

Editorial

FROM LEUVEN TO LOUVAIN-LA-NEUVE

Last year, after an absence of eleven years, I decided to return to Belgium and continue my studies. Since I knew that I would be spending a lot of hours at the library of the University of Louvain, I immediately attempted to establish a friendly relationship with its employees. Imagine therefore my surprise when my first attempt at chitchat in Dutch with the coat check man produced nothing but a silly grin. Since I have a very high opinion of my own sense of humor, I was not amused, but I decided to try again. Unfortunately the result was the same. Some days later, I undertook to explore a staircase on the west side of the building on the assumption that it would provide a faster exit to the park where I wished to eat my lunch. Instead, I ended up in someone's office. I apologized in Dutch and this time I was met by a look of complete bewilderment. The lady repeated: "ik... ik... ik... geen... geen... geen... Vlaams..."

The mystery was solved. Neither one of these people understood a word of Dutch and my attempts at being friendly had only resulted in embarrassment. More than a decade after the decision had been to move the Université Catholique de Louvain from Leuven to the new campus of Louvain-La-Neuve, there were still people who worked in a Flemish city and who could not utter a single sentence in the language spoken by the majority of Belgians. Towards the end of my stay (June, 1979), the last books and the last faculties were being removed to their new location and, most likely, the francophone workers at the library were being transferred as well, but

the fact that some of them were still totally unilingual goes a long way to explaining why, at present, Leuven is the seat of only one university, the Katholieke Universiteit Leuven, and why the Université Catholique de Louvain has its campus around 30 kilometers to the south near the towns of Wavre and Ottignies.

When we arrived in Leuven for the first time in 1967, its bilingual character was still strongly marked. We heard both languages spoken everywhere, and few people felt ill at ease addressing a stranger in French. Yet even then it seemed somewhat odd that waiters, salespersons, or shopkeepers should be asked to express themselves continually in a language which was not their own. When in that year the French-speaking university announced that it intended to expand further into Flemish speaking territory, all hell broke loose.

The demonstrations; the riots, the riot police with their sticks, their trucks, and watercanons; the occupation of the ALMA II until the government fell, and the subsequent decision to move the francophone university to Wallonia, resulted in an exciting year, but I cannot say that it was entirely a pleasant one. Certainly, the year had its amusing oddities. For example, there were no riots on the weekends because, I was told, Belgian students spend their weekends with mother at home. Also, there were no riots until the movies were over. As well, there were very few violent encounters. The cops and the students played a cat and mouse game with each other, and the students usually had no problem outrunning the cops. Being soaked by water from the watercanons harmed no one and it did have a cooling-off effect!! I did talk to one student who was painting a slogan on a wall which suggested that Leuven should be burned in the same fashion as sections of Detroit had been levelled.

When I pointed out that it would be a lot more difficult to destroy a city constructed of brick and stone than it had been to flatten a city where wood-frame construction dominates, he suggested that I buzz off because he needed no advice from a fatcat capitalist who could afford to travel from America to Europe!

What was wrong in Leuven in the year 1967-1968 was the atmosphere. All goodwill had disappeared and people took out their unpleasantness on anyone in sight. I had a friend who was abused constantly because of his looks and his resemblance to Che Guevara; even bus-drivers would stop their buses and hurl insults at him. My wife was jeered at for wearing fishnet stockings. The landlord of an American friend threatened to take him to court for breach of contract when he decided to move at Christmas, even though he had found a tenant to replace him for the remainder of the academic year.

In my eyes, the decision to move the university was a good one because it got the Flemish and French speaking Belgians out of each other's hair. They were crowding one another and constantly stepping on each other's toes, and the elusive dream of linguistic harmony was slowly turning into a daily nightmare. Whatever the intrinsic beauties of the French language may be, to the Flemish the sound of that language had begun to grate and by now, it reminded them too often of previous domination and master-slave relationships.

Last year, 1978-1979, I commuted between Leuven and Louvain-la-Neuve. My memories of both cities are much more positive and pleasant than my recollections of Belgium and of Leuven in the late sixties. In spite of the fact that the Dutch and the French speaking Belgians continue to clash (sometimes violently) at all levels of society, it

seems that they are beginning to sense the outline of a solution to their language quarrels. Many now accept that there is a relationship between territory, language and justice and that problems are not solved when one group imposes itself on another, but only when the rights and privileges of each group are guarded and respected.

Therefore, at this point, it may be appropriate to comment on the state of the new campus. Louvain-la-Neuve is a worthwhile, if very costly symbol of this belief. It is new, French, and in Wallonia. Its architecture and layout are novel and they are attracting the attention of architects from all over Europe. Its existence implies that the two major language groups in Belgium must each now look after themselves first and then decide communally what is good for the country as a whole.

Of course, living in Louvain-la-Neuve was not without its ups and downs. The city is an attempt to combine the idea of the North-American campus with the coziness of the medieval city. Many of its narrow streets are closed to traffic, which is a tremendous boon for anyone who has children. The streets follow the contours of the landscape which creates variety as well as magnificent views. The centre of the city contains housing, shops and also university buildings. Mixing the three avoids the sterility and monotony of the American campuses. However, Louvain-la-Neuve has its weaknesses. Living costs are high, and it may never become a true city because nearly all the Belgian students still go home on the weekends and during the holidays and leave the town to a handful of foreigners and permanent residents. Instead of coming alive on the weekends, Louvain-la-Neuve turns into a ghost town. It will take a while before it changes from a huge dormitory into a city with a more permanent character. But during

our stay, we already made some excellent friends amongst its heterogenous population and, since many of them intend to stay there, this variegated group could become the core of a vibrant community which could claim to having its roots everywhere.

At the same time, the "old" Leuven continues to thrive. Certainly some people bemoan the fact that it is losing its cosmopolitan character, but that is not entirely true. I have an American friend who just finished medical school there and who studied in Dutch. Similarly, I met Irishmen and Americans who are studying philosophy in Leuven and who are at least trilingual (English, Dutch and French). Not one of them complained about the difficulty of learning Dutch and as far as I could ascertain they were more fluent in Dutch than a lot of other foreigners are in French! It seems likely that the Dutch speaking university will attempt to strengthen its links with its Germanic and Anglo-Saxon counterparts while the Francophones will continue to orientate themselves to the Francophone and Latin countries.

In conclusion, if your interest lies in architecture, be sure not to miss either city. Leuven has nearly completed the restoration of the "Begijnhof" and it, together with the city hall and the old market square, are worth a visit. Louvain-la-Neuve is a veritable showcase of contemporary architecture, and what its architects have done with concrete, brick, and mortar deserves an equally careful look.

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