

# THE HISTORY OF THE INTERNATIONAL SCHOOL OF PARIS

By Monique Porter, Founder

When we began looking for a school for our young daughter, my former husband, Russell Porter, suggested that we start a school. I thought it was a joke and said he was crazy! But then he said that a lot of people at the American Embassy were complaining about the lack of English speaking schools in Paris itself. The American School of Paris was moving from the Boulevard d'Auteuil to St Cloud. He thought that something should be done, and that I could do it. There was nothing more to say, and the result of this adventure was the Pershing Hall School.

The school started in 1964 in a private building called the American Legion in Paris. In the 18th or 19th century, it was a private house belonging to a noble French family. It was bought later on by the American Government to serve as a club for the First World War veterans. It was called Pershing Hall, after the American General Pershing who came to fight with the French in 1914-18. We gave that name to the school.

We started with 6 children – the Liberian Ambassador's daughter, a Filipino diplomat's son, two children from the U.S. Embassy, one French boy and my daughter - we were already international. The tuition at that time was \$500!! We started to grow rapidly and we opened a school going from K to 8<sup>th</sup> grade. We had mixed K/1 under the eye of an adorable plump English teacher who passed children in review every morning, like the Queen's Horse Guard: nails, ears, hair and polished shoes. I am sure that those children were the cleanest of all. We had Grades 2/3 and 4/5 on the first floor, and a mixed Grades 6, 7 and 8 on the ground floor.

Mrs. Jannick Jones, who started the school with me was the first Headmistress and gave the basic philosophy to our school. She taught also Maths and French (she was of French origin), and at the same time was cooking lunch on a gas stove. Sometimes in the middle of a math explanation, she had to run to check a burning roast-beef or boiling noodles. It was fun, except when teachers had to take turns washing and drying the dishes after lunch, there were some grumblings. I was in charge of bringing the food every morning - plastic bags of fruits and meat. After being forced to give some explanation to my butcher who could not believe that I was eating so much for supper, he gave me the best morsels for a reasonable price. I had also some adventures with that meat, because one day, the roast-beef was not properly wrapped and I discovered that some blood was dripping in the Metro and there were some suspicious looks!

In the year 1967-68, NATO moved to Brussels, and the Head's husband had to move also. She went too, but continued to come every week from Tuesday to Thursday by the 5:00 am train called the TEE (Train Européen Express), leaving teaching plans with me for the following days.

In May 1968, during the Mini Revolution, she was blocked in Brussels. The staff and I decided to keep the school going. Teaching plans and orders were given by telephone, and all children except one, attended the school during that period. We had a bus for kids and another for teachers. We had a good time during the two hour trip to go home, having cookies, goodies and sometimes a bottle of whisky (except for the driver).

In June '68, the American Legion let us know that our presence on the premises was not welcome any more; we had to find another place. I found myself alone with seventy-five children registered for the next Fall, no Head (Mrs Jones had to go back to the States) and no place to go. Summer '68 was the worst summer I ever had. Trying to find something or somebody during July or August, 30 years ago, was impossible. Finally on the 4th of August 1968, we signed a lease for the only log cabin or Russian *isba* existing in Paris - Villa Copernic in the 16<sup>th</sup>, not far from Place Victor Hugo. That house had been built by an eccentric Russian architect and was made of wood and slates. It was "ça ou rien". The parents were marvellous to trust me; not one of them withdrew their children.

We spent three years at Villa Copernic, in that small, fire trap building. Veterans like Diane Sirot (Mrs. Lawlor at Ranelagh) would remember it. We had a 4th grade class in the old laundry basement,

the French class was in the garage; in winter it was freezing cold, but we survived. Our first year in that eccentric building was hectic. The Head, a certain Mr O'Neil, was part-time and practically never there, so I learned to hire teachers, make report cards and have conferences with parents. The second year brought a relief to me with the arrival of a marvellous woman, Marcia McDonough. She had started a small American School in the garage of the Switzerland Embassy in Algiers, and Villa Copernic looked like a palace to her. I started again house-hunting before the end of our 3 year lease, and we moved to 68 rue d'Auteuil, in the 16<sup>th</sup>, in a very nice house. We also had a new Head, Alain Wenger. That house had been a kind of religious centre and for a long time I had calls for Monsignor so and so. Again, the French class was in the basement, but we had our first library!

We were expanding again and could not push the walls. So once again I went house-hunting. In 1973, I discovered the marvel of 96 bis rue Ranelagh, but at that time the Board did not want to hear about it or even look at it as it was too expensive. Moving has always been a fantastic gamble. In 1975, we changed our name to the International School of Paris. I was surprised to discover that rue du Ranelagh was still free, and that time I literally pushed the Board to visit it. It was made for us and we moved in in 1976. There was nothing to change, and we had a new Head, Patricia Hayot (who is currently head of the Chapin School in New York City).

The Board decided that the school could not survive if we did not start having a middle and high school in the future. At Ranelagh we had already in 1980-81, two mixed classes of Grades 6/7 and Grades 8/9. So again, house hunting. Looking back, it seems I spent more time house hunting than anything else.

In 1982, we found Chardin. It was a private town house with kitchen and bathrooms. To be accepted by the French authorities, since renovations were necessary, we had to request the visit by the Security Department of the Prefecture. The architect and I submitted our plans for approval. When we heard the verdict our hopes went to ashes. First we had to tear down everything but the walls and roof, rebuild the floors so that they could support 500Kg per square meter, put a fire escape staircase inside (not in the court yard, being in a residential area it was forbidden to build anything of that kind). We needed doors, doors, doors. At a certain point I wondered if there would be enough space for classrooms. So imagine an empty house with only walls and roof.

I was desperate. It took four months to redo everything, starting in July and ending in October. On the November 1, 1982, the middle and high school moved in with the paint still damp. The school had been in session during September and October in rented rooms. The Headmistress, Pat, had been in the States during that period preparing her PhD, and Marc Greenside took over as Acting Head.

In 1985, the Head, Pat Hayot, who was back, started house-hunting again, and we purchased the building across rue Chardin at 6 rue Beethoven. It was a former art school, called Ecole des Arts Décoratifs, perhaps built in 1930. It probably had not been renovated since that time. It was in such a state with electric wires dangling or fixed with nails. I could not believe that the French Security Department had accepted those conditions, especially after the fuss they made with us. Everything was redone, according to law, even the roof above the gym was re-tiled with tiles of the same colour and shape as the roofs in the area.

Mrs Hayot went back to the States to assume responsibilities as Head of a school in Columbus, Ohio. After her we had an Acting Head for a few months (Robin Stuart), a Head, Maurice Pezet, and finally Nigel Prentki, who left in 1997. Since then, Gareth Jones, who had been a biology teacher in the school, has been the Headmaster

I was the founder and Business Manager of Pershing-International School of Paris from September 1964 to end of December 1991, the date of my retirement.