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History lessons in Paris

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PARIS - I am walking my little dog to the market near my apartment when I notice the sign. The stark words, permanently attached to a Paris schoolhouse on narrow Rue de Poissy in the fifth arrondissement, beg for a closer read.

In memory of les enfants deported from this school between 1942 and 1944 because they were Jewish, reads the marker, "innocent victims of Nazi barbarianism with the active complicity of the Vichy government, exterminated in death camps. We will never forget them." Les enfants is French for children.

Unexpectedly the door to the school opens, and I see another sign. Only boys were educated here during World War II. The inner memorial, posted over the entry hall, tells that eight boys, ages 7 to 17, were deported from this school. The sign reminds girls, boys, teachers and parents that 11,000 children were deported from France, 100 of them from the fifth arrondissement where I live, the current and historical home of the Sorbonne university, famous artists and writers, and wealthy bourgeois bureaucrats.

This is Armistice Day weekend. Military parades, fresh flower wreaths and hourly church bells mark the Nov. 11, 1918, official end of World War I, and reflect on World War II.

My husband, Jim, and I aren't witnesses to another war raging around Paris and across France. We see no car burnings or angry crowds from our apartment near Notre Dame Cathedral and the Seine River tour boats. We get our daily news the same way friends and family members stay informed in the United States: from television and the Internet.

Concerned friends e-mail asking if we are safe. I tell them the trouble is in some Paris suburbs, that public housing, many immigrants and their les enfants - French-born and -bred offspring - are outside the city center.

I am reminded of similar calls and e-mails when we lived in St. Petersburg's Old Northeast, blocks from the 1996 police-citizen clashes in south St. Petersburg. Pinellas County tourism officials worried that visitors would stay away. Paris tourism officials now face the same issue.

In the center of the Seine on the elegant Isle Saint Louis, a fresh bouquet of red, white and blue Armistice Day carnations adorns another memorial. In the shadow of Notre Dame, the engraved words read that 100 people were deported by Nazis from this house alone, many of them children. At the American Church in Paris, the sermon this morning made no mention of France's current problems. Though called "American," the international Christian church includes a large population of African

heritage. The American Church doesn't comment on French domestic policy, said the minister when I asked about his sermon.

The church building, with its high steeple and Tiffany windows, was once occupied by Nazis. Americans still in Paris were allowed to have a service once a month. Paris remains a moveable feast, as Hemingway so long ago called it. However, the history, art and cultural bounty now includes the dirty-linen spoils of immigration and racially charged issues.

A friend of mine, Adrian Leeds, a New Orleans native who has lived and sold real estate in Paris for many years, makes comparisons between New Orleans and Paris on her Parler Paris Web site. Adrian received some negative feedback from Web site subscribers.

"If instead of giving correct information about events in Paris you continue to promote communist or Islamist propaganda, I will cancel my subscription," wrote one reader. "Your comments and the comparisons with what happened in New Orleans are unacceptable."

Adrian, a Jew, says she doesn't face antisemitism in Paris, although some other Jews talk of its undercurrents.

Just down the street from me, two blocks from the little neighborhood school, is the Mauthausen Foundation, an archive and research center for survivors of that concentration camp and their families. I have made another Jewish friend, now in her late 70s. Her family immigrated to Paris from Germany when she was a young girl. My friend survived the Holocaust, but her parents did not.

Paris presents such living history lessons every day. The massive Musee de l'Institut du Monde Arabe, Museum of the Arab World, isn't far from the Mauthausen center. Exhibitions at the museum focus on Arabic contributions to science. When I walked by a nearby Arabic bookstore this morning, the window no longer included the book about women of al-Qaida that was there during late summer.

I love living in Paris, with its many museums, afternoon coffee and people-watching at a sidewalk cafe, entertaining visitors and street market shopping.

Meanwhile, my eyes are open a bit wider. For the first time the other night, I noticed an African bookstore close to home with a book in the window titled Negrophobia.

The perfect fall weather continues, and I look forward to opening a window during school day afternoons. That's when les enfants from the school on Rue de Poissy come out to play.

- Pamela Griner Leavy, a freelance writer, moved to Paris from St. Petersburg in April.

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