

Article 10

Vive l'France

After dropping off Fr. Jim McDougall at the Frankfurt Airport, I set the Garmin for France and the city of Strasbourg. It proved to be a relatively short drive, but a bit more complicated than I thought. For whatever reason, the road between Frankfurt and Strasbourg is not an expressway all the way. After passing the heavily industrial area in Saar Valley, the closer to the boarder I drove, the less expressway there was until the road between Germany and France was only a two lane highway. After passing through what was probably a customs and passport control area, the road went from two to four, to expressway again.

My arrival in Strasbourg was not without difficulty. It took twice around the block to find my hotel on the Rue de Bitche. Once I found the hotel, amazingly, I parallel parked successfully in the very narrow space in front. It is not an easy feat, especially since I haven't had to do it for years and then add the fact that the car is a stick shift. All great fun!! After going to the hotel, I had to find the parking which again took me a couple of times around the block trying to find the seemingly secret entrance!! All of this was a bit easier with 4 eyes instead of two.

As it turned out, the hotel is in in an Orthodox Jewish area. Several men and boys out on the street were wearing yarmulkes. Soon after I arrived I got a city map and directions to the Old City and set off. As it turned out I took the Rue de Bitche a couple of blocks to the synagogue and turned right. As I walked along the Avenue de la Paix, I came to a beautiful little circular park named the Place de la Republique. It is surrounded with monumental civic buildings that were built in the late 19th century.



This is when it was Strassburg, a German city. Around the park is the national opera house, the national theatre, the national library and the national museum; all the grand sort of building one would expect to find in Europe.

The city has been German and French ever since it was first founded. Originally a Roman settlement, it was abandoned after the empire fell. The first record of the town is in 842 and the first churches were established about that time. It was a German city originally, settled pretty much on the island that is surrounded by the L'Ille River. Between the river traffic and the natural flow of the roads, some left over from Roman times, it made the location of the city a natural. A ring of walls and towers were built along with bridges creating a natural defense. It also was the natural center for the region of Alsace. Over the centuries, depending on who ruled the territory of Alsace, it was a German or a French city. So while French is the dominant language, many signs are in German as well.

Continuing down the avenue, I crossed the L'Ille River and into the old city. Most of the buildings here were built in the 16th & 17th centuries, with some parts much older yet. The cathedral of Notre Dame dominates the city, surrounded by a beautiful square. Begun in 1176, the original design was Romanesque, with the sanctuary, apse and dome done first. In the next centuries, stone masons familiar with the construction of the cathedral in Chartres. In any case the work continued for over 400 years and while it is still unfinished, it is a masterpiece of gothic architecture. The finished spire is a lattice work of stone as is the whole exterior, but this spire is the highest gothic spire ever built.

Since I brought no guide book for France, I ended up buying a small booklet on the city and the major buildings at the information center near the cathedral. Then I walked over to a café nearby and read the booklet as I drank a cafe au lait. Once that was done I entered the cathedral. The café was located in the Kammerzell house, a typical house of the late middle ages. It has a stone ground floor (1467) and the upper five floors built of wood and plaster were added 100 years later.

The Dome – the Cathedral of our Lady – is an amazing piece of architecture. I really think that it is the finest piece of masonry, almost a lacey intricacy; and to have it rise so high. There was a large crowd of people making their way into and through the cathedral. There is a large nave with its high vaulted ceiling and two side aisles almost equally as wide. There are chairs down through the nave; enough to seat well over 1,500-2,000. The windows are wonderful as well, with bright vivid colors. The old high altar is amazingly simple; it is a large block of stone with six large candlesticks and a large gold cross behind it (I would venture that it is 10-12 ft high, wood covered in gold leaf.) Mosaics fill the Romanesque apse, much like St. Paul Outside the Walls in Rome. To the left of the altar, in a side chapel is a large astrological clock that must stand close to 35-40 high. It was designed by a Strasbourg mathematician between 1570-4. It tells the time, the date, the location of the planets and stars and it includes a portrait of Copernicus.



Across the plaza from the cathedral is the Rohan Palace, the residence built from 1732-42 for Cardinal Rohan, the archbishop of Strasbourg and the illegitimate son of Louis XIV. The first floor house an archeological exhibit that gives the history of Alsace and the city from prehistoric times through the Roman period and into the Celtic and early medieval. The main floor has the rooms decorated as they once were, including the bedroom of the king...Cardinal Rohan's father and the bedroom used by Napoleon. It is all very elegant. The third floor has art work that belongs to the city, not the palace, much of it with some connection with the city or Alsace. One painting I found moving was entitled "The Virgin of Consolation". It was the portrait of grim faced Mary staring out at the viewer; a grief stricken woman knelt at her feet and lay across Mary's lap. At her feet lay a dead child. It was very poignant.

A second painting that struck me was entitled "The Rape of the Nigress". It showed three young men: one dressed, one half dressed and the third naked, laughing as the woman is held on the lap of the naked man. Her face shows her terror. It was a very sad and depressing sight, but one that seemed to capture a horrible story.

From there I made my way over to a very medieval part of the city called Le Petite France. It is a warren of small, narrow streets with houses that were built in the 15th -17th centuries; all timber and plaster. Folks still live in the upper floors and, like it was in the Middle Ages, the ground floor has a restaurant, shop or small café. Nearby was the Church of St. Thomas, the oldest Protestant church in Strasbourg; adjacent to it is the Protestant Seminary that goes back to the 16th century.



Strasbourg is also the home of the European Parliament and other EU offices. They are housed in a series of wonderful modern buildings perhaps a mile or two from the old city. I did not head out that direction, but I did find wonderful pictures in my little booklet.

In the evening I went back down to the Dom for the 6:30 Liturgy. I got there about 6:15 and the bells were ringing for the start of the service. So I called my sister to let her hear the bells as well. We talked while the bells rang in the background for about 10 minutes. I was glad to share the experience with her.

The Liturgy was high church. There was a cantor who had a beautiful voice; five servers, all male; three priests and a deacon; and two female Lectors – who helped take up the collection and distribute Communion. The presider seemed rather folksy, obviously adding his own comments beyond the liturgical statements. The procession entered from the sacristy and climbed the 20 some steps to the sanctuary and altar while the full organ played an entrance. When everyone was in place, the cantor sang what was called a Chant D’Ouverture which I suspect was a psalm with the assembly joining in on refrain. The Penitential Rite was sung as was the Gloria which was done with assembly joining in on a refrain. The psalm was sung. The deacon, who was not in the opening procession appeared from the side for the Gospel (he may have been a little late). The presider preached, reading his text, but he appeared to be very animated and people seemed attentive.

The gifts were brought to the altar by the servers led by incense. After they were placed on the altar the gifts, the presider and clergy and the assembly were all incensed. (The presider did eastern style, swinging the censer on full chain.) After the Holy, Holy two acolytes with candles and censer came back out and stood on the stairs; as the second part of the Eucharistic Prayer began the incense rose. From the Epiclesis (the calling down of the Holy Spirit) until the Acclamation of Faith a bell rang in the tower. It was all very dramatic, but well done. The French appear to be a little more orderly than the Germans at Communion time – there was no mad dash to the altar and people lined up comfortably. Afterward, four verses of the Communion Song were sung with the cantor singing the verses and the people joining in on the refrain.

All in all, despite the large space, people seemed to sing and participate reasonably well. Even though it was high church it did not seem overly formal.

