

Snapshot

SERIES OF INFORMATIVE TEXTS ON THE CONSEIL SCOLAIRE CENTRE-NORD WRITTEN BY GLEN TAYLOR

REVIVING A MOTHER TONGUE — AND FINDING ONESELF

A mother tongue is more than just words and grammar. It's a window on the world, a way of seeing things and expressing ourselves, a key element in each person's identity. Losing one's mother tongue is like losing an important part of oneself.



Lise Roy-Maxwell knows this firsthand. The daughter of two francophone parents, she grew up speaking French in the francophone village of Falher, located in northwest Alberta. Lise not only spoke French with her family and friends, she also attended a French-language school.

All of that changed when Lise was eight years old, when her family moved to Edmonton.

They settled in the northern part of the city, in a district where everyday life took place in English. Lise quickly learned English — and started to lose her French.

When the time came to choose a school, her parents believed they had only one option: the neighbourhood English-language school. Lise wasn't the only francophone enrolled there but, like the other students, she spoke English with everyone. The only time she practised her French was during French class, where she was by far the most advanced student.

At home, Lise's parents started speaking less and less French. It wasn't long before the family had completely changed their home language to English.

A FEELING OF LOSS

Although Lise wasn't unhappy, she still knew she had lost something.

"Even though I was totally comfortable in English, I had a vague feeling that something was missing in my life. You can't change languages like that without paying a price! I had always spoken French during the first eight years of my childhood, and then suddenly I found myself in a completely English world.

"One day when I was still young, one of my uncles went to Montreal on vacation. Well, he enjoyed the experience of living in French so much that he never came back! That intrigued me: how could he feel so good about a place that he decided to move there? I had to go see for myself. So when I was 21, I boarded a plane for Montreal.

"I quickly understood why he had stayed. There was something special, something that met his deeply felt need to live in harmony with his roots. I even considered moving to Montreal myself."

FAMILY LIFE BEGINS

But Lise returned to Edmonton where she later met Jeff, an anglophone from Ottawa. They married and decided to make their home in Edmonton. Like the vast majority of francophone/anglophone couples, they lived in English.

A single language was all they needed, until their son Alexander was born.

"I was living in English but still considered myself Franco-Canadian," explains Lise. "I wanted to pass on the French language and francophone culture to my son. It was important for Jeff, too, and right away we started looking for French-language resources."

Although it's hard to change language habits, Lise and Jeff tried to introduce French into



their son's life. Among other things, they already planned to enrol him in a French-immersion school.

"We didn't know what options we had for his education," says Lise, "but we sure did learn!"

Although Jeff fully supported Lise's efforts to speak French with their son, she still felt isolated as a francophone parent.

"I felt that I needed a support group," she explains. "I wanted to meet other francophone parents who were passing on the language and culture to their children. I knew there was a French bookstore in Edmonton, the Carrefour, and when Alexander was three years old, I called to find out what resources they had. I was lucky: the person on the other end of the line was a great help to me. In fact, that very day, I started my voyage back into the francophone community!"

Lise learned that there were francophone playgroups and preschools in Edmonton, and right away she joined the Ribambelle playgroup. Later, she and Jeff enrolled Alexander in a francophone preschool, where he was placed in a class for children who needed extra help with their French.

COMMITMENT AND LEARNING

That year was educational for Lise, too.

"Even though I'd lost a lot of my French, I still joined the preschool's board of directors. It wasn't easy, because at first I understood only about a third of what the others were saying."

But she continued to be involved in her son's education. Near the end of the school year, Lise asked the teacher if she thought Alexander could succeed in Maternelle, or French-language kindergarten.

"The teacher assured me that the francophone school would be the best choice for him, even if he was coming from a class where the kids needed more help with their French. And she was right!"

Lise and Jeff enrolled Alexander in Maternelle at Père-Lacombe school. (Today, he's in Grade 5 at the same school.)

"Each time I went into the school, I knew we'd made the right decision," says Lise. "I still remember the first time I realized what a strong sense of belonging I felt in this francophone setting. I'd found something that I didn't even know I had lost!"

When Alexander started Maternelle, he received francisation, or intensive French language instruction. But within two months, he no longer needed the extra help.

"It kind of confirmed that he, too, was in the right place. There's no doubt in my mind that children who arrive at a francophone school speaking a language other than French can still reap all the benefits of their French-language education!"

WELL WORTH THE EFFORT

Today, Lise works for the Conseil scolaire Centre-Nord as an information/recruitment agent. At home, she always speaks French with Alexander, while Jeff speaks English and sometimes French. Suffice it to say that the two languages are alive and well in the Roy-Maxwell household!

"We make sure Alexander hears and speaks French at home and elsewhere outside of school. We want him to live in French in addition to studying in the language. Sometimes it requires more effort, like when we drive him across the city to see francophone friends, but it's really worthwhile.

"Often, when people are completely assimilated into another language and culture, they don't even know what's missing from their life. But losing your mother tongue also means losing your culture and identity. Even though I was totally comfortable living in English, and even if I search for French words in some situations, I'm so glad to have revived my mother tongue and my francophone identity. It's enriching not only for me, but also for our couple and our son!"

