

## The Selection Process

(Pithiviers and Tours, 1971) My parents asked the American Field Service for an application packet. In September or October, the local committee invited me to a «selection test» which took place in Tours. My mom accompanied me to the Fleury-les-Aubrais train station where I would hop on the train. Then I found myself in an unknown town. I didn't know that I would later study medicine there. I went by foot from the train station to a tall building on the border of the Loire River occupied by a branch of the University of Stanford, California. There, with thirty other candidates, I worked on a general knowledge questionnaire and I wrote down a self-portrait. They asked us to be as verbose as possible. The more we spoke about ourselves, our family members, our life style, our likes and dislikes, our aspirations, and whatever activities we had for fun, the better : all that would serve not only to define the «profile», the aptitudes of each candidate, but also to choose the family which would host him or her in the United States. I filled fifteen pages.

The application file also contained « descriptions of the applicant by his parents, a close friend and a teacher chosen by the applicant ». I don't remember which friend I requested the description from, but Monsieur Monticelli, my 11<sup>th</sup> grade French teacher filled one. He insisted that I should read it. Among other things, he wrote that I was very fond of literature, and specifically of American literature.

Each French AFS local committee could propose no more than a limited number of applicants. A few weeks later, I was summoned once again in Tours for an interview. My application was been considered with that of a half-dozen other young people. My heart soared with happiness. Again, my mother brought me to Fleury. Since I was early for my train, I went to the newspaper stand. I was leafing through the comic books and magazines, when I heard the train was leaving. I ran like lightning all the way to the train platform, but too late. It was over, my dream was vanishing away. I would never go. A boy who can't catch the Orleans-Tours train is too stupid to go spend one full year in America.

I thought I'd die. I looked for a telephone (there were almost not booths in France in the early seventies), and I ended up calling my dad from the station's café. He yelled and said I was an idiot and a *bourricot*<sup>1</sup> (his favorite insults for his sons). Then he calmed himself and reassured me. He told me to hop in the next train, he was going to call AFS in Tours. They would wait for me, I'd go through the interview after the others, and that's all.

Vexed, sheepish and gloomy, I waited for the next train. When I finally arrived in Tours it was dark. It was almost six o'clock on a December evening, the main streets were illuminated by Christmas decorations. The interviews had not ended. The people in charge still had one applicant before me. Two or three others, who had already been heard, were talking with the young people who had already made the trip and had just returned, and with parents whose son or daughter was in America or who were hosting a young American. I loved to hear them. I wished I could be there already.

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<sup>1</sup> Donkey

When they called me in, I found myself standing in front of a strange crew. There were seven women sitting in a half circle behind tables. They made me sit on one chair in the middle of the room. Some of them were mothers of former AFS students or current «host mothers», others had spent one year in the United States years ago. And I had the very odd feeling of being perfectly at home in the midst of all these women. For the first time in my life, someone asked me to say who I was, what I liked, and why I wanted to leave - and didn't intend to use it against me. I had never succeeded in making myself heard in the midst of my family brawls ; when they sought me out, it was usually to put me in the spotlight in front of other people (« Marc! Come say Hello to this person», or « Oh, my dear how tall you are now ! What a handsome boy you have become!») when it wasn't to humiliate me («Yes, I agree, it would be better for him to fatten up a little bit. If only he didn't have all this acne, I take him to the dermatologist twice a month – *I know you don't like* me to talk about that, but you know, I'm your mother. I have the right to say how I feel about my son !»). Facing these women whom I didn't know and whose faces I had trouble seeing, my height, my thinness, my acne and all the rest no longer bothered me. No question seemed inappropriate, nor put me ill at ease, and when one of the committee ladies asked me if I would help my host mother to do the dishes, I laughed, and I answered that it had been a long time since I washed dishes at home. When my parents went to eat lunch at their friends' house, my brother Mick and I ate lunch together on Sundays at noon before we went to the movies. I could fix salad and cook a steak, no big deal. . . I saw the seven women look at one another. I realized suddenly that the woman, who must have been a teacher, had asked me that question in English, and that I had answered in English, without thinking about it.

When I left the room, an hour later, I had kept on speaking all the time. In all my life I had never spoken for such a long time to so many people at a time, except on the day of my *bar-mitzvah* - and on that day, I had rehearsed. . . . I hurriedly greeted the people still present, I had to leave immediately in order to catch the last train for Orleans, if I missed that one, I would be in deep trouble. They told me they would keep me posted.

Sitting in the train compartment, I felt worn out. My head was empty. I reflected on the strange interview. I tried to remember the looks, the smiles, the heads nodding. I tried to give it a meaning, to guess what they thought of all that. And then I told myself that it was as good as lost. I was the last student they met. They were probably sick and tired of listening to boys talking about themselves as if they were the most interesting person on the planet, and furthermore I was late. And I had the feeling I had said a bunch of stupid things.

Much later, they told me that after I had left the room, one of the women, a member of the AFS national committee sent there to help the local members, had strongly expressed her doubts about my capacity to spend a whole year in an American family. «This boy talks too much, she'd said. He is going to make their ears hurt.»