

Walter Rosen

Traveling in a Strange Country

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Which is the road to Quebec?" I inquired. The children looked at each other and giggled. "Nous ne parlons pas anglais" they chorused. I tried again. "Quel est le chemin a Quebec?" I offered hopefully. The answer was nothing my high school French teacher had prepared me to understand. For the first time I had an inkling of how it feels to be a foreigner in a strange country and hopelessly lost besides.

Our '49 Pontiac rattled and coughed like a Stanley Steamer. It was obvious that the Canadian country roads bear a definite grudge against the American automobile.

We were not many miles from the verdant beauty of Vermont and in very similar terrain, but the entire aspect of the countryside had changed. Broken down shacks replaced neat sturdy buildings; the vegetation was scrubby and colorless; the cattle looked unhealthy.

"I hope it's a better road than this one," I told the farmer who (miracles of miracles) was giving me directions in heavily accented English. He stared at me in amazement. "This is a good road," he said. (Should I have told him about the Pennsylvania Turnpike?) His ten children and wife, with baby number eleven in her arms, came hurrying out of the house to point at the car and chatter in French. They were raggedly dressed. Papa, I noticed, was frowning in heavy concentration. "How is the honey situation in the States?" "You mean money?" I coached. "Non, non," he objected, "honey! I sell twenty-five a pound." He pointed. "There are the bees." I was farther from home than I'd thought.

But Quebec city was different. There was everywhere a captivating charm. The entire city was devoted to making tourists happy, and that the effort was successful was demonstrated by the predominance and variety of American license plates.

The main industry of the city is "the guide tour," and its salesmen are so persuasive that eventually you buy and go clattering over the cobblestones atop a swaying caleche (one-horse buggy). Our guide was a student at Laval University, one of the oldest on the American continent, and, in an English so Gallicly inflected it was almost French, he proudly told us the cherished history of the city.

Two great events hallowed Quebec, and the people cling zealously to their memory. The first was the battle on the Plains of Abraham, and the second was the visit of Roosevelt, Churchill, and MacKenzie King during the Second World War.

On every pair of lips is the story of how Montcalm was betrayed by one of his own men. "Quebec is naturally fortified," they will point out. It is built on a cliff that rises vertically from the St. Lawrence River. But there was one place that sloped to a convenient pathway and that was unguarded. Learning of this from the French traitor, General Wolfe led his British army through the pass during the night and took Montcalm by surprise. (He did not, however, attack at once but waited courteously until morning.) "There was a great battle," our guide continued, pointing to the cannons which were left there and which look to atomically oriented eyes like innocent little toys. "And in the battle both generals were killed." What a significant sermon here in these few words! If only men had given heed to it then, the second great event of Quebec's history might never have had to take place.

The Roosevelt, Churchill, King conference took place in the Citadel, a walled labyrinthian construction with battlements, tunnels, and dungeons modeled after the Bastille. It swarms with tourists, who clamber gaily about to marvel or mock at everything and perhaps make the old ghosts feel a bit uncomfortable. But the sentry marching back and forth at the entrance enjoys his job and the attention it brings to him, and he, in knee pants and beret, raises no objection to shouldering his rifle and posing for his picture with any tourist who asks him. All the city is similar to the museum where scenes of the past have been reproduced with remarkable artistry, and men of history in their waxen images live again their moment of triumph and suffer again their moment of defeat.

Of course there are the churches, the shrines, and the cathedrals—hundreds of them with innumerable priests, nuns, and pilgrims who come from miles around in search of miracles and mount the steps of the shrines on their knees as they pray their beads.

Except for various places in Mexico, Quebec is the only walled city on the American continent, and in the "Old Quarter" we find the shops and the wooden stairways on the side of the cliff that lead from one level of the city to the other. There is the street where one must not walk at night, the restaurants with French cuisine that rivals nectar and ambrosia, and "The narrowest street in the world," where dozens of ragged children cling to your skirts and beg for pennies.

And I cannot forget the Boardwalk behind the castle-like Chateau Frontenac, right on the edge of the cliff. Here the people stroll at night in the glow of the soft triple lights (like those in pictures of the Champs Elysees in Paris and watch the stars dip into the St. Lawrence.

Grande Alle is Quebec's "Main Street." Here stood our

chateau, a model of cleanliness and comfort, managed by Maurice, the personification of soothing cordiality. Although he spoke English perfectly, he was a thorough-going propagandist for his mother tongue. "Mlle. speaks no French?" he inquired with such pity and regret that I frantically tried to ease his obvious pain. "Well . . . er . . . I did study a little in school," I admitted. His face became radiant. ". . . but I don't want to murder your beautiful language," I added hastily. "Oh, but Mlle. is wrong," said Maurice with a marvelous blend of emphasis and courtesy. "We would be honored if Mlle. would try to speak our language."

The next morning no members of the staff would speak English to me. When I spoke to them, they pretended not to understand me, and I was submerged by a rapid stream of melodious but highly unintelligible français. I retreated for a moment while another American woman, who spoke with a New York accent, discussed a problem with them in English. I realized suddenly that, on the basis of my few poorly spoken French sentences of the previous evening, I was no longer accepted by these people as an outsider but rather as a friend; with deep humility I approached them again. "Monsieur Maurice," I began. "Oui, Mlle?" He was all Latin charm. "Avez-vous une dictionnaire française, s'il vous plait?" "Oui, Mlle!" he beamed, eagerly handing me the book.

Wolfe may have won the battle on the Plains of Abraham, but he didn't win the war in the Province of Quebec. I was grateful to Maurice for his tenacious devotion to the language he loved, for I eventually tore myself away from Quebec, and, of course, once on the country roads I was lost again. "Quel est le chemin a Montreal?" I asked of some youngsters on the road. And this time I understood the answer. I was no longer in a strange country.

