

Letter from Paris - May 18, 1968

*Translated 2015 - (I don't remember being able to write French!? But There are a number of letters. The following few letters were sent during my time in Paris and retrieved back in Toronto. There were / are pages missing.*

Dear Family

Without doubt, you can follow the events in Paris more closely than I. I do not have radio, only newspapers and my eyes which cannot understand all that is happening.

After the first march, Monday, the students occupied the Sorbonne and two days later, the Odeon Theatre - a very grand and sumptuous building near the Sorbonne. ...

*(A more precise history of events is enclosed - from Wiki. I recall both the Sorbonne and the Odeon were occupied that same Monday night by the students marching back from the rally at the Champs de Mars. I know the Odeon was ... because I entered there on returning to the Latin Quarter. Well, the door was open! I don't remember the Sorbonne occupied before that but Wiki says it had been and was re-occupied that night.)*

... And then the workers occupied some suburban factories [in Paris] and also in Lyon. This was not a strike, but an occupation [and] this is very important. The two, the students and the workers, put on a show of solidarity. Perhaps [sic] I read in the paper this morning that the unions did not allow their young revolutionary brothers to join them inside the factories. But this struggle evolved far from the Latin Quarter where I observe 'the revolution'. It will take some time for me to tell and report the news from the *banlieu*.

At the Odeon there is 'permanent meeting'. On the door there is a poster telling us "imagination takes power in the ex-Theatre of France. Enter free". Another informs us "To invent is take the power of the future. The future is for the taking because the future has been [forfeited] by the old government ... The urban revolution will eliminate [*tuera*] the world of the old bourgeoisie. The revolution which is beginning will replace not only capitalist society but also industrial civilization. The society of consumption must die a violent death. The society of alienation and must disappear from history. We invent a new and original world."

Inside the 'comrades' were raging. When I attended Wednesday the great problem was the solidarity with the workers and how to make it seen. In the newspaper *le Figaro* this morning, a journalist who attended last night cited the words of a spokesman, "We are a group of artists and workers of the the theater ... We wish to develop a art of struggle which completely rejects 'commercial theatre'. We have occupied the Odeon in order to transform it from high blown talk to popular struggle. Actually it is no longer a theater, it is a political forum where we debate the bourgeois society versus the unions".

"Imagination takes power" there has replaced the Paul Taylor Ballet, the most ingenious in the world.

But the Odeon is a side show. One must wander in the circus of the Sorbonne itself in order to experience 'the revolution'. In English it is 'a happening' a 'be-in'.

Day and night the crowd wanders round the Sorbonne, in the court yard, the classrooms and offices, and then fills the galleries of the Amphitheatre to the rafters (their Convocation Hall) where a General Assembly is convened almost in perpetuity.

On the walls of the University facing the streets are affixed posters, placards and notes which cover over all the notices "Forbidden to affix posters". One after the other the tell the ideological progress of the revolution. Each '*groupuscule*' - Trotskyist, Maoist, anarchist, Youth of Communist party, National Union of French Students, Committee of Occupation, Action Committee, April 22 Movement, their version of

events and their vision for the future. One can unravel all history on these walls.

In the courtyard everything is in tumult. Discussion groups form, break up and reform. The 'groupuscles', each one with a table and a banner sell their propaganda – the first time in the courtyard. A hippie plays his flute. The loudspeaker requests Mlle Fachot in Room Thirty. One cannot see the floor for the carpet of abandoned tracts. The young men - *jauns* - [slang] ...

*How could I know this word!!*

... cry out, "In ten years Brittany will be a cultural desert or a free country".

In each classroom of the university there a committee of some sort. It's necessary to see a little of each one.

*Revolutionary tourist!*

And in the Amphitheatre the debate continues without amplification. That would not be democratic.

Myself, I listened to the revolutionaires and their visitors played the piano. Chopin was never more inspiring than from the hands of a young revolutionary. But when the amateurs had liberated Chopin the pros began to play at first jazz and then Bach, both together with a formidable dexterity and *éclat dur*. [explosive volume].

*I don't think this means a mixture of jazz and Bach on one piano but two different pianos in different parts of the foyer competing but blending.*

At the same time inside the Amphitheatre the 'pros' also emerged. The revolution must provide housewives, warriors and negotiators and discipline. ....

*Where were the feminists!*

.... Before I left they had begun the process of cleaning their fortress. After four days of this fantasy a much stronger 'machine' began to organize. Perhaps the revolution will be stronger than I had thought.

While I was leaving I stopped twice to watch an excellent mime on the subject of greed and ingratitude and to peer through the telescope of an amiable professor to see the world of Jupiter very far away.

For the students 'the revolution' was a struggle between the communists and the 'new left' which followed, as in the U.S., Herbert Marcuse and his philosophy of alienation. These students believe that it is necessary to win more than a wage increase, but what, exactly? There is no one clear and unified voice. The workers are not only communists, [they are] very practical. There is no philosophy

*Next pages missing*

Letter – no date – The National Strike is after May 15. See attached WikiHistory.

Dear family

Now, more of the details. I am no longer in the middle of sixty one strangers in the *depot cinquieme*, [??] headquarters of police for the Latin Quarter. I am not injured myself, as 367 students and tourists. Really, all with me is tranquil and serene. I was never present in 'the action'.

I was present in the Quartier Thursday. The gendarme with rifles were guarding the Sorbonne. Outside, buses filled with soldiers waited. But the people passed on the Boulevard Saint Michel without even a shout. They gathered in some small and heated debating circles, then everybody went home, as did I. This afternoon, Sunday, it was very beautiful and I walked again in the Quarter. The bricks that were the surface of this charming street were gathered as barricade. Burnt out cars were everywhere. Still the gendarme, the rifles, the buses filled with soldiers, but no debating circles or fierce students, only a happy well-dressed crowd and ice cream vendors. Tomorrow, a General Strike and more demonstrations. The source of the problem, at first, was the lack of humanity in contemporary society (which is to say the lack of employment for those who don't like to work in ordinary jobs) and also,

of course, the lack of power for the students in bureaucracy of the University. As always. But now it is a question of the brutality of the Gendarme and the fascist government which double locked the doors of the Sorbonne, without cause, of course. For me the great surprise was the passion for something, never seen in our country. But the Communist Party is very strong and well prepared ...

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*[This language is more complex, - I'd say 'sophisticated' if I had any idea whether it is grammatically correct - than I remember knowing. I never spoke French this 'well'. Who wrote this?]*