the German Federal Republic. Or the enchanting university town of Heidelberg, a dream city all by itself, and the site of the most spectacular ruin in Germany. Or Munich, the city of Baroque churches and ultra-modern department stores, the "beer capital" of the world and an important electronics center as well. Or Aachen, a small town on the way to Cologne, where the Emperor Charlemagne held court back in 800 A.D., and which still houses one of the largest collections of medieval art. Nor would anyone want to miss an afternoon's boat trip up the Rhine River, so often celebrated in Wagner's operas, where reality blends with myth and folklore as the boat steams past the fairy-tale castles on the shore. Or take the lovely resort town of Garmisch, which straddles the highway between Munich and Innsbruck, Austria. Its gaily painted houses and ornate woodwork offer a fitting farewell to any trip through Germany. Cologne, Bonn, Heidelberg, Munich, Aachen, the Rhine River, and Garmisch: that's quite a bit for just a few days in Germany. But it can be done; it is simply a matter of intelligent and imaginative selection.

I have the conviction that Europe can be

understood only against the background of the Renaissance. For the Renaissance was the period in which Western man came to a rediscovery of himself. We can trace this rediscovery through all the many activities and monuments in which it can be seen at work: in painting, sculpture, music, literature, social development, and philosophy. We can see ourselves in Michelangelo's MOSES in Rome, in Memling's microscopically detailed paintings in Bruges, Belgium, or in a play at the Shakespeare Memorial Theatre in Stratford-On-Avon.

But man's rediscovery of man is by no means limited to the past. Europe is today. The rediscovery goes on. It's present in the Common Market, which promises a whole new kind of Europe by 1992. It finds expression in the new trends in film and fashion. There's "retro" in Paris, a new Franco-British railroad tunnel under the English Channel, or a hot debate among students in Paris on who should be the next French President. There are new ideas developing about the relation of man to his environment. These too are worth exploring while tracing man's rediscovery of himself from Renaissance times to the present, to see what man has discovered about himself over the past 400 years or so. It's a fascinating story, just waiting to unfold before the wise traveler who plans efficiently

A few remarks about some down-to-earth aspects of any European travel. Many Americans (especially adults) take out their maps of Europe and look them over in the following way: "Hmmm. England, France, Germany, Belgium. Looks pretty good. I think I'll try France this year. They say the weather's great in June, and my wife wants to go perfume shopping in Paris. And I've always wanted to see the FOLIES BERGERES. Then maybe a short flight to London. Lufthansa's offering a special husband-and-wife discount on a 9-day return basis. Right. That's exactly what we'll do.

To this aspiring traveler, Europe is flat. All the countries of this continent, with their complicated patchwork of languages, cultural traditions, and mannerisms, are all more or less on the same level -- like cubbyholes in the Post Office. They number 1 to 100. Take your pick. If you don't like France, hop on a jet to London. If London's too wet and foggy, there's Brussels. And so the story goes. . .Once our traveler lands in Paris, he'll have his eyes wide open, but he won't see anything. Nor, in all probability, will his wife. If it's the Folies Bergeres he wants to see, he can see it done better - and pay much less for it - in Las Vegas. His wife can buy all the French perfume she wants in New York City. And the weather's just as great in Georgia.

Although Europe is big -- too big, in fact, to be taken in at a glance -- it is made up of very small things. It's fascinating to watch Europeans in their day-to-day activity, for it is here that style comes out. Seeing Europe is seeing how a Frenchwoman buys fresh cloves of garlic at the market; it's quite a ritual, unless you are too busy to notice. In the U.S. the salesman smiles if the purchase is big, grimaces if it's small. In Europe, there is an etiquette which almost every sales clerk follows. He says an elaborate "thank you", quite irrespective of the size of purchase. The only exception, of course, is the harried salesman who has been jaded by the U. S. tourist. Seeing Europe is seeing how a Londoner reads the morning newspaper. Or with what careful scrutiny the German Hausfrau selects her purchase of Bratwurst at the local Metzgerei. Or the kinds of jokes that the different peoples of Europe enjoy.

Humor in France is a very different thing from what it is in Germany or in Britain. But European humor tends to be very different from its American counterpart. American humor, especially on TV or in the movies, is aimed at the instantaneous laugh. Think of the Johnny Carson show or the old Phil Silvers-type stunt. The viewer roars with laughter, then waits for the next "gag". Five seconds later, he can't remember what it was that he found so funny.

American humor tends to be a quantitative thing; the more outrageous the gag or the stunt, the funnier it is. The assumption is that if, instead of having one couple involved in a pie-fight, there are seven couples throwing pies at each other, the total effect must be 7 times as funny. The European approach to humor is different. Europeans are more concerned with the quality of the joke -- with its subtlety, complexity, and articulation -- than with the quantity of instantaneous laughter it evokes. The point of a European joke often requires a great deal of thought to unravel. Europeans linger over a joke, repeating it often, recalling it fondly long after they have heard it the first time. Perhaps a good example of one which I read in a French magazine will outdo any American joke for its sheer intellectuality. "French townspeople in a small provincial hamlet were laughing for days over a theatre marquee which announced this film entitled: VOTRE FEMME NOUS TROMPE (YOUR WIFE IS DECEIVING US). What's so funny about that? The verb "tromper" (deceive) is often used to indicate a wife's unfaithfulness to her spouse. In French literature, one often encounters the expression "Votre femme vous trompe" ("Your wife is deceiving you"), as someone's friend lets him in on an unpleasant, but important secret. Here, however, the one deceived is not the

husband - or not only the husband - but a whole circle of his wife's paramours, who are apparently outraged that their mistress has turned to someone else. Hence the complaint, "Your wife is deceiving us." The whole effect of this joke is created by a simple change of one letter: from vous to nous. This may not strike the American as being at all funny. In any case, the joke loses something in translation. But at least the point about European humor has been made. It is highly verbal, often intellectual, and in all cases much more subtle than the average Johnny Carson one-liner. In short, American humor, like everything else, tends to occur on a large scale; in Europe everything tends to be finer, smaller, more detailed. However, I must confess that no American tells a joke better than Charles Tilley. I may not be able to repeat them to a group as august as this tonight, but I always laugh uproariously!

Drinking is another way in which this difference can be seen. In America, people often sit and drink in silence, brooding over their home life, the unpaid bills, or the boss. That's what bars are commonly used for: the people inside drink to get "high". For them, drinking is a distraction from life. In Europe it's different. Drinking is a part of life, not a distraction from it. Europeans enjoy the experience of drinking itself -- the

conversation, the occasion, the details, the friends with whom they share a glass of cognac. In Germany, it is traditional for students to sit with their professor a whole evening, discussing philosophy, literature, or music. They usually reserve a back room in a tavern for the occasion. One mug of beer will last each of them the entire evening. The Swiss theologian, Karl Barth, spent many evenings this way with his students. The sidewalk cafes of Paris are another example. All sorts of people are clustered together -- husbands, wives, even the kids -- lingering over their glass of wine, taking it slowly, savoring the bouquet. In Bavaria, the farmers still have a bottle of beer with their breakfast.

It may not be too much to say that Europeans in general have a much greater love for the small things of life, the things which last, and it's these things that often go unnoticed by the American tourist. But the love of small pleasures does not mean that Europeans are gullible. A few years ago, the Pepsi Cola Co., conducted an advertsing campaign in France in exactly the same way it does in the U.S. The country was festooned with billboards exhorting everybody to "Think Young, Drink Pepsi". The campaign was a flop. French people simply laughed at such appeals; they weren't about to be taken that easily. Pepsi

caught on to the French approach to advertising. In Paris, for example, French companies often announce their wares very simply and unpretentiously. Riding on the Paris metro, one notices many ads go by outside the window which simply give the name of their product, nothing more: "Cinzano", Renault", "Peugeot", etc. No appeal to repressed masculinity, no hint of a glamorous career awaiting the user of "Gauloises". And yet, some American firms have yet to wake up to the kind of advertising that appeals to Europeans.

There are many other "small things" worth noticing in Europe. Americans are often frustrated in their first attempt to read a British newspaper. The arrangement of material is quite different than it is in one of our own. Often, an advertisement will appear on the front page, while the news items surrounding it will seem to be absurdly trivial: wool prices in Nottingham, a county fair in Halstead. What Americans don't realize is that a British newspaper is designed to be opened up to the center first, where the international news appears. Then the reader works his way to the front or the back depending on whether he's looking for racing schedules or art exhibits. Most "tourists" miss these things because they don't pause to look for the small items which distinguish life

from our own.

John Gunther, in a burst of enthusiasm, once stated that "France is the most civilized country in the world." That might be overstating the case a little -- the British, Germans, and Italians might want to qualify that statement. But Gunther's basic point about civilization is a valid and important one. Civilization means much more than a country's GNP or its technoligical achievements. It is really a style and art of living that makes even the smallest act a ceremony. Life itself becomes a kind of ongoing dramatic experiment. To a European, it's not so much what one does, but how he does it. That's why the London Bobby seems excessively polite as he gives the visitor the directions he asked for. That's why the Frenchwoman makes the purchase of a bit of garlic a minor ritual. For many Americans life is not an art, but a business -- a series of "problems" to be solved in the most efficient way. To a European, life is not a business but a style to be achieved. Both style and ceremony are often notoriously inefficient.

Civilization itself is a matter of style. Whole nations may have distinctive styles, and each separate internal region may have its own peculiar style. Each individual in that region will have his own variation to make on that regional style. Many European wars over the

past 300 years may be considered conflicts of style as well as of ideals or national interests. The writer, F. Scott Fitzgerald, was one of the few Americans to perceive the kind of passion which motivated the common foot soldiers in World War I. He saw the conflict, not just as a war between nations, governments, ideologies, or classes, but as a struggle between German beer and French wine or English roast beef. It was the little things that soldiers held dear which sustained them in combat. This is reflected in their songs: they are songs, not of lofty ideals or grand ambitions, but of home, family, friends, or the village parish.

There's something else worth noting. Europeans don't make such a fuss about the distinction between a person's public and private life. Americans tend to get "up tight" about any public discussion of one's private religious or political beliefs. These subjects, at least until recently, were taboo in ordinary conversation. It's different in Europe. People openly acknowledge their religious or political affiliations. They don't fret if a cathedral or local church has been renovated with public funds, because a cathedral belongs to the life of the community. A person's public and private lives are not as rigidly compartmentalized in Europe as they are in the U.S. And the public life of a European community is all the richer for it. Europeans

take a relaxed view of the "separation of church and state", even in countries having a mixed religious constituency. This can lead to some amusing situations. In England, both Houses of Parliament must pass on any major changes in the Anglican Prayer Book. One can imagine Bertrand Russell sitting in the House of Lords, discussing and voting on fine points of the Anglican liturgy, even though he was an avowed agnostic. He didn't regard this as out of place, though he may have been less than enthusiastic about the issue. Similarly in France, where each church building is owned, not by the Vatican and Rome, but by the local village or city in which it is located, Communist delegates on city councils might vote to put a new stained glass window in the local parish church. Why would they do it? Because the local church or cathedral is regarded as a monument to the life of the town. Europeans take pride in all aspects of their community, whether it be the parish church, a statue in the village square, an old brewery (which may still be privately owned), or an art exhibit. LIfe is much less fragmented in Europe than in the U.S. Each country has an overall unity of style which tends to encompass personal differences in outlook, religious affiliation, or political persuasion. Similarly, in Europe there isn't as large a gap between the "intellectual" (writer, artist, film director)

and the ordinary citizen as there is here. The greatest authors write for the whole community, and the ordinary citizen tends to look to the writer or film director for personal ideals. A look inside the bookstores in Paris or London bears this out. A lot of middle-aged people from all walks of life are seen there along with the students. Europeans take their reading more seriously than Americans do. Many of them even shape their lives on the basis of a philosophy which they've encountered in a novel or film. There is much more contact and respect between the educated and the uneducated in Europe, even though a smaller percentage of the people are able to attend a university.

What about La Belle France, my favorite subject? Ask any European which country he considers the most "European" of all and he'll probably answer that it is France. Thomas Jefferson knew France well, and never lost his affection for it; he dubbed it "every man's second fatherland." How, then, can it be that one also hears so many negative comments about the French -- i.e., "they're rude and unfriendly, narrow-minded, inefficient, liberal, or even promiscuous?" - although I believe they are falling behind the Scandinavians in this line of criticism. I must confess I have sometimes been unsure what to think of the French. I've seen a cab driver and

a motorist argue for 5 minutes over just whose fault it was in a fender-bender, then laugh the whole thing off as they both double-parked, sat down at a cafe, and argued about who would treat whom to a vermouth. One thing is certain: any American would be foolhardy to risk driving in Paris, for there are no such things as lanes; it's everyman for himself. It is not surprising that France has one of the highest mortality rates from automobile accidents of any country in Europe. In any case, it is normal that most of what one reads about France tends to abound with adjectives such as paradoxical, ambiguous or just plain baffling.

Obviously, to understand any foreign country, one has got to keep his mind open, but this is especially true of France. Variety, individualism, and a love of liberty are keys to the French way of life, and it takes about as open a mind as one can muster to appreciate them. Take the sheer variety of things in France. The country produces over 350 distinct types of cheese, more than the rest of the world combined. Each Frenchman has his favorites, and of course no two persons agree on which are the best. France is the only European country which touches the Mediterranean, the Atlantic, and the North Sea. The population of northern France is ethnically close to the Danes. Most people in Normandy can trace their ancestry back to

Scandinavia while people in eastern France are more Germanic, and many actually speak German. In the south, life is sunny and relaxed, much like it is in Italy or Spain. The people in western France are Bretons and speak a language similar to Gaelic and Welsh. Then there are the Basques, whose language and culture are a complete mystery to experts, and unlike anything else in Europe. Imagine all this variety in a country roughly the size of Texas - about 20 times smaller than the U.S., and yet is 2nd in land area only to the USSR in Europe. French individualism shows itself at every turn, indeed at every intersection. Motorists, pedestrians, and even bus-drivers interpret the traffic rules in their own way. If one goes into a bakery, a cafe, or any shop, the salespeople won't act like robots. Before the customer can give them a request, they may start talking about high taxes or their brother-in-law's case of neuralgia. In the US, a telephone operator has a set of about 8 fixed phrases which she is supposed to use when talking to customers. In France, operators are alternately cheerful, irritable, or just plain indifferent, depending on how they feel when one talks to them. One of them may even tell a joke, or admit that the phones aren't working too well and that it might be better to send a telegram.

The Frenchman's love of independence is

possibly his most misunderstood trait. It consists of a general attitude which makes a prime virtue of minding his own business and expecting others to do the same. The visitor won't be in France for long before he spots the characteristic shrug of the shoulders, which is the Frenchman's reaction to all startling or shocking news. De Gaulle illustrated it pretty well when the news wires everywhere were cracking with the disturbing announcement that Khrushchev had been deposed. He was asked for his reaction, and he answered, "So? The earth will not stop turning." It's easy enough to misunderstand the Frenchman's tolerance for rudeness or indifference, but it is still a mistake. Frenchmen don't believe in being extra-friendly toward total strangers; they prefer instead to reserve their warmth for family and friends. They are basically courteous, but instant friendliness is considered in bad taste. The French also have a great sense of discretion. French newspapers, for example, seldom if ever discuss the family, personal life, or religious beliefs of nationally-known figures. If Mitterand had prostate cancer and surgery, only he, his family, and doctor would know it. Few Frenchmen even know whether the President is Catholic, Protestant, Jewish, or a nonbeliever, and they feel it's none of their business to find out.

It is clear to me that generalizations about such a people can be extremely hazardous. Nonetheless, there are certain features which unite the French. One is a deep pride in France as a nation. France is, after all, the modern world's oldest unified nation of any size. For centuries, it was the most influential country in Europe, and it still is the center of the European artistic and intellectual life. The French have suffered great losses in the 20th century and are understandably sensitive to the fact that France no longer plays as great a role on the world stage. The humiliation of 4 years of German occupation in WWII has left them with a strong desire to re-establish French influence in the world. The visitor has no choice but to respect their sensitiveness in this regard.

Another unifying factor is the universal French respect for intellectual distinction. The French probably read more than any other people. The leading intellectual figures of the day receive the same kind of attention which heavyweight champions or television celebrities get in the US. The French are great believers in solving problems through rational analysis, and they look to the pronouncements of novelists and philosophers for guidance in everything from politics to love. The French educational system is one of the best in the world, in fact the envy of many other nations.

Even De Gaulle was recognized as a great contemporary master of French prose; President Pompidou started out as a literature teacher and published a fine anthology of poetry. The essence of this emphasis on the intellect is what the French call the ESPRIT CRITIQUE - the critical attitude. Every French man is taught from earliest childhood to examine and analyze ideas for himself, and not to take anything for granted. The Frenchman seems to dread being "hoodwinked" more than anything else. This may have some unwanted effects on French political life, but it probably makes French conversation the most stimulating & best-informed anywhere. France and especially Paris is also proud of its role as a haven for some of the best minds in Europe. On Paris campuses, for example, there are students of every nationality preparing for leadership in their own countries. Even Hopkinsville, KY has one of its own finishing up her masters at the Sorbonne after 2 years of study there - Karin Peterson. Artists who felt shackled in their home countries have often come to Paris to sample its heady atmosphere of creativity and freedom. I think of Hemingway, James Baldwin, F. Scott Fitzgerald, and James Joyce, or of the Spanish artists Picasso and Casals, who found refuge there. Two of France's leading playwrights are both foreigners who write in French: Samuel

Beckett from Ireland and the Roumanian, Eugene Ionesco.

But there is always the other side of the coin. The visitor to France must expect a fair amount of inefficiency, and it's obvious that France, while prosperous, is not quite as modern-looking as some other European countries, notably Germany. The brilliant French intellectual record is not matched by great industrial achievements, and France still exports prestige goods like wine and perfume instead of really profitable items like steel, computers, or automobiles. And many Frenchmen simply don't accept such modern conveniences as washing machines; washing machines, they believe, damage clothes. But somehow, in spite of the slow rate of progress, the French seem to be reasonably happy with their way of life. Our good friend in Luxembourg, who works very closely with the Germans and the French in his business, has observed how complaisent the French are by contrast to the Germans. The French would rather spend an extra 2 hours over lunch, discussing politics or poetry, than rush back to the adding machine at the office. The best part of spending time in France, I believe, is realizing that this may not be such a bad idea after all.

Travel to Europe has always been an adventure for me, and I hope I have transmitted

to you a bit of the feel of that adventure overseas. Europe and France are my straightforward passion, a passion I always have as I anticipate the day of departure and I feel it even more intensely as I reflect on it after every return home.