

Parle-vous



A Cultural Treasure in Our Own Backyard

by Dolah Saleh

Something occurred to me after I had written the article on travel to beautiful Quebec City last issue. It is the same thing that I felt during a brief stay in Montreal recently. Being able to understand and speak the language of the places I visit endears me to its people and enriches my experience.

My travels to foreign lands had not always been positive experiences. There were times I had not felt welcomed. "Do you speak English?" I often asked in desperation. "Can anyone here help me in English, please." I received nods, shrugs, indignant stares, but few responses. Frustrating, I thought. I needed someone to point me in the right direction, recommend a good place to eat, and help me negotiate my way around as I shopped. Like many who have gone before and after me, I was disappointed that not everyone knew my language.

Today when I hear someone complain about the lack of friendliness of native people in the foreign territories they visit, I can not help but wonder whether it is because we Americans tend to expect that everyone should speak English. We want foreigners to come here and speak our language, but we do not speak the native languages of the countries we visit. Perhaps we go in with an attitude, so to speak, and what we perceive as unfriendliness is really a negative reaction to our insistence on speaking English. We might indeed encourage a positive response if we at least attempt to address or greet people in their native tongue.

There is something else I commonly hear from American travelers. We are hopelessly impressed with the fact that people in other countries speak two and three different languages. Isn't that great, we say, as we lament the regularity with which Americans speak only English."

Why is this, anyway? Do we expect more of those from other countries than we do of ourselves? Our school systems do not consistently mandate second language instruction. but does this excuse us?

As a teacher, I remember being confronted with the lack of enthusiasm for learning a foreign language. Our children simply are not convinced of the usefulness of this skill. But let us think about it. Americans are faced more and more with the necessity to know a second or third language. With increased international business, affordable travel, Internet and web sites in French speaking (and other) countries, the distance to foreign nations is closer everyday.

It turns out that Buffalo has a sister city relationship with Lille, a beautiful, old and quaint city in Northern France. Our proximity to French-speaking Canadian locations with places like Montreal and Quebec City allows ample opportunity to visit these fascinating places. Whether one is a frequent traveler, likely to visit these areas for vacation or maintains working relationships with people from other countries, it behooves us to familiarize ourselves with their language.

And there are other places to visit where French is the dominant language. Besides Canada, French is spoken in Belgium, Luxembourg, Western Switzerland, in Northern and Western Africa, Caribbean Islands (Guadeloupe, Martinique, St Martin) and in Polynesia.

But we do not even need to leave Buffalo to be faced with having to speak French. There are organizations in Buffalo that encourage foreign business people, foreign students, foreign researchers, and tourists to come, invest, study, or visit our area: the Buffalo-Lille organization, the Council for International Visitors (www.buffalo-niagaraciv.org/), International Institute of Buffalo, the International Trade Council (www.niagaraitc.com/), the Foundation for International Cooperation (www.ficcultureswap.org/) are only a handful of organizations that encourage foreign exchange with people and host foreigners regularly.

If you plan to be among the twelve million Americans expected to visit Europe this year, you may be particularly interested in brushing up on your language skills. I can personally guarantee a more enriching experience even with a mere attempt to communicate with basic greetings and conversation.

Perhaps, like many Americans, you studied French in high school, maybe a couple of years in college. And today you may be able to go through a newspaper article, catch a few words in a movie, but in the presence of someone, you manage a few words and that's it-you realize that all your French is "gone"; you can not speak.

Fortunately for us in Buffalo, it also happens that there is an organization that can help us right in our own backyard. We have a valuable resource in The Alliance Francaise of Buffalo, which recently created two educational programs. For adults, it offers Conversational French Classes at Canisius College Campus and, for children, it offers a summer immersion camp at St Joe's Church on Main Street. Adult participants are diverse members of the association (a small annual membership fee is required) who gather for two hours each week to learn and practice the French language on the Canisius College Campus. The classes are kept small (no more than 10) to maintain the level of attention required for each individual to obtain adequate practice time. And now, a gathering of at least 8 persons will bring a French teacher to any designated location convenient to the participants! Classes are taught by enthusiastic native speakers who emphasize oral and conversational skills.

The Alliance Francaise of Buffalo, also known as the Buffalo French Cultural Circle, Inc. (Cercle Culturel de Langue Francaise de Buffalo, Inc., 1986) has actually had a presence in Western New York since 1915. It was originally founded as Les Amis de La France, a group that supported French people during World War I. It continues as a not-for-profit organization whose mission is the promotion of the French culture and language. The Alliance is unique to Buffalo as an educational association as well as a social club.

The organization, through its school and its activities will offer many avenues for people to meet and speak the language. When not traveling, the organization helps people who study French to find opportunities to use it, so that one is truly able to realize the tremendous difference on his or her very next visit abroad!

Today the Alliance organizes and sponsors a myriad of cultural events throughout the year involving the arts, cooking, architecture, theater, books, and films. It is the only organization to bring professional foreign language theater to the Buffalo area. On November 2, 2000, the Alliance will bring La Lecon de Ionesco, and will encourage every high-school student in WNY to attend the performance by the outstanding Claude Beauclair Company. In recent years, plays by Beckett, Ionesco, and Tardieu were brought to Buffalo.

The Alliance also publishes a bimonthly newsletter that keeps its 350 subscribers abreast of the activities of the organization as well as the activities that involve French speaking events in the Western New York area.

Becoming an active member of the Alliance, learning about the culture and practicing the French language has opened up a new world to me, broadened my knowledge and given me new, cherished friendships. It has truly enhanced my travel experiences as I enthusiastically use my new language skills and invite natives to engage me in friendly conversation. This is so true that today, when someone reports that a trip to a place where English is not the dominant language was somewhat "unfriendly," I say, -"That was not my experience." And I wonder.