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Letter from France

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There are many crosscurrents and undercurrents present in the G.D.R. today. On the surface, it appears to be business as usual, with the Party still very much in control. However, one senses in the G.D.R., more than in Western Europe or the U.S.A., that an era is slowly, almost imperceptibly drawing to a close and a new age, still hidden beyond the horizon, is about to inch its way into view. The undercurrents, the crosscurrents, are there. The shape of the changes which they will cause still remains to be determined, but surely changes will take place. There is a dynamism present in the world, and no matter how much opposition there is to that dynamism, it will eventually have its way.

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Letter From France
LYNN MAPES

France continues to provide the American visitors with a culture, society and polity that contrasts with their own. Placed somewhat ambivalently between the ubiquitous small shopkeeper of Poujadaist ancestry and the ever-more-numerous hypermarchés, French society sustains its pre-World War II character while it leads us to a post-modern future in areas as diverse as architecture, literature, music, fashion, and nuclear power.

Surely a country with one of the lowest birth rates in Western Europe during the pre-birth control 19th century and which now has one of the higher rates in the birth prevention era of the late 20th century is complicated. France is a centralized country with state dirigisme evolving from its royalist, Jacobin and Napoleonic traditions. But it also has regionalism in its diverse traditions — Flemish in the north, Breton in the west, Alsatian in the east, and Basque and Corsican in the south. It has such a varied geography that over seventy-five percent of the French spend their five-week paid vacation within French borders. And it is altogether possible that the revolutionary and conservative traditions have never quite been reconciled, as shown by the explosive 1984 conflict over state control of Catholic schools.

But it is French society, especially its unique language and those interesting cities, that provides more direct access to the French and how they live. Aix-en-Provence,
a charming Provençal city in Southern France, is the site for the Grand Valley French Program. With a population of around 125,000 it probably comes close to having a chair in a sidewalk cafe for one person in twenty. Aix has a mixed population of Provençal natives, Parisian transplants, Pied-Noir emigres (ethnic French from North Africa), and both older Mediterranean and newer Arab immigrants. It has a daily outdoor market, le petit marché, a university dating from the 15th century, an extensive center city built primarily between 1700 and 1900, and an RPR-UDF (the conservative political alliance of 1988) mayor from Corsica who edged out the Front National (extreme right) candidate by only fifty votes in the first-round elections for the National Assembly. Actually the Socialist candidate came in first only to lose by a wide margin in the second round.

The center of life in Aix, as in many French cities, revolves around cafe life. Aix has numerous, large Parisian-style cafes, most on one side of the plane tree lined Cours Mirabeau. Banks, interestingly, dominate the opposite and much more sedate side of this impressive boulevard. These cafes, each seating two hundred or more, with names like Les Deux Garçons, Le Grillon, La Royale, Le Mazarin, La Belle Epoque, are the social center of the town. Equally important for the local clientele, are the husband and wife operated bistrot du coin, their two or three outdoor tables claiming a proportion of the limited sidewalk space. It is in these cafes that one observes the planned and unplanned rendezvous taking place, mixed with the solitary newspaper reader perusing Le Figaro (right wing), Le Quotidien (Gaullist right), Le Monde (independent Socialist), Liberation (left Socialist) and L'Humanité (far left) — all national dailies published in Paris.

Most of these cafes are in or close to the old city (vieille ville) which is being restored to its pre-20th century pedestrian focus. Aix has developed a variation known as semi-pieton. This system allows one-way vehicle traffic on a narrow street lined with cast iron posts helping to protect pedestrians and prevent parking. However, pedestrian traffic easily spills over into the street and, together with frequent blockages from delivery trucks and congested traffic during the morning marché, car traffic slows down to little more than an average of five miles per hour. More than ten kilometers are organized in this manner in this city of traditional three- and four-story buildings (18th and 19th century functional limitations and 20th century zoning). Small stores, restaurants and offices are on the street level with their potential customers occupying apartments on the upper levels. The high rise apartments and office buildings are located on the periphery, as in Paris.

If the cities are inviting and even dazzling to American eyes, the French language,
despite its presence in Louisiana, Quebec, and the American passport, seems intimidating. Certainly the French are protective of their language. The campaign against Francais (l'apres shampooing, un oil-rig, le weekend) has been official since 1977, gaining support from both the right-wing Gaullist and the Communist parties. To help the French, LaRousse has even published a separate dictionary titled Anglicismes.

Nothing is more risky in speaking French than extensive use of that enormous range of cognate words that aid French-English interaction, but also lead to use of false friends (faux amis) and subsequent misunderstandings. It may be true that the French expect you to speak just a little bit better than you are able to, but perhaps it is hard for a French person not to correct you!

The French and Americans seem to share a tendency to mono-lingualism, possibly the result of French being the 19th-century's international language and English its 20th-century successor. Both find the other's accents difficult to acquire. However, French words in English are given French pronunciations (rendezvous, for example), but proper names such as Notre Dame are Anglicized. On the other hand, almost all American words in French are Gallicized and have a strong French accent.

If these unachieved rapprochements in language seem complicated, the political life of these two cultures might be moving in a common direction. Not in political tendency, however, since the French have just reelected their Socialist President to another seven-year term. But since 1986 the French voters have been reluctant to support a parliamentary majority of that same party. They elected a right wing majority in 1986 and President Francois Mitterand's major opponent, Jacques Chirac, became his prime minister. This produced a situation labeled "cohabitation": in both languages a vrai ami meaning living together without legal sanction. Matters improved for the Socialists in the 1988 elections, but, falling short of an absolute majority in the National Assembly, Michel Rocard became a minority, Socialist prime minister. Rocard needs support from either Communist deputies or independent centrist deputies to establish a majority position on all legislation. All of this sounds vaguely familiar to Americans accustomed to their own divisions of political power.

It is this world which welcomes and challenges our students who take an intensive language course at the Institut des Etudes Francais pour les Etudiants Etrangers, affiliated with the University of Aix-Marseilles and a French-society-and-culture course taught by the Grand Valley Program Director. Students cope and learn in many individual ways, interacting with international students as well as the French society that surrounds them. But when an order for un vin blanc, s'il vous plait is easily understood by the garçon or you have your first argument (probably political) in French, a corner has been turned and another bridge between American and French societies has been created.