

AN HISTORIC COMMENT ON THE HOUSE IN ROBE STREET

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The purchase by the Alliance Française of the solid and spacious house at 17 Robe Street, St Kilda is the high point of an effort begun by the society in 1970. A number of members will remember that time very well. This effort was the foundation of the "Maison de France" Appeal, of which, having then been an active member of the Alliance Française for 35 years, I was able to be the instigator and its first organizer. This brought to reality a dream in Melbourne's French community, as well as at the Alliance, a dream dating from the 1920s, and the idea of a brilliant and generous President of the Alliance Française of the day, Mrs James Dyer.

Since that time and with the first thousands of dollars from the "Maison de France" Appeal raised with great energy and enthusiasm by its first committees I had been asked to form—these were based on the Australian tradition of work, generosity and skills given voluntarily for the sake of a worthwhile cause—one saw the Alliance buy firstly the little Edwardian villa in Dandenong Road, Armadale, followed by the "terrace-house" in Richmond, its principal domicile at the time of writing, each one with years of great usefulness. I note that in a recent letter addressed to members by the President, Mrs Liz Gallois, she alluded to certain difficulties experienced by the Alliance in managing two properties at a time, which is understandable.

The purchase of these properties thus appears as a preliminary event, a propulsion towards today's purchase, the acquisition of the Alliance's most important locale in nearly ten decades of its history, an excellent result that dates from the early efforts of seventeen years ago, and all those that were associated with them deserve warm congratulations.

A French Presence

Isn't it interesting to note, then, that this big red brick house with its steep shingle roof, where the Alliance Française and the "Maison de France" will put down new roots, has already sheltered a French

presence, has already played a rather special role in French life in Melbourne and is even a place where the Alliance had certain definite links?

I would like to describe to members the place this building had in Melbourne, as I remember it quite well. Belonging to the French community and the Alliance, I was invited several times to this house, and in my personal scrapbooks I can find photos, press reports, invitations, cards and letters that quite clearly underline the details.

At the end of 1944, when France and Paris had just been liberated, a big change took place in French life in Australia, for it was then that, as with many other European countries, France established a diplomatic mission in Canberra for the first time. Before the Second War, there were no embassies or legations to represent overseas countries in Australia. Monsieur Roger Monmayou, appointed Chargé d'affaires, founded the first Legation of France in Canberra (1944), before the first Minister of France, Monsieur Pierre Augé, took charge of the post (1945). I have a photo where Monsieur Monmayou, surrounded by his staff, is presiding at a ceremony during which the French Tricolor is hoisted in front of the Diplomatic Mission in Canberra.

A career diplomat, well-groomed, polite, amiable, he visited Melbourne several times, attending important French events like the 14th of July reception or receptions where he himself was host, as well as evenings at the Alliance Française. Remembering him quite well, I recall he was given quite an amount of attention in the press; and one was pleased to see such an appropriate person begin to make France live again among us.

Those days in Melbourne had something special for French people, francophiles and francophones, and friends of the Alliance. One must remember that despite the great relief, the joy that everyone felt after the last days of war in Europe, the War in the Pacific had not finished and Australia and its allies still had difficult days to pass.

Another thing which many people did not realize was that General de Gaulle, at the time of the bombing of Pearl Harbour, had declared war on Japan. The war in Europe concluded and there was a French Army of 600,000 men, with the possibility of doubling this figure. Thus, at the same time as the establishment of the French Legation in Canberra, French soldiers and sailors arrived in Melbourne to direct actions by the French Armed Forces that, alongside allied

nations, were to fight in the Pacific, where French warships were already active.

At the end of 1944 and the beginning of 1945, two officers, Colonel Dominique Renucci and Commandant André Kervella, who had been named Military Attaché and Naval Attaché respectively to the French Legation in Australia and New Zealand, arrived each with his own staff to settle in Melbourne. Melbourne, like today, was the Headquarters of Southern Command.

This event in the French community, which had just experienced the difficult days of war, without happenings, without news from those close to them in France, having sometimes to put up with criticisms and disapproval from their neighbours and acquaintances but above all in political articles in the press, writings filled with venom—this event brought a note of hope, of renewal. This was increased when the new arrivals did not hesitate, as distinct from their official and administrative life that was part of their duty, to form close links with the French community, links of friendship, as well as connections with social and cultural French groups, speedily becoming faithful supporters of the Alliance Française.

Colonel Renucci, a Corsican, settled in a large house in Glenferrie Road, Malvern, a house that still exists. It became the Headquarters of the French Military Mission in Melbourne. Aside from the serious work that took place there, it was equally the setting for large and beautiful dinners where 30 or 40 guests sat at table in the large "Verandah-Ballroom" and where fine meals were prepared by French chefs. A real gaiety sometimes reigned on those occasions and there were certain gatherings where the atmosphere encouraged amateur singers of talent to share their repertoire of traditional, regional or other songs with the guests . . . a very real and rich expression of French culture.

Diverse other receptions were offered in the home of the Attaché. I think his colleagues and he had a natural duty to encourage very good French-Australian relations. The Colonel gave support to French groups near him; and I remember when he lent his house and garden for a large fair in aid of the French Red Cross, very active in Melbourne during the war. Most of these activities in which I participated or brought some help were reported in the newspapers of the day.

I had then been invited to form a "Cercle de Jeunesse" at the Alliance Française (we even had our little badge!) where young people,

mainly Australians who spoke French very well, met to collaborate in Alliance programmes. For the "Cercle" I organized programmes where plays, music, poems and songs were mixed, and certain evenings, one a beautiful concert, enjoyed a very great success.

The officers of the Legation lent a sincere interest, attending programmes quite often with their colleagues and bringing the young members of the "Cercle" into the generous hospitality they offered. The house of the Naval Attaché, Commandant Kervella, a Breton officer, which later became the principal Headquarters of the French Military Mission in Australia, was at 17 Robe Street, St Kilda, and thus the current new domicile of the Alliance Française.

Here, equally, beautiful dinners and receptions were meticulously arranged. Through their work, the members of the Military and Naval Missions had close contacts with Australian authorities, governmental, diplomatic, military, and in their reception rooms one could meet the most eminent personalities of the day in Melbourne.

If the members of the first French Legation in Australia gave their patronage to Alliance activities (the Alliance was then known as the Alliance Française de Victoria), they also took part in them. I note that between April 1945 and May 1946 Colonel Renucci addressed members on four occasions: firstly, on General Chiang-Kai-Shek, whom he had known during a mission to China in 1938; another time he spoke of his service in African countries; then a lecture on Morocco; and finally he spoke of his experiences in the Levant. Commandant Kervella presented a lecture at the Alliance on the French Navy; and some other officers spoke on subjects on which they were specialists.

It was a time where everything, little by little, was finding the allure of peace-time. One feted "V-E" Day was celebrated by the French community at an official reception at "Menziess Hotel", offered by Monsieur Pierre Mathis, who represented the Provisional Government of France in Victoria. At the end of 1945 he was replaced by the first Consular representative of France after the War, then Vice-Consul, Monsieur Roger Loubère. He took charge of the Consulate, then situated in Collins Street in the beautiful building of the Bank of New South Wales, unfortunately since destroyed.

In recalling all these events, I remember that my family and I often entertained in our home the people and personalities that I just mentioned.

Towards the middle of 1946, the Attachés of the Military Mission left Melbourne. The Pacific War was nearing its end. Of the two dwellings mentioned, Robe Street was retained as principal headquarters of the military representatives of France. New residents in the house lived there until 1947. I have a few photos of other officers who resided there, some of whom were accompanied by their families.

To conclude, the house at St Kilda sometimes served as a setting for ceremonies aside from military affairs. The last time I was invited was 9 May, 1947, the occasion the award of the Legion of Honour to Madame Marcel Crivelli who was honoured because of her work for the French Red Cross during the two Great Wars. Her husband, Doctor Marcel Crivelli and she, old friends of my family, had been doyens of the French community for fifty years. For readers, it is interesting to know that Madame Crivelli was a member of the first Alliance Française committees in Melbourne, that she had been a great friend of its founder, Madame Mouchette, and had even been one of the first pupils of her school. The reception to celebrate her decoration gathered a wide variety of people, French and Australian, with whom the honoured guest had been closely linked.

As I have already written, those years where the house in Robe Street was part of the French presence here had something special that has never been repeated, that will probably never be repeated. The concluding days of the War were special and the members of the Military Mission brought with them a variety of experiences and knowledge that enriched French life here.

Having lived in many countries, having participated in events of world-wide importance, they could bring the best aspects of French culture to life again here. On the official level as well as the personal, they were received by Australians with the greatest amiability and with friendship.

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