

# On the lookout for October in France

**The diary from last year reminds me of my different October in France in 2022.**

**Long-awaited respite from everyday life as social assistant for new arrivals at Intro Stockholm.**

The Covid restrictions put CIF exchange programs on hold when I initially started thinking about traveling to France to familiarize myself with French social services. Last October, it would then finally be possible for me to broaden my horizons on the professional level and also in French.

French is the language I studied in high school, which I take every opportunity to use and which I also need in my job when the new arrivals have a background in former French colonies.

That I should apply to the CIF program in France was obvious to me, my first choice.

CIF-France has organized programs for many years, like CIF-Sweden. Long experience of organizing successful programs applies to France, which I experienced during my three and a half week long stay in Paris, Strasbourg and in the end the town Saint-Florent-sur-Cher. I had prepared for the trip by writing a presentation of my own workplace Intro Stockholm and an overview of Swedish social services. I had read travel stories from participants in various CIF programs. I had a long conversation with CIF-Sweden's chairman Kristina Weinsjö at Café Bagdad, who shared her own experiences from her long involvement in CIF. I knew that if I cook "Jansson's temptation", a potato gratin with anchovies when I want to offer a traditional Swedish dish to the people I meet in France, I'm probably right.

I flew from Stockholm to Paris, as Dorina from Romania, Asel from Kyrgyzstan and Souad and Moustafa from Morocco. Susanna and Conception from neighbouring Spain took the climate-smart train. We met at FIAP a short walk from Denfert-Rochereau metro station in the 14th arrondissement, the conference hotel where CIF-France usually holds its meetings. It was not difficult to travel in Paris with a suitcase on wheels, despite the fact that many metro stations lack escalators.

## **Where the adventure begins!**

It turned out that we quickly bonded, understood each other's French, more or less knackered, and enjoyed each other's company on walks in Paris, the boat trip on the Seine with breaks for hilarious photo sessions at the iconic Paris sights such as the Louvre and the Eiffel Tower. When we listened to the sociologist Michel Chauvier, we learned that the French social service is in a crisis, professionalization is being dismantled. Education in social work is not yet at university level and salaries are lagging behind. The responsibility for the socially vulnerable falls increasingly on non-profit organizations, the church. And when the care of, for example, children with mental illness in France is not enough, the solution is to care for the children in Belgium. A national scandal.

The arrangement of the group in Paris being invited to the homes of CIF-France members for an evening party and a lunchtime lecture contributes to a pleasant start to the program. Getting an insight into how Parisians live beats any attraction in the city.

## **Chez Alice à Strasbourg**

It was at the evening party in St. Antony, one of the southern suburbs of Paris, that I met Alice Chavannes, my host in Strasbourg. A few decades ago she participated in a CIF program in Sweden and without hesitation offered to arrange a program for me in Strasbourg because I wanted to become familiar with the reception of refugees in France, the field of work she herself had worked in for many years as one of the few employees of the non-profit organization CASAS, assisting asylum seekers with authority contacts, offers French lessons and various activities such as cooking and outings for families with children. Today, as a pensioner, the involvement in CASA continues as a member of the board.

Together we rode the non-stop ultra-rapid train Paris-Strasbourg. Before the train journey, we had time to walk along the stone-paved paths of the Père Lachaise cemetery and orient ourselves to the grave of the rock legend Jim Morrison.

Alice lives in an apartment a few kilometers from the center of Strasbourg. On my way to the tram stop, I pass a mosque in an immigrant-dense residential areas.

I spent my first week at the volunteer organization CASAS, I got to participate as an observer in interviews with asylum seekers from mainly Armenia, Georgia and Azerbaijan seeking help in appealing the rejection of their asylum applications. The interviews took place in parallel in a large hall, at different tables and somehow the three employees managed to

communicate successfully with help seekers who often only spoke Russian. Access to professional interpreters is lacking, volunteer interpreters can be called in.

CASA's network of volunteers is large. French lessons for the asylum seekers are offered thanks to pensioners or students.

Most of the thousands of refugees in Strasbourg, the city closest to the border in the east, have their asylum applications rejected. The assessment is that the political situation of the home countries is stable enough. The reason for the asylum applications is often evoked by the need for necessary life-sustaining medical care they do not have access to in their home countries.

A short walk from Strasbourg's historic center with its magnificent cathedral is the André Malraux media library. In the park opposite, a tent village has sprung up where the asylum seekers live. This is the solution to the housing shortage for asylum seekers. Only special reasons such as small children in the family entitle to a designated residence.

Alice is a good example of how much of a difference voluntary social work makes for the vulnerable in society. The same room that was mine during the two weeks in Strasbourg, was the room of Rasman, in Chechnya the principal of an elementary school, who seven years ago sought asylum in Strasbourg. In October, she participated in a training course in the restaurant work.

My study visits in Strasbourg included a day at an authority similar to the Migration Agency in Sweden. A long queue wound up to the reception desk. I took part in a long meeting between a lawyer with a background in Eritrea and a Turkish asylum-seeking woman. A professional Turkish

interpreter was present and the lawyer's assessment was that the woman had sufficient compelling reasons and probably would be granted asylum.

### **Close client contacts**

When my turn came to the social office, which is similar to municipal social services in Sweden for the target group new arrivals who have been granted a residence permit and thus also a municipal rental house, I visited a small social office where the social workers have frequent contact with the clients who pick up their mail at the social office. Job coaches are among the employees and can easily be called in to the social worker's meetings. Professional interpreters are not used, google translate does the job.

In France it is mainly healthcare that can employ professional interpreters, but there is an organization in Strasbourg offering a short training course on what to consider in transcultural meetings.

Security alarms are missing in the client meetings in the social workers' office. I reflected on the fact that the threshold between clients and social workers is lower in France than in Sweden.

By the help of the staff of the social office the clients were also given easy-to-manage folder systems for important official letters, as well as offered recreation with nature walks and museum visits in groups.

The new arrivals in France have the right to an extremely short social orientation course and, in comparison with Sweden's comprehensive SFI education, a short course in French. The difference in language teaching is also that it takes place in small groups of about five to seven students. The French establishment program is as long as ours, for 24 months the newly arrived person receives specially adapted, individualized support based on their needs. Of course, it is not possible for all newly arrived, within two years, to find a job or vocational studies, and then other social services take over. I got the impression that the social workers had fewer clients than we at Intro Stockholm, which favours the possibility of frequent client contacts.

### **NGOs as a complement**

During my stay in France, It was a relief to get support for ideas such as the social assistant in the meeting with the new arrival should individualize the social work and care about being easily accessible, inviting to meetings, being reachable via mobile phone and mail. It is useful and worthwhile to collaborate with voluntary organizations contributing to rapid integration.

The fact that meaningful free time contributes to the social worker's energy being sufficient for work, I experienced in abundance together with Alice in Strasbourg. I got to meet her friends in various contexts. On the weekends we hiked in the mountains in sunlit October forest, went to the cinema and saw the film about the popular politician Simone Veil who gave her name to the abortion law in France. One evening at the theater I saw a play by Molière in an audience of mostly 14-15-year-old schoolchildren who behaved in an exemplary manner. The concentration on the comic intricacies on stage was total.

I am eternally grateful to CIF for this fantastic opportunity to learn about social work in larger and smaller cities in France combined with stimulating culture and nature experiences. I got inspiration for the development of my work in Stockholm.

My study trip did not teach me only about the social sphere in France - Asel, Conception, Dorina, Moustafa, Souad and Susana contributed with insights into the situation in their countries.

And we continued sharing in our WhatsApp group.

At the moment of writing my report from October, I am preparing the train journey down to CIF-International conference in Hannover, June 2023. We are a large group of CIF-Sweden members on our way. I hope to meet again my friends from CIF-France and Margit from CIF-Estonia whom I got to know in April-May when she participated in the CIF-Sweden exchange program.

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