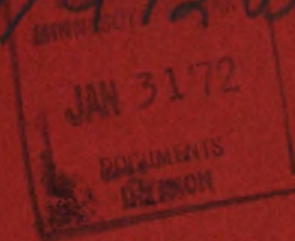


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Winter 1972

Douglas P. Murray

Exchanges With China?

Roger D. Masters

Toward Improved Franco-American
University Exchanges

Ernst G. Breitholtz

Rotary International
Youth Exchange and Educational Awards

David D. Henry

The Latin American Scholarship Program
of American Universities

Helga von Hoffman

Reflections of an AFS Exchangee

Ruth H. Purkaple

American Students Abroad

Maxine Lowry Hermann

The International Executive
Service Corps

Edward DeAntoni

Foreign Student Career Counseling:
A Personal View

A 17-year-old German girl named Helga came to the United States in 1950 under sponsorship of the American Field Service (AFS). In 1971 she returned to give the keynote address at the anniversary banquet of the convention at which AFS celebrated 25 years of its scholarship programs.

Reflections of an AFS Exchangee

by Helga von Hoffman

TWENTY-FIVE YEARS of the AFS Scholarship Program—these days of the convention are proud days, full of the feeling of achievement, full of reflections, memories, sentiments, and full of hope for the future. But most of all, I feel, all of us are filled with gratitude. For the past 25 years we have tried the impossible, and I think we come close to proving the impossible does not exist.

When I was asked to speak to you I had hoped to learn what was expected of me. We all know AFS New York. They told me to take the time I needed and it would be all right. So, here I am and I am glad my American public speaking teacher of 21 years ago left for Europe 3 days ago and cannot be here now. Surely she would scold me for reading this.

Of course I also asked myself why I was asked to speak. It must have something to do with seniority—of the 25 years the scholarship program exists I have been actively involved with it for 21 years. So I guess the virtue of your speaker is her being a historical relic. Let us try to reflect on those past 25 years together and let us together try to use these days of the convention to map out our aims and goals for the next 25 years.

This opening of the AFS convention seems to me to be AFS in a nutshell, and looking through this banquet hall once again I marvel at the impossible becoming possible: a hall filled with friends, from all walks of life, from all different countries, of various social, racial, cultural, and political background, of all age groups united in a gay and memorable and important

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As an AFS scholarship student, 17-year-old Helga came to the United States in 1950 and attended Bethesda-Chevy Chase (Md.) High School, living in Kensington, Md., with the Richard M. Price family. The Prices then had a daughter Helga's age, a younger daughter, and a son 12 (who is now an Army doctor currently stationed in Germany).

Mrs. von Hoffman is married to a journalist. The older of their two teenage daughters has just completed her AFS year in White Plains, N.Y., where she attended Woodlands High School.

event. It is one of the events that have always had a heart-warming effect on me for the past 25 years—a gathering of AFS'ers.

My greetings go out to those who cannot be here and share in fun, memories, thoughts, and ideas. My thoughts go back to those who will never be with us again but who with their faith in humanity, their faith in truth and the dignity of the individual, have led us toward the ideal of the AFS. My gratitude goes to those who came and to those who made this meeting possible.

I am afraid that what I am going to talk about is a very personal account of 21 years with AFS. But since these three letters have very personal effects on all of us, we can identify ourselves with each other's experiences. Maybe this is one of the secrets of AFS.

Girl From Postwar Germany

When I read "Walk together, talk together, all ye peoples of the earth, then and only then shall ye have peace" for the first time in 1950 this seemed to be a revelation for a 17-year-old girl in postwar Germany. I had grown up with the personal knowledge of what hate means and what hate can lead to, and neither my situation nor my history books could render any hope that it could be any other. When I applied for this program it seemed to offer a miracle, and I was keenly aware of the fact that I was going on a mission—a mission to prove that people from my country could not be identified with war crimes only. The world seemed huge and unknown, and I shared with other students from other countries the fact that

we had grown up in a world filled with hate and prejudice in total isolation and in ignorance of each other. There was nobody to tell you what was ahead; there were no returnees to tell you how we would be received in a former enemy's country. The boat trip took 10 days, and many of us did not even know the names of the families who were going to host us. I was a German, the war had ended only 5 years before and legally Germany was still at war with the USA. I was loaded down with guilt feelings of being a German.

When my boat pulled into New York harbor George Edgell came aboard from the pilot's boat and greeted me with "Hello, Helga" and at the old, old AFS headquarters the original AFS crew greeted us—Mr. Galatti, Mrs. Field, and Sachi Mizuki. The world started to shrink—there was communication and we walked in a daze. On my way to catch the bus to my American home town I had to take a taxi. The cab driver gathered from my peculiar English that I was a foreigner. He talked to me. He had been a GI in Germany. He did not charge me—he told me it was his share in welcoming me to his country. The impossible seemed to become possible, and by the time I was in the arms of my family I started to be a person and not just a German. My school took me in as one of theirs, the question of my nationality was of minor interest.

Individuals in a World Community

I think that when we look back on the past 25 years it is vital for us all to reflect on the need this program originated from—the need to prove to ourselves that we are individual persons and not members of nationalities. The founders of this program were far ahead of their time by sensing that this world could only become a better place to live in if we could all overcome nationalism and prejudice and instead start seeing each other and ourselves as individuals in a world community. Their faith in humanity and their dedication gave us the strength and the knowledge that every one of us can do his part in overcoming what is fencing us in.

My heart goes out to those first, first families who had the courage to do something unheard of—take in a foreign child as their own and thus prove to their communities that it could be done. My heart goes out to those who were willing to work for this new ideal, who persuaded, armtwisted, campaigned for a dream. My heart goes out to the schools and communities who took us in. And my heart goes out to those who had

enough faith in this dream to let their children go across the ocean for a whole year in search of a better world. To all of those very first we owe the growth and the strength of this program because they were the pioneers in a world that had never considered trying a new approach. I hope the younger generation in this audience will forgive me for going into the stories of the "good old days," but I feel very strongly that at this time and at this 25th anniversary of our program it is appropriate to mention this and to pay tribute to those very first families who opened their hearts, these very first schools and communities who opened their minds and their wallets, to these first volunteers who worked for this ideal. It was a revolutionary new movement, and to my knowledge AFS was the first organization ever to try a program with this age group.

During the year the impossible became possible, and at the end of my stay the bus trip proved it. I had never met French students before, or Danish, English, Italian or Greek, Belgian or Dutch, or Jewish students who had personally suffered from what my countrymen had done to them. For the first time in my life I met them on the AFS bus trip, and once again the impossible was possible. All of us had made a vital discovery, had had a vital personal experience. We were able to see each other as individuals. We spoke the same language—with different accents, but it was the same. It was not only the English language but mainly the language that had been taught to us by generous host families, the language of love and patience, understanding, and laughter. To me it has always been a significant and symbolic event when my first child started walking into this world in a pair of shoes given to her by a Jewish-French AFS friend.

American Abroad Program

My heart goes out to the first returnees who made the impossible come possible in their native countries by starting the program for American students. I have seen this program grow from scratch. For Germany it was outlined during numerous meetings aboard the ship taking us from New York back to Europe. Those were stormy days, and the meetings had to be adjourned at times to give those with a nervous stomach a chance of privacy. I do want to pay tribute to those first AFS returnees in Europe who put all their efforts, time, their own pocket money, and work into this ideal. Their dedication and enthusiasm started the American Abroad Program,

and looking back one might say they passed the test of their AFS year by carrying on the torch.

Crossing the ocean those days was still considered something like an adventure—and very few did. My gratitude goes to those American parents who let their children go, who had the faith in this organization and in this ideal. It gave those of us who worked for the program the enthusiasm to go on. Again, the impossible became possible and one of the most gratifying moments for me was when the first Jewish American AFS girl to come to Germany after the war was given the key to her German home as a farewell gift.

At this point I do feel it should also be mentioned that having faith in the organization as such was really most hazardous. There was a lack of money, a lack of experience, a lack of practically everything—only enthusiasm was never lacking. Nobody who is familiar with today's organization could believe what was possible in the "good old days." Mutual respect, patience, and a never-ending sense of humor pulled us through at times.

In 1953 we had the first really large number of American students in Germany—198 students being handled by a handful of dedicated 18-year-old chairmen with no experience and a German office head who didn't even know the blessing of file cards. There were several students expected by more than one family by the time they arrived, and the weeks prior to the arrival of the group brought patient but frantic letters from AFS New York: "Helga, dear, so-and-so has had mail from family Schmidt in Munich. However, dear, you told us she was going to spend the summer with the Mullers in Berlin. Could you please reassure?" We learned the hard way, but a sense of humor in moments of seeming disaster never left us.

I do know chapters, volunteers, overseas representatives, the New York office tend to despair at times even today. But thinking back, this is the most bureaucratic, organized outfit possible, compared with yesteryear. I do know we have things like late-late placements today, and we hunt such students with the help of the police either here or in other countries because they happened to be on a camping trip without an address. But somehow they always do make their charter plane. And they are the exceptions.

I marvel at parents in the olden days who knew this was more or less routine with AFS—and they still let their chil-

dren go. We really all learned from scratch. Something like the written rule "Don't pack your passport" certainly derives from a bitter experience of having several hundred students boarding busses to take them across a border and somebody walking up to you and saying "I packed my passport." So, in the middle of the rainy night everyone pulls apart the busses to find that one suitcase. And all this knowing that boats don't wait. It's been a learning experience for everyone involved in it.

There seemed to be a growing, deep need for this AFS experience. In the fifties I spent a few weeks in your country raising funds and speaking for AFS in communities throughout the country. This was another vital AFS experience for me. I met with hundreds of people deeply involved, deeply feeling the need to move closer, to meet the stranger, to get to know him. It seemed to be a mass movement, and I shall never forget a high school somewhere near Chicago that seemed to show this enthusiasm so well: the wall in the entrance hall showed a huge world map. In the middle of the ocean a tiny boat was pinned and it was explained that every time somebody put a donation into the box beneath the map he could push the boat a little closer to the U. S. coastal line. The boat was symbolic for the AFS student this school was expecting from Europe. Here was a student body pushing the boat of their AFS student closer to their home town, raising the money for their AFS'er. There was another school selling "shares" in their AFS student.

AFS chapters all over the country were doing the utmost in their communities to raise money, to promote the program—and this still holds true and the mass movement of volunteers' dedication and belief in this program has been and is pushing us on ever since the first pioneering years.

There have been changes—surely today the map in this school would show a plane instead of a boat. Gone are the days of the famous AFS boats. For a number of years AFS has been part of the jet set, and tales of the Arosa Line fleet or of the Seven Seas are tales of the past. I know some regret this, but our concepts of how to prepare the students for a new experience—the experience of meeting themselves, each other, and their host country at Gateways seem to me to be adequate.

Our Midways today are a more meaningful preparation for what is ahead of them and how they are to use their new strength—better than 10 days of ocean travel could provide.

Stolen Signs Returned

The jet age brought another angle; the weight limit on planes also limits the urge to souvenir hunt. I still get nightmares when I remember this one special train carrying several hundred students from some meeting point in Germany to the pier in Rotterdam. Shortly before getting off the train I noticed the rest room did not have a sign. I did not know the entire disaster till I had a letter from the German railroads informing me AFS would never get another single reservation unless 187 signs from this specific train were returned. Some future historian going through the AFS archives might wonder about the frantic cable from me to the shipboard director begging to have the students return the signs. I received a package from New York by airmail—containing more than 200 signs—street signs, signs from trains, from public places. I picked out 187 that could have come from a German train, and of the remaining ones I kept one that still today reminds guests in my bathroom that the toilet may not be used during train stops—in four languages of course. And we still get train reservations from the German railroads.

Boats and planes during the past 25 years have carried more than 59,000 students across the oceans toward wider horizons. At this assembly of friends of the AFS today we must ask ourselves what it has been, is, and will be that is driving us who are working for this organization and its ideals.

To me it is obvious—and has always been obvious—that this is not another kind of charity work, of killing our spare time, of doing something worthwhile. It seems to me that, working in and with this program, every one of us gains so much that maybe a certain kind of selfishness is driving us all. We want to gain, but we also want others to gain. We want the experience, the almost physical experience of growing within, but we also want to share this with others. We expanded the program more and more. We had larger numbers of students from year to year, larger numbers of countries represented, larger numbers of Americans going abroad, larger numbers of communities involved throughout the world, more volunteers, more donors, more governments realizing we found a way of promoting something professional diplomats could not do. From year to year we were proving more and more that the impossible could be done.

We are sharing our gains. Those involved with AFS deeply—host parents, host brothers and sisters, AFS'ers, chapter

members, counseling teachers, friends—cannot help but come away with a deeper understanding of human needs, with deeper compassion for the fellow man, with a more serious desire to make this world a better place to live in, to get involved actively, to stand up to one's opinion. Somehow this very human experience opens up eyes and minds and hearts.

Change in the World and Change in AFS

With the slow change that took place in this world—this change toward deeper search into the individual, more self-analysis, more self-questioning—I feel the AFS went through a change as well. Maybe we in AFS feel changes more universally, faster and deeper, and I think my most eye-opening experience came when I was a host mother two years ago. I realized that today the AFS experience was not any longer in the first place a confrontation with another nationality only. It was an experience of being confronted with another human being and ourselves. It was the most relevant year of our life as a family unit. We grew in love, in laughter, and in closeness. Our efforts to integrate Lori into our family and into our way of life brought about a deeper and more fundamental understanding for each other's needs for the whole family. It also brought about a deeper realization of what we stand for and the reasons for it, what our values really are, where we place our priorities in life. We learned that once you have the urge to explain it all, to spell it out, once you really mean to get close to another human being, your own situation becomes clearer and things small and traditions cherished within a family are re-evaluated, thought out, spelled out. A new and deep awareness of each other and each other's needs developed as the entire family—including Lori—grew closer and closer. It was an all-embracing experience that included Lori's American family and my American mother of 21 years ago who spent New Year's with us.

As I look back over the past 25 years, AFS seems to reflect vividly the changes this world has gone through. Not only did the jet age bring countries and people closer together within a few hours—but mass media and worldwide press and television coverage have brought about a new and better informed generation of world citizen. No longer are those we host derived from isolated, unknown worlds of their own. Many of them have traveled widely, and most of them are well aware of what is going on in this world. We are coping with a new world citizenship, and everyone working for and with AFS has

felt this strongly during the past years because we were and are confronted with this change and feel the need for it and feel the need for change in ourselves. This started slowly and then came as an eruption, and it will stay with us.

This high level of information about each other's problems during the past years has led to a new concept of values, a new concept of our status in today's and tomorrow's world. Much as many of us older ones might shudder at the word "revolution," we might as well realize we are living in revolution. I feel that this might be the most challenging and most constructive development mankind has gone through in many centuries. No matter what we do, we are involved in a re-evaluation of our values, our motivations, of anything we ever stood for. The developing nations showed us the way and so did the minorities, and there is nothing in today's world that is not being challenged and questioned and re-evaluated. The fight for human dignity, for liberty and personal freedom, the liberation from any oppression—this is a universal movement and it is reflected in AFS. Exploited countries, the oppressed minorities, and the restless young carried this torch of self-analysis, of re-evaluation, and critical awareness. They have forced us, the established powers and settled generations, to answer their searching questions, and I have always been grateful to them for their courage to do so. There is a search for a deeper meaning of life which we don't seem to have been able to provide.

The world is on fire today, and everyone working for AFS should be aware of it. Once again AFS can do its part in educating people, in confronting them and their ideals, and in bringing about deeper understanding.

Those of us who live in affluence tend to close our eyes and minds to the fact that there is injustice in this world, that there is poverty, that there is intolerable intolerance, ignorance, that majorities suppress minorities, rich suppress poor, the educated suppress the uneducated. There is not one institution of today's society in this world that is not being questioned—and rightly so: the status of the family, upbringing of children, the status of the woman, the status of the black in a white society, the churches, governments, the judicial system, socioeconomic structures, the relationship between man and woman, the status of the worker, the student. This worldwide movement to my mind is an attempt—and the first one worldwide—to secure the dignity of the individual. Self-analysis is a

painful treatment, but a necessary one. Surely an identity crisis goes along with it, and we have all suffered from it.

Looking back over the past 25 years of AFS and looking forward to the next 25 years of AFS I am convinced that we will have an even more important part on this world's stage than ever before.

Facing Today's Challenge

We were able to confront postwar German students with American families and communities shortly after the end of the war. We were able to confront Greek and Turkish students on one boat during the height of the Cyprus crisis. We are able to load planes with white South African and black African students. We are able to place white students with black families and black students with white families, have poor and rich live together. We are able to bridge language barriers, cultural barriers—I am convinced we should and will also cheerfully tackle the challenge today's world, our world, poses. Never has anyone connected with AFS shied away from any challenge, and more than 59,000 families all over the world are proof of this. So are more than 3,600 presently active AFS chapters all over the world.

Two weeks ago I met with the group of American students newly arrived to spend the school year in Germany. They were painfully but cheerfully struggling to learn German at the language camp. Along with them, tackling this impossible language, was the first student of the multinational program to come to Germany, fully integrated in the group though his native tongue is Spanish, as he comes from Chile. There will have to be more and more students like him in this program. Multination exchange programs will have to grow, and so will the number of those students and families have to grow who derive from underprivileged groups of society.

I told you how much it meant to me 18 years ago when my daughter walked into this world in her French-Jewish shoes. She has walked a long way. As the first one of the second generation of AFS'ers from Germany she returned from her AFS year in your country this summer. With pride she wore a dashiki that her beloved black American mother had sewn for her. I can tell that this dashiki on my own daughter stands for a new awareness, a new deeper thoughtfulness and compassion for each and every one. I am filled with gratitude and awe. Once again the miracle has happened, the impossible became

possible. The miracle of true and deep communication and of growing close.

Something brought us all here for this 25th anniversary of AFS, and I think maybe it was the need for confrontation and for communication with each other once again.

Let us use these days for reflection, for discussion, and for planning for the future, and let us use them well and in the right direction.

Let us have the courage to listen to criticism. Let us go on listening to the heartbeat of our brothers and sisters all over the world. Let us never be content with what we have achieved, but let us look for new and other ways of keeping our ideals meaningful. Let us never lose the ability to listen to each other intently. It is not enough to walk together, talk together for achieving the peace mankind needs so desperately. We have to listen as well. ■

Canada Council Grants for Foreign Scholars and Writers

Ten Canadian universities have been awarded grants from the Canadian Government to invite 49 visiting scholars and writers from five European countries for the 1971-72 academic year. The countries are Belgium, France, the Federal Republic of Germany, Italy, and Switzerland.

Worth \$100,000, the grants were announced here by the Canada Council, which administers this phase of Canada's cultural exchanges on behalf of the Department of External Affairs. The grants are worth up to \$1,000 a month for each visitor and include travel expenses.

The visiting scholars and writers will give conferences and direct seminars for students, faculty, and the public. Host universities are Alberta, Dalhousie, Laval, Montreal, Ottawa, Quebec, St. Paul (Ottawa), Sherbrooke, Simon Fraser, and Toronto.

—*Canada Council press release,
October 19, 1971.*