ICWA
LETTERS

Institute of Current World Affairs
The Crane-Rogers Foundation
Four West Wheelock Street
Hanover, New Hampshire 03755 U.S.A.

KAD-1
FRANCE

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Knocking on France's Door

By K.A. Dilday

MARCH 15, 2006

PARIS, France–I'm not the first to observe that while the physical nature of movement has gotten much easier in the past century, in almost all other aspects cross-border movement has become more difficult. With a few exceptions, legal immigration from South to North, East to West, begins in one's home country at the consulate. Consulates are strange things — they are sovereign territory on another country's soil. Entering the French consulate therefore is to enter France.

Until 2006 visa-seekers just turned up at the French consulate in New York, a townhouse surrounded by posh residences on the tony upper East Side, and stood in a first-come, first-served line. Since January, one must make an appointment to apply for any sort of visa. Nevertheless, on the first Wednesday after the New Year we were still huddled in line outside the building, a gaggle of supplicants all clutching sheaths of paper and marring the genteel splendor of the block.

As I waited outside with the small crowd, we all shared concerns. Most of us had appointments, but a few did not know about the change in policy. There was a Senegalese man who needed a transit visa (most Africans need a transit visa to fly through France, lest they make a break in a land of plenty). He was planning to leave in three hours and fly through Paris on his way to Dakar. He didn't know about the necessity of making an appointment. He pleaded with the guard at the door but to no avail.

I visited the embassy three times that week and each time I heard a similar story: Brazilians who had traveled from New Jersey, an Indian woman who came in from Long Island. None of them knew about the new policy. The guard (a new one according to rumors, the previous one being fired for a brutal style that finally reduced too many people to tears) began telling people he would lose his job if he let them in, effectively turning the tables by forcing them to ask him to replace their misfortune with his own. Even in the litany of missed flights, and delayed journeys of people from Africa, India, Pakistan, Sri Lanka. I never heard anyone raise a voice to the consular officials. What I mostly heard was pleading.

Three weeks after I completed my application the visa came through. And two weeks after that I had crossed the Atlantic to stand in another line of supplicants, outside the *Centre des Réception des Étrangers* at the Hotel de Police, which serves most of the people in the city. It is located in the 17th arrondissement in outer Paris.

At 9:15 am, there aren't that many of us here.

Paris is not a city of early risers and even the newest residents seem to have adopted the habit of sleeping late. I am in line for about five minutes before seeing an official. When the blonde door-guard appears, a man who arrived just before me with a woman and small child in a stroller goes to the front of the line and asks her if he can bypass the line and enter with his baby. I try to guess at his na-

About the Author

In her application for an Institute Fellowship, Kay wrote:

"During the 20th Century, the nature of immigration changed: Now, it seems assimilation is no longer necessary for successful immigration, nor is it desired by many immigrants. Because of technological advances and shifting mores, in the West new residents often live with their feet in one culture and their hearts and minds in another, allying with the West only as a source of income. Immigration used to provide an opportunity for reinvention. Increasingly, though, immigrants are choosing to emphasize their differences by insulating themselves in their expatriate community and adhering to ancestral traditions.

Kay Dilday

"One of the problems in writing about and addressing the situation of North Africans and Muslims in France is the lack of uniformity in the community. Although many North Africans who immigrated in the mid-20th Century did not receive citizenship, their children did, so their children are French… Thus, there are fierce debates about the nature and future of the North African community in France. They rage among people of like and different religions and varied affiliations and histories."

tionality—maybe Bosnian? The guard says he can come in first if the rest of the people don't mind. She looks out at us. He turns and does too. No one says anything. The silence is answer in itself and he returns to his place, just in front of me in the line. Not much charity here.

Once inside it moves quickly. There is all manner of people. One man in particular catches my eye. He seems to be African and is accompanied by a white man and woman. The man goes with him to the reception desk where they make sure you have all of your papers; they both go into the interview with him. I think they are lawyers. Is he a political refugee? I'm also intrigued by another couple, a 20ish African woman, dressed casually with jeans and long braids and another woman dressed from head to toe in black. Her head and neck are covered by a thin black scarf. Her body is clad in a dress that drags along the floor. She's obviously a good bit older than her companion but as I can see so little of her, I can't tell by how much — mother, aunt, grandmother, friend? I don't know. Are they both Muslims? "That," I think, "Is the generation gap."

My interview proceeds quickly: this, after all, is a dress rehearsal for the real event. The interviewer has scarcely scraped the surface of my dossier, which, by governmental demand, is deep and revealing. The French government requires evidence of substantial health-insurance coverage and financial resources. I also needed proof that I would have approximately 60,000 euros per year to live on. I am, in global terms, a rich Westerner. Yet to have evidence of the yearly sum I had to sell my New York apartment. Yet although I had to show all of these papers in New York, the birth certificate and my lease were sufficient to win me the blue card which is the *récépissé de demande de carte de séjour*. Now that I have entered the country, this is simply a way for the French government to document my whereabouts in the months before they will decide if I am allowed to stay. I am given an appointment two months later for the actual interview for the *carte de séjour*.

As I exit a woman, in her 60s I think, with glasses, thrusts a paper at me and asks if I know where the address printed on it is. No one ever asked me a question on the street in Lyon, yet in Paris it happens all the time. Paris. It is a dramatic change from Lyon where I spent the winter. Paris is a major world city and thus accustomed to absorbing newcomers. I don't feel chilliness but only the lack of interest that is big-city blasé. I feel as if my identity is my own to choose and at this moment I am the adept foreigner among all the other foreigners. I take out my *plan de Paris* which I've gotten quite good at using in only six days and look for the address.

It's very close to here, I tell her. "Just take the metro to Barbés."

"I have to be there at twelve," she tells me, slightly frantic.

It's 11 am and she is a 20-minute walk from where

Waiting to apply for residence permits in Paris

she needs to be, 10 minutes by metro.

"You'll be fine, See here it is. It's on the same line and only a few stops away," I say, showing her the map.

"But how many stops is it?" she says.

"Four," I say as it finally dawns on me. She can't read it.

I don't know whether she can't read French or she can't read at all. But when she takes out the paper with the address again she shows me the wrong one — the sentence-structure of what is printed isn't even close to the other one. Arabic is so dissimilar from French though; it could simply be that.

"I'll take you there," I say. It's not a particularly generous act. Her destination is around the corner from my apartment.

She is Moroccan, she tells me as we begin to walk to the Metro.

"How long have you been here?," I ask expecting an answer of months, maybe single-digit years.

"Twenty-three years."

She insists on taking me on a circuitous route to the metro even though I am pretty sure the station, *Place de Clichy*, is just down one street and up another. But she is so worried I let her take us the way she wants to go. We twist and turn around a series of streets as she insists it is the way, all the time saying, "I'm scared."

She is scared she will miss her appointment. When we finally arrive at the metro she has taken us in a big circle, adding at least eight minutes to our time. But she can't read street signs or a map, so everything is done by memory. That must have been the way she came. I wonder what time she set out today.

We board the metro, which I convince her to take even though she is so scared she wants to take a cab, because she is not sure she will find the street when she gets off even though it is only a minute at most from the metro.

"I'll take you," I say again and she relaxes a bit.

As we ride, she remembers what I told her before and counts off the four stops in her head. Ten minutes later I deposit her at the door with a half-hour to spare before her appointment and receive profuse thanks. She is going to the center for renewal of the *carte de séjour*. What is it like to live in a country yet to be so closed off from it? Why has she lived in France for so long and not become a citizen? After 23 years it should be her right, but then I remember — naturalization in France requires proficiency in French. Immigration rules are constantly being debated at the moment and it is likely that my nervous companion will have a more difficult time in the future.

Following the car-burning riots at the end of last year, the interior minister and presumptive 2007 presidential candidate, Nicolas Sarkozy, announced plans to change the nature of immigration: To make it a more selective system, to make immigration less a right and more a privilege, one extended primarily to an educated class. Families of French residents will not automatically be admitted as was the case a few years ago. Among those caught rioting were people who have families here, but possessed only what I was seeking, a *carte de sejour*. Mr. Sarkozy publicly followed through on threats to deport them, a measure that is unusual in France.

Mr. Sarkozy's immigration proposals are due to be considered by the French parliament some time in May and the lobby against them is beginning to gain force. I asked a new acquaintance, Tahar Hani, an Algeria-born man who is a correspondent for Algeria's most widely-read French-language newspaper, what he thought of the proposed changes. Mr. Hani claims that France's resistance to the vitality that immigrants provide is choking innovation and stymieing the country's progress. He claims that the proposals won't work anyway, since no one with anything to offer would come to France since, "it's a dying country.

I met Tahar Hani at a festival for Maghrebian authors at the end of February. It was just after a horrific thing happened in France, a vicious murder, just out-

Le Maghreb des livres at the Hotel de Ville

side Paris. A young man, Ilan Halim, was kidnapped, a ransom demanded, and when it was not delivered, he was tortured and left to die. He was Jewish and the gang that murdered him was made up mostly of Muslims. A young woman had baited him and led him to his doom.

It was a shockingly medieval act and for days it was the top story in the French press. There was a march, a memorial to Mr. Halimi that took place on February 26. It attracted a tremendous crowd including Mr. Sarkozy and former prime minister, Lionel Jospin.

I wasn't there. I was at *Le Maghreb des livres*, a two-day showcase of authors at the city hall in Paris. The façade of the building is almost four centuries old, but the interior dates from the 1880s since only the shell was left after it was burned by departing Communards in 1871. The grand lecture hall is a hall of the revolution: Ornate frescoes of peasants with cows and other livestock decorate the ceiling: men are depicted in wide-brimmed hats, women in fields with overflowing bustiers. Yet in the hall, the discussion evoked France's colonial past and subsequent responsibility. The authors and panelists were almost exclusively of North African origin. Literary panels abounded, but I attended several forums on contemporary social and political issues. Mr. Halimi's name was never spoken.

As much as the horrendous act itself shows that France houses violent, vicious people, the discussion about Ilan Halimi's brutal murder shows the fissures at all levels in French society. I've heard professional people of North African descent talk about what happened and angrily claim that if a North African had been killed it would not have been called a racist act nor gotten so much attention. (In fact, a young Muslim man was shot outside a bar in Lyon in early March, in what his companions say was a ethnically motivated murder. Less horrific and therefore less jolting, nonetheless, it received a small fraction of the attention that Mr. Halimi's murder did.) I've seen news reports about people in the *banlieues* scoffing at the attention. I've heard Jews speak of it as indicative of growing anti-Semitism, a recurrence of the cancer that almost destroyed Europe last century.

The ringleader of the murderers, an ex-convict just 25 years old, fled France to his native Ivory Coast and was interviewed on television before he was extradited. He was impassive and casual. "It was purely done for money," he says. Even a clinical-psychology naïf like me can see that he is a sociopath. He spoke calmly of the murder as if it was nothing more than chopping down a tree in someone else's yard. I do not doubt that he is telling the truth since it is evident that he is a dissolute opportunist. But I also believe that he could count on anti-Semitism among young Muslims in the *banlieues*. They

decided that Jews had money and they didn't, or rather that *because* Jews had money, they didn't. For his followers, giving their actions a religious gloss probably made them feel that they were more than greedy vicious thugs.

I can't understand why an issue that was so prominent in the news went unmentioned at a gathering of most of the Maghrebian intellectuals in France. Prejudice was discussed, and it is undeniable that the brutal Halimi murder harmed the profile of Muslims in France. But I think it wasn't discussed because it wasn't what concerned them. There were, of course, panels that focused purely on literary topics, but by and large the discussion as it related to social and political issues for the *beur* (North African immigrants) in France was of opportunity, education and discrimination in the workplace.

As I write this, France is in the middle of a week of nationwide protests. Here in Paris, the Sorbonne, the famous French university, was occupied for several days by students over the weekend. The French riot police entered and efficiently removed about 200 protesters in ten

March against the CPE,
place de la Nation

minutes with only a few reported injuries. It was a remarkably anti-climactic ending to a much-storied event. Yesterday, Tuesday, students again marched and clashed with the police.

What they were protesting is the CPE, which stands for *contrat première embauche* (first employment contract): a law that allows employers to hire under-26-year-olds without giving the usual guaranty of longevity of employment or financial responsibility. After the weekend's events, the other presumptive presidential candidate for the right, French prime minister, Dominique de Villepin, took to the national airwaves to defend the CPE which is scheduled to take effect in early April.

Mr. Villepin stressed that the law was to benefit workers who were not highly skilled. He kept mentioning youth in the *banlieues*, which is a coded way of saying young *beurs* and blacks. It seemed that he wanted to imply that the university students didn't care about those who didn't have their educational advantage. The CPE comes with provisions that would permit one to gain a lease, and to do all of the things that a job allows.

I've been talking a lot with Mr. Hani, and he is against the law. "It's only good for the employers," he says. "They can fire you at any time, with no reason." Coming from the United States where that is always the case, it doesn't seem so awful to me. It's middle-aged people with families and mortgages who are usually the most devastated by the sudden loss of a job. "But why would an employer want to fire a good employee? I asked. "That just wouldn't be prudent."

Mr. Hani doesn't really have an answer to that, *"C'est pas l'ésprit Français,"* is his fall-back answer. But most of the time when we discuss politics of integration and commerce he tells me how the French *esprit* is ruining the country. How the French are not accustomed to mixing with a wide range of people, and that is the root of prejudice; how French businesses are stagnant and uninteresting because they refuse to draw in a vibrant immigrant work force. The contradictions in Mr. Tahar's rhetoric seem emblematic of the problem of France today.

Mr. Hani is going to one of the many nationwide marches against the CPE on Saturday. He is in his mid-30s and not affected by the proposed law, but he says, "It's important to support the young people. The CPE will do nothing to solve the problem of unemployment."

According to him, jobs are everything. He scoffs at the idea of religious militancy being an important part of young *beur* culture. "If people had jobs, they wouldn't care about those things. They'd get apartments and go to the cinema and have parties and do what young people do." ❑

INSTITUTE OF CURRENT WORLD AFFAIRS

Current Fellows and their Activities

Richard D. Connerney (January 2005 - 2007) • INDIA

A lecturer in Philosophy, Asian Religions and Philosophy at Rutgers, Iona College and the University of Hawaii at Manoa, Rick Connerney is spending two years as a Phillips Talbot Fellow studying and writing about the intertwining of religion, culture and politics in India, once described by former U.S. Ambassador John Kenneth Galbraith as "a functioning anarchy." Rick has a B.A. and an M.A. in religion from Wheaton College and the University of Hawaii, respectively.

Kay Dilday (October 2005-2007) • FRANCE/MOROCCO

An editor for the New York Times' Op-Ed page for the past five years, Kay holds an M.A. in Comparative International Politics and Theory from the Graduate Center of the City University of New York, a Bachelor's degree in English Literature from Tufts University, and has done graduate work at the Universiteit van Amsterdam in the Netherlands and the Cours de Civilisation de la Sorbonne. She has traveled in and written from Haiti and began her jouralistic life as city-council reporter for Somerville This Week, in Somerville, MA.

Cristina Merrill (June 2004-2006) • ROMANIA

Born in Bucharest, Cristina moved from Romania to the United States with her mother and father when she was 14. Learning English (but retaining her Romanian), she majored in American History at Harvard College and there became captain of the women's tennis team. She received a Master's degree in Journalism from New York University in 1994, worked for several U.S. publications from Adweek to the New York Times, and is spending two years in Romania watching it emerge from the darkness of the Ceauscescu regime into the presumed light of membership in the European Union and NATO.

Nicholas Schmidle (October 2005-2007) • PAKISTAN

Nicholas is a freelance writer interested in the intersection of culture, religion and politics in Asia. He is spending two years in Pakistan writing on issues of ethnic, sectarian, and national identity. Previously, he has reported from Central Asia and Iran, and his work has been published in the Washington Post, the Weekly Standard, Foreign Policy, the Christian Science Monitor, and others. Nick received an M.A. in International Affairs - Regional Studies from American University in December 2005. He lives with his wife, Rikki.

Andrew J. Tabler (February 2005 - 2007) • SYRIA/LEBANON

Andrew has lived, studied and worked in the Middle East since a Rotary Foundation Ambassadorial Fellowship enabled him to begin Arabic-language studies and work toward a Master's degree at the American University in Cairo in 1994. Following the Master's, he held editorships with the Middle East Times and Cairo Times before moving to Turkey, Lebanon and Syria and working as a Senior Editor with the Oxford Business Group and a correspondent for the Economist Intelligence Unit. His two-year ICWA fellowship bases him in Beirut and Damascus, where he will report on Lebanese affairs and Syrian reform.

Jill Winder (July 2004 - 2006) • GERMANY

With a B.A. in politics from Whitman College in Walla Walla, WA and a Master's degree in Art Curating from Bard College in Annandale-on-Hudson, NY, Jill is an ICWA Donors' Fellow looking at Germany through the work, ideas and viewpoints of its contemporary artists. Before six months of intensive study of the German language in Berlin, she was a Thomas J. Watson Fellow looking at post-communist art practice and the cultural politics of transition in the former Soviet bloc (Czech Republic, Slovakia, Poland, Croatia, Hungary, Latvia, Romania, Slovenia and Ukraine).

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Author: Dilday, Kay
Title: ICWA Letters (Europe/Russia)
ISSN: 1083-4273
Imprint: Institute of Current World Affairs, Hanover, NH
Material Type: Serial
Language: English
Frequency: Monthly
Other Regions: South Asia; East Asia, The Americas; Mideast/North Africa; Sub-Saharan Africa

ICWA Letters (ISSN 1083-4273) are published by the Institute of Current World Affairs Inc., a 501(c)(3) exempt operating foundation incorporated in New York State with offices located at 4 West Wheelock Street, Hanover, NH 03755. The letters are provided free of charge to members of ICWA and are available to libraries and professional researchers by subscription.

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