

## Claire recalls her vocation and first steps in India

At a very young age, between 16-17 years old, I was thinking of a missionary vocation. I met Abbé Boland, Yvonne and others at a youth movement "Les volontaires des missions". At the end of my high school, along with Maria Leblanc and Simone Landrien, we joined the Auxiliaires Laiques des Missions (ALM) in 1944. I was already thinking of doing my medical college and my parents let me leave home as they were thinking that I had at least 7 years to realise what I was doing. I was attracted by the total gift of my life, the joy that was always present in the house - it was advised to laugh everyday at least 1/4 hour ! - and also by the simplicity of everybody, and life in teams. The idea that through my profession I could serve the ones who are most in need was also a motivation.

In 1954, at Bruxelles, the ALM was in full expansion. There were teams working in the Congo and the Near East. Centres for foreign students, called Crossroads, were functioning at Paris and Chicago.

Asia has always attracted me because I met Chinese and Indian friends in my family. At the beginning, like all the ALM, we thought of going to China because Fr Lebbe had written on a post card, "I am waiting for you". But China was soon closed to foreigners and naturally my choice was to ask for India as I was equally attracted by this country. Requests for professional teams came from the Bishops of Japan, Vietnam and India. The ALM Council decided that it was time to go east and that Yvonne visit the bishops on the spot. From India, there were requests for ALM teams by Cardinal Gracias, Bishop Raymond (Allahabad) and Fr Chillakalappalli (Kerala). At that time it was the Council who decided where we would be sent, taking into account as much as possible, our own desires. I was very happy when I was nominated for India along with Simone Liégeois and Hélène Eenberg, both staff nurses. We started our preparation by going to the UK to learn English. For me it was language for 2 months and then Tropical Medicine for 6 months. I learnt medical terms but in 2 months I did not really develop proficiency in the language. Now I am certainly at ease with English but speak with a dreadful Indo-French accent. During this time, the 3 of us got in touch with the Grail and did several sejours at Caldey island and met Francis Mahieu, the novice master. He was waiting for his visa to go to India. Soon we were also waiting for our visas. It was decided that Yvonne and myself would go first and see where we could serve.

For the investigatory visit we left in March 1954 - a long flight in the TWA from Paris to Bombay with six stop overs. We reached Bombay in the middle of the night, the Cardinal's secretary was waiting for us at the airport and dropped us at a hostel run by the Franciscan Missionaries of Mary.

This travel with Yvonne has been something special in my life, a sharing in the discovery of India that was becoming my country, a deep sharing also in prayers for the society and for all who were living in great difficulties at that moment. We met Cardinal Gracias and Bishop Raymond at the Archbishop's house. While they welcomed us with joy and enthusiasm, they also informed us that they could do nothing to get us visas to work in India. Residential visas were very difficult to get at that time – a cold shower, but we were not deterred. We had to find a way. We met several people and organisations in Bombay among them the Indian Women's Association (an appointment arranged probably through the wife of the Belgian Consul) at the Governor's residence. The next day on the first page of the Times of India (a widely read newspaper) was our photo greeting the Governor !

Being a medical team assigned to India, we also met the Medical Mission Sisters and other organisations and from them I realised that without having any specialisation I was really not

prepared for medical responsibilities in this country. The youngest interns had more experience than me.

We went to Pune to meet Fr. J Moeyersoens who had just started the Indian Social Institute. Fr. Jerome D'Souza was there. He was a member of the Indian Constituent Assembly. He invited us to meet him at New Delhi. He introduced us to the Minister of Health and Family Planning – Rajkumari Amrit Kaur – a Christian Princess. In discussions with her I mentioned that I had worked in the histopathology department during my studies and had a certificate for that. The Minister proposed immediately that I help set up a histopathology laboratory in the newly established TB research Institute – the Vallabhai Patel Chest Institute. She would also arrange for employment of the two nurses in a central government hospital. The terms specified were that there would be no salary for one year but a nice flat at our disposal. Yvonne agreed. At least we saw the light of the day.

The Health Ministry saw that my tourist visa would be changed into a residential visa and that H el ene and Simone would receive the necessary visas. This was April and I would start my work on May 1st (between 35-40% C  in Delhi).

Yvonne continued her journey to Japan and Vietnam. As suggested, she came to India on her way back and we went to south India to meet the friends of the ALM Society in the Christian areas of the country. We visited many colleges and bishops in Madras, Bangalore and Kerala. I recall that it was probably during this trip that the change of name from ALM to AFI was proposed. In India we had no official connection with the Church and the Near East was not a mission territory – sufficient rationale to change the name. Yvonne left for Bombay on August 12th, H el ene, Simone and myself got our residential visas on August 15th 1954. H el ene and Simone reached Delhi in October and we settled in Delhi.

We were happy to live in the capital city of India, the heart of the country, seven years after independence. We could still encounter the great freedom fighters, Pandit Nehru, Vallabai Patel, Humayun Kabir and others. Integration into work was not easy. While I worked in setting up the laboratory, Simone and H el ene had long hours to travel to their work in the government hospital where they encountered the real poor of Delhi. But it was not long before we realised that there was no need for doctors and nurses in this great city where many of our Indian colleagues preferred to work.

By the end of the year we looked for opportunities to settle in some villages where there was a greater need of health facilities. Soon two requests surfaced. One was for a tuberculosis service run by a philanthropist in his native place in Patan in Gujarat. The other came from Dr. F Hemerijckx. He was commissioned by a Belgian organisation to establish a leprosy control centre in India. This was a gesture to thank India for its assistance to Belgium at the time of a flood in 1953 on the north sea coast. The terms were that this leprosy control centre would be handed over to the Indian government after five years. We were attracted by both these proposals. Fr. Jerome D'souza advised us to take up the leprosy work. The Council at Bruxelles agreed. It was one of the last decisions that Yvonne took in February 1955. The tuberculosis work at Patan was taken up later by another AFI team in 1958. Rajkumari Amrit Kaur who was not willing to let us go out of Delhi finally conceded because it was leprosy work (dear to Mahatma Gandhi) and because the centre would be handed over to the Indian Government eventually after 5 years.

*(Notes from Claire, written at Trivandrum in 2011, for a booklet coordinated by Nalini Nayak, "The story of AFI-MISH in India")*