

## GROWING UP IN SENEGAL

by Josée Massé

*I have tried to tell a side of history that few people have experienced. That education has made me what I am. Thank you for having asked me to put into words some days of my "previous life".*

"In August 1963, a young Montreal lawyer, fired with a passion for justice and fraternity, enrolled in an international youth camp in N'Dangalma (Senegal). How could he have known that there, he would meet the girl who would later become his wife?"

That introduction to my article in this issue of *Liaison* highlighting Africa and the Middle East, will perhaps provide an answer for those who are curious to know how Marcel and Josée met.

Our meeting — on a construction site — was not at all romantic. (That was at the time when people were talking about "human investment"). Both of us had come to help build a village of "modern homes" — that is, houses built of cement. We were about a hundred young people from Mali, Mauritania, Gambia, the United States (one Canadian was part of their delegation) and Senegal.

Overnight, each of us had traded our occupation for a construction job, asking no pay but merely accepting bed and board. And...as if by magic, this spontaneously generated band of workers, under the competent eye of a German architect and working for Senegal's Ministry of Youth and Sports, produced twelve family homes in just one month.

We gave our all — doing everything from making the bricks by hand out of cement and laterite, to anchoring the corrugated sheet steel roofs with steel rods. As for the solidity of these houses, we were overjoyed to find them still standing four years ago!

It was in the company of Ambassador Marc Perron that we made our "sentimental journey", when he was posted to Senegal and we were there on official travel. But did this young Canadian lawyer who had introduced himself to me know that I was also a "Canadian"?

In Senegal it is a tradition to call the inhabitants of the Senegalese town of St. Louis, "Canadians". We do not know exactly how this custom originated. Perhaps it is because the histories of Canada and Senegal cover almost the same periods. Who knows?

I spent my childhood in St. Louis in a privileged way. I was raised in an orphanage run by the Sisters of St. Joseph of Cluny. Having boarded in the convent from the age of three to the age of twenty-one, it was here also, that I wanted to celebrate my engagement.

Others might feel that growing up in a convent would lead to deculturation from daily life, but for me it was an experience that was valuable in many ways. First, it must be said that these nuns were highly educated — each a true expert in her field. The cook was a "cordon bleu" the sewing-sister an experienced seamstress



*Marcel and Josée Massé at a youth camp in N'Dangalma, Senegal in 1963, where they first met.*

who made us very becoming uniforms, but whose talents were revealed especially at the weddings of the senior girls in the boarding school. The nursing sister, who also ran the town's dispensary, was a medical doctor by profession.

At this boarding school, where there were about one hundred children, life moved to the rhythm of seasons that were liturgical rather than climatic. The high points were Christmas and Easter, but, of course, we couldn't forget July 19, with our "St Vincent de Paul" celebrations and the official start of the school holidays, with our first swim in the ocean.

The education we received in the boarding school was not a second-rate one. To begin with, Senegal was a French colony governed by French people, who were living among us; they therefore, had to have an environment in which they could feel at home. The curriculum in our schools was the same as that of schools in France.

Today we may criticize the colonial era and the colonizers for lacking in foresight and especially for having acted like conquerors in imposing their culture on the African people, but for my part I would like to say to the nuns who raised me, "Thank you for having a culture". It was Jaurès who said "we teach not what we know, but what we are."

While they were looking after us, these nuns were living in and by their original culture. We came to know the French provinces through the folklore each of them knew. We had an Alsatian sister who was an expert in beer-making. She was the cook, and it was she who showed me how to butcher meat, when during the hunting season we received warthogs or other game from the French hunters.



*Marcel and Josée Massé (plus friends) in 1983, in front of one of the "modern" homes they helped build.*