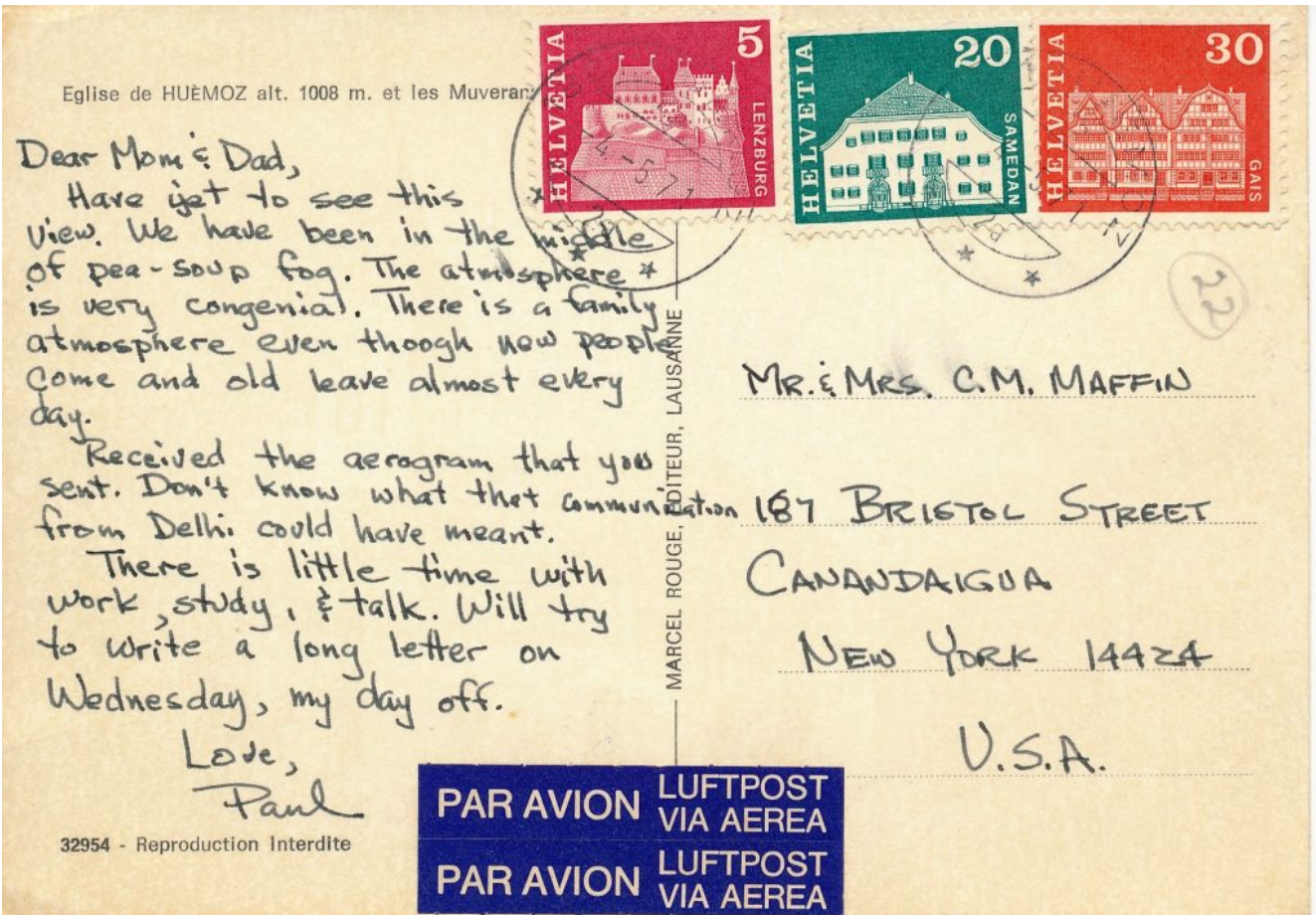


Community Life at L'Abri

I won't attempt a history of L'Abri. If you are interested, the best source is Edith Schaeffer's book *L'Abri*. By the time I arrived 50 years ago, there were about 100 students and guests. Students were housed in seven chalets, situated within easy walking distance of one another. Each chalet was overseen by a L'Abri ministry couple. I was assigned to Chalet les Sapins. The "father" was a German, Udo Middelman, who was married to Debbie, one of the Schaeffer daughters. There were about 16 living in our chalet. We took breakfast in our own chalet and were assigned elsewhere for lunch and supper. The only building constructed by the community was Farel House (named after the Swiss reformer, William Farel), which consisted of a chapel and a tape library.

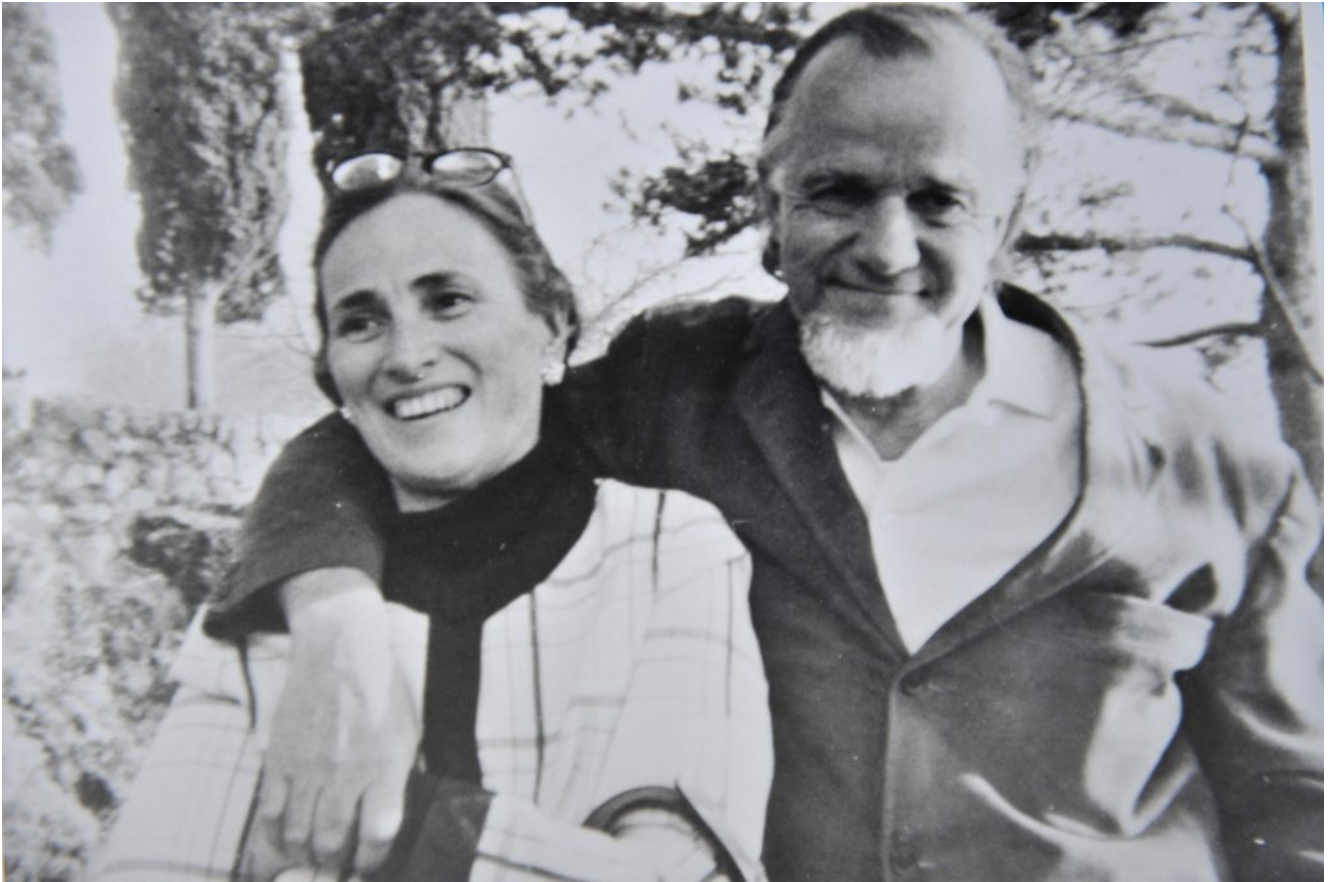
The first couple weeks at L'Abri were quite an adjustment from my seven months on the road. In some ways, the daily routine was reminiscent of the routine in the Indian ashram, with a combination of work and study. For five days of the week in the mornings, I worked in the house and garden of the main chalet, Les Mélèze, which housed the Schaeffers' residence, office and common area. In the afternoon I listened to lectures by Dr. Schaeffer and others. There was a weekly lecture and two open discussion sessions. Sunday was worship. On Wednesday, my permanent day off, I was handed a bag lunch and given the option of eating at L'Abri or taking off on my own.

For the first week, I had to take it on faith that we were high in the Swiss Alps. L'Abri was enshrouded in a thick pea soup fog, as I wrote to my parents.



The formal aspect of the study was conducted on the English system. I was assigned to a proctor who worked with me to guide my course of study. I was blessed to have Os Guinness as my proctor. As the name suggests, Os was the great-great-great-grandson of Arthur Guinness, the renowned Dublin brewer. Os was born and raised in China and has a fascinating life story. At the time I studied under Os, it was two years before he published his first of many books. Today, he is one of the most influential evangelical Christian thinkers in the world. His first assignment for me was a study of the New Testament Book of Romans, which was to prove transformative for my life.

In addition to the formal study, there were always extended discussions around the meal tables. Topics were far-ranging; theology, philosophy, culture, and many more! Edith Schaeffer was a whirlwind of energy—planning meals, supervising work, creating beauty, interacting with students, and often traveling with Fran for conferences. How to describe Fran Schaeffer? I cannot do better than the affectionate description by Os Guinness regarding his first meeting with Fran (which he wrote many years later).



“So there I was as a student in the middle of ‘swinging London’ and the exploding Sixties, and no Christians that I knew understood what was going on at all. Then a friend took me to hear a strange little man in Swiss knickers, with a high-pitched voice, terms all of his own such as ‘the line of despair,’ and appalling mispronunciations and occasional malapropisms. But I was intrigued and then hooked. Schaeffer was the first Christian I met who was concerned to, and capable of connecting the dots and making sense of the extraordinary times that puzzled and dismayed most people.”

Finally, after about a week, the fog lifted and revealed this magnificent view of the Swiss Alps and the Rhone river valley. The fields were carpeted with Alpine wild flowers, and the trees were beginning to leaf out. It was refreshing to see all this color after the parched summer brown of India. Because Huémoz was a typical Swiss village, the melodious clanging of bells as cattle were led to and from the pastures was the

background music of every day.



I will conclude this post by talking about the dizzying array of people at L'Abri. Even though people were constantly coming and going, the Schaeffers had managed to create a family atmosphere. I tried to describe this array at L'Abri in a letter to friends. "Except for Fran and Edith Schaeffer, the people running things are our age and have incredibly good heads. Quite a few are former freaks. There are enough 'real people' that one feels like paying attention to Christianity for the first time." Many of the students were "seekers" like myself, while others were Christians who had come to L'Abri desiring to learn how to think Christianly about the cultural dynamics of the 20th century and the seismic cultural shifts of the late 60s and early 70s.

In looking back on those days—50 years ago—I've concluded that I needed two factors to fall into place if I was to wholeheartedly embrace the Christian faith. First, I needed to be convinced that the Biblical story was true and that the Christian worldview provided a satisfying description of reality. Second, I needed to see the Christian faith lived out in a way that demonstrated the transformation of heart and mind promised by Jesus. While I was unaware of this in the midst of my initial days at L'Abri, God in His sovereign grace had led me to the perfect place to provide me with what I needed.