

April 10, 2006

Paris Strikes

We've finished our first week in Paris, and everyone has been asking: What about the strikes? For those of you who may not be aware, the French government was about to pass a law allowing companies that hire workers under the age of 26 to fire them for any reason within 24 months. The intent is to reduce the rate of youth unemployment, which stands at 22% and 50% for minorities in the suburbs. The students think this is unfair, and labor unions are backing them. We were a trifle perplexed. How could students who were not working be on strike? Normally it's workers who go on strike, right?

Our answer has been that we've seen little evidence. Sure, the square in front of the Sorbonne is blocked by a steel mesh barrier marked every few feet with a small hinged door that resembles a gunport. Every entrance to the University is blocked, and guarded by police in riot gear – helmets with face guards, shin/knee guards, riot sticks. That was O.K. Our local wine bar remained open. That was all we cared about... until yesterday, Sunday.

We went to church at the American Church. It's located on the left bank, a short walk from Les Invalides and buildings that house the major French government – Assemblée Nationale and several ministries. After church we meandered back toward Les Invalides looking for a place to lunch. Facing the park that fronts Les Invalides we came upon Le Club Shanghai, an attractive Chinese restaurant that advertised some inviting *prix fixe* menus. Inside we met the owner, Lu Shin, "Call me Lu-Lu.", who ushered us through his crowded restaurant to a table by the window that overlooked the park and a game of boules in progress. Since boules has become one of my favorite sports, I was in pig heaven.

We took an instant liking to Lu-Lu. Despite the fact that he was very busy waiting on several tables, he made time for conversation with every table. He won over a group of ladies behind us with his discourse on how Chinese cuisine rejuvenated feminine skin, and that he could see it working already. To us he expounded his ideas on how sports differ among areas of the world. Frenchmen get their exercise from boules, the arm movements, the bending over to retrieve the balles. Americans require equipment – treadmills, stationary bikes, nautilus machines – to accomplish the same. And Americans possess the money to afford this equipment. Whereas in Asia people pole their boats to keep fit. It's much more tranquil, he postulated. He sounded as if he was making it up as he went along, so it was tough to take him seriously.

After a delightful meal of Thai chicken and Chinese duck, we suddenly realized that we were the only table left. Lu-Lu came over and we launched into an extended conversation, during which he explained that his restaurant had been open only three days since last Tuesday, when it was attacked.

The restaurant was closed at the time. Lu-Lu and his family were inside preparing for the day. They could hear the crowd and the bullhorns down the street, near the government buildings. They heard the sounds coming closer. Lu-Lu looked through

the blinds to see many people running through the park opposite. Then he heard the sound of breaking glass to the right of his restaurant as a rock flew through the window. He shouted to his family to go to the storage room behind the restaurant. Then all hell broke loose.

Bricks came flying through both front windows and the door almost simultaneously. These were followed by “strikers”, students mixed with “casseurs”, hooligans who took advantage of the situation. Lu-Lu said he could only stand by and watch as the marauders proceeded to wreak havoc. They broke chairs and dinnerware; threw a table through the front window, raided the kitchen; stole kitchen utensils, money from the cash register; wines and champagnes, even the electronic gadget used to transact credit card sales. I asked him if the obligatory aquarium that stood front and center near the door survived. “Just barely”, he replied, and pointed to a tiny crack in the glass where a striker had struck it with a chair. The chair broke instead of the glass.

“Do you suspect that the attack was ethnically motivated?” we asked. He doubted if he, personally, was targeted. “But most of the attackers were either black or Magreb (North African Arabs).”

Today, Monday, the government has withdrawn the law. They say that a replacement will be forthcoming. We can assume that it will be more moderate. So, today; March 10, the voice of the people has been heard in two countries: France and Italy. That’s right. The people of Italy had said “Ciao” to Berlusconi. For those of us who think that our protestations do about as much good as a rabbit’s fart, here’s a reason to hope.

A la prochaine,

Chuck