

La belle époque pour Mary et la crise pour Jacques

Approximately one Canadian child in four is French speaking. A youngster in Quebec grows up in a culture which, though identifiably Canadian, is distinct from the culture of Toronto or Vancouver. There can be no such thing as an All-Canadian Boy or Girl. In the following recollections we view the French fact from somewhat different perspectives.

Ms. Mary de Bellefeuille is one of the fortunate Canadians who can, without straining emotion, feel part of two cultures — she has been fluent from childhood in both of Canada's official languages. Since attending Ottawa University, a bilingual school, she has taught French and worked in broadcasting.

We lived outside of Hull, Quebec, in a big old house on four and a half acres. My mother was French Canadian; my father spoke only English, and that's what we spoke at home. I had one little playmate who lived across the highway — Hélène Hupé. She was six, I was five, and at first we played together through sign language.

The closest school was French, and my mother wanted me to go to school with Hélène, so I wouldn't have to walk by myself on the highway. September came and my mother went up to the school — a little, red-brick place, four rooms on a hill — and she said, "I want to enroll my daughter." They said, "Non, non, non." They would not accept me because I would not be six until January. The parish priest, le curé Trudeau, was my grandmother's cousin, and my mother phoned him and said, "Je veux que Mary commence l'école tout de suite au mois de septembre." He said, "Quel âge a-t-elle?" and my mother said, "Five," and he said, "Well no, you can't do that." My mother said, "Well then, M. le Curé, I'll send her to the Protestant school!" So I was registered in the French school — the Catholic one — the very next day.

I started not knowing a word of French. By Christmas I was third in the class. To this day I cannot do multiplication tables in English. I have to do them in French and translate.

It was the best way to learn French — to be five years old in a totally French environment. The only way I could survive was to learn French.

There were very few English speakers. I would speak French with Hélène, the little girl across the highway, and her family would kid me. "What is this?" the father would say pointing to a tooth pick. I thought about it and said, "Pick-dents." They all laughed and I learned a tooth

pick was "un cure-dents."

My name was Sheehan, and that was a barrier, but everyone was very nice. We always had to wear the long lisle stockings to school, with long black dresses and little white collars and cuffs. It used to get very warm toward the end of June, and one day, when I was ten, my mother said, "You're going to wear knee socks tomorrow." So I did. I walked around with my knees bent, but at recess we were playing ball and I thought the principal couldn't see me. Suddenly I saw her looking at me and saying all the things I expected her to say. She sent me home and told me to come back tomorrow in my lisle stockings. My mother was furious and said, "No teacher is going to tell me what to put my daughter in." So I wore the knee socks the next day with a note from my mother saying, "My daughter finds it too warm for long stockings."

Later at the English school, I had the worst time going to confession because I knew all my prayers in French. So I'd say to the priest in the confessional, "Do you understand French?" And if he did not, all the better. . . .

When I was nine or ten, my father developed a love for animals. He started with goats. He came home one day in a rickety old truck with a goat in tow — a nanny, and we had that goat for years. We used to stake her, and she'd eat everything within reach; and then we'd move her. My brothers used to love it because they didn't have to mow the lawn.

At the Connaught Race Track, there was a horse called Prince Canter who was very fast at the start but never quite made it to the end. They were going to shoot him, and my father said, "Don't, I'll buy him."

After that came the pigs. We had an electrified wire enclosure, but they used to get out regularly and run down the highway. There'd be three boys and my father trying to catch them. It was very embarrassing.

To finish the story of Nanny — one day Nanny got loose and ate all the turkey feed and blew up, literally exploded. We found out later