

Fall in Paris Journal

Friday, October 15 – Arc de Triomphe with AMOPA

The Order of the Palmes Académiques is honored to be involved in re-igniting the flame at the tomb of the Unknown Soldier under the Arch of Triumph every year because of their combined contribution to Education and to the maintenance of the French Language. As a member of the Palmes Académiques, Ernie was invited to participate. He was sorry he had left his medal in Cascade Shores because some of the others were wearing them. It is a laurel leaf in bronze suspended on a purple ribbon. Some of the women were sporting a white scarf with the emblem of the purple laurel wreath. Ernie did have his little purple insignia attached to the button hole of his sports coat.

The purpose was to re-ignite (it doesn't stop burning, it is a perpetual flame, but symbolically it is re-ignited each year) the eternal flame at the grave of the Unknown Soldier.

I had a noon Pilates 1 session and then practiced the cello before we left at 4:15 (I was 15 minutes late getting ready to go.) The strikes are still hitting some of the metros with work slowdowns so we didn't want to take any chances. We dressed warmly, Ernie even wore his navy Italian wool coat and a scarf. We did not take rain gear (a mistake) because the rain had cleared to a blue sky. There was still wind.

As we got off the Metro and started walking toward the meeting place, I took photos of the Arch. Here are two of them.





The instructions were vague stating that members should gather at the corner of two streets at the Place Charles de Gaulle (Étoile). Eight streets converge symmetrically with the Arch of Triumph in the center of the wheel. We weren't the only ones who didn't know what to do. I recognized several of the people from the reception the previous night so I knew we were in with the correct crowd. The question was, should we be gathering under the Arch or in the area where those two streets converge? That involved taking an underground stair way that took us to the Arc de Triomphe (Arch of Triumph). We all milled around for about half an hour with more and more of the members showing up. They were very excited about the event.

We were there very early so Ernie and I went through the underground tunnel and went to the Arch and looked around. It is huge and quite impressive. I don't think I have been there before this.

It is hard to get a photo of something as large as this, but this will give you a sense of the scale of it. Following is a photo of the detail of one of the sculptures on the outside. Take a look at the face of that angel leading the charge.

Of course, the Arch is all about battles.





Once there, there seemed to be no signs telling us what to do. There was a bus unloading a marching band in beautiful uniforms and shiny brass instruments. This band is called La Musique des Gardiens de la Paix. They, too, were milling around, smoking cigarettes, talking. They are part of the National Police, a different organization than the Gendarmerie, of which the string quartet were members.



We went back underground to the corner where the members were gathered, wondering what to do. Finally someone made a decision and the group started walking purposefully to the tunnel and to the Arch. We were told by someone in uniform to line up 4 abreast. In front of us were 4 flags held by a color guard.



We began to walk slowly following the marching band that now was playing. They were as good as the Marine Marching Band I used to watch every year in the Pasadena Tournament of Roses parade. But instead of Stars and Stripes, they were playing French marching songs.



We walked slowly around the Arch following our color guard until we stopped under the arch at the side of the tomb of the Unknown Soldier. On the ground in the left of the photo is a bronze shield at the base of the tomb.

Across from us were a bunch of children from a local school who had an important role to play in the ceremony. (Through all of the photos are other people taking photographs, sometimes blocking what I am trying to get. Please forgive the backs of peoples' heads. I was in a crush of the members of the Palmes Académiques.)

There were still some tourists around, but there were barriers separating the participants in the ceremony (us and the children plus various VIPs).



There were some bouquets already laid, but there were others being held by children who could barely hold them. There were a few tense moments when we held our breaths hoping no one would drop the bouquet.



Once the band stopped playing, there were speeches that we couldn't hear. It didn't matter, we wouldn't have understood, anyway. Then the children were lead four at a time and each was given a single white rose. They stood at the base of the tomb, bowed ceremoniously then walked to the tomb and each laid down the rose. Another four children followed, bowed, and laid the roses down. By the time all of the children had done this, there was a sizable bouquet of white roses.



In the background to the right, left to right there is a member of AMOPA in an Army uniform, the Mayor of the local Arrondissement (8th), a tall, stately (probably retired) well decorated soldier. Of course, he was wearing the French army hat and had a physique that reminded me of photos of Charles de Gaulle. Then there is Mme. Le Presidente of AMOPA wearing a chic hat, matching coat and sensible shoes for the event. To the left are the cold and shivering children holding the heavy bouquets waiting their turn in the ceremony. Not visible to the far right is another Army officer in camouflage gear who was very fit, likely a serving officer.

After the white roses and then the big bouquets were laid, the children's choir sang La Marseillaise with the band playing. Everyone sang. I made a video of it, but haven't figured out how to post a video yet. It was very moving.

After the singing, the soldiers, the mayor, the Presidente all came up and bowed then went through the AMOPA crowd shaking hands with the first row and thanking them for their service to France. The AMOPA crowd was sort of 2-3 rows deep. A few of the dignitaries reached in and shook our hands too! Then they went to the other side and shook each of the children's hands. It was lovely and a privilege to be part of it. This is what the tomb looked like after everything was done.

