What I was waiting for

Two chance encounters at Ohio State led to a global career.

I was waiting tables at the Faculty Club when a French-speaking delegation arrived for lunch. The center of the group was a short, plump, graying man dressed in a dark blue suit and an old tie.

It was April 1950, my final quarter in the College of Agriculture. The previous autumn, I had applied for a Fulbright scholarship to study overseas. I was not accepted. The scholarships awarded that year; the first of the Fulbright program, favored liberal arts graduates.

I had been determined to go abroad ever since I met a Finnish graduate student, Jouko Voutilainen, at an International Students Day on campus the previous year. He showed me a picture book of his country. The orderliness and modern architecture—along with his description of Finland’s progressive social democracy—shook me out of my belief that the U.S. was the only modern country in the world. I decided I had to see Jouko’s country for myself.

The man at the Faculty Club, it turned out, was the director of the French National School of Agriculture and the first French agriculturalist invited under the Marshall Plan to visit the U.S. after World War II to learn about the land-grant colleges of agriculture.

As I served the distinguished guest the customary Ohio dessert of apple pie, I was thinking: agricultural school . . . France . . . Europe. Finland was in Europe.

I interrupted the director’s interpreter. I would soon graduate in agriculture, I told her. Could I get a postgraduate position at the man’s school?

She translated my request to the director. They talked intently for a minute or two, then she turned to give me his answer:

“Yes, you can. The school will give you free room and board and full tuition. Come when you like, and you can stay a year.”

I walked out of the Faculty Club that day on a cushion of air. In a few weeks, I was on my way to a new continent.

I would come to know the director, Jacques Ratineau, and his school well. The buildings were on the grounds of a château that Louis XIV reportedly had built for one of his mistresses. I was the first American many of the employees had seen, and they treated me like a king. I worked in the school’s agricultural chemistry lab and spent much time learning the language.

When the winter work slowed, I set off to visit farms throughout Europe, including in Finland. I stayed a month there, and the country and the people—still recovering from the war—more than lived up to my starry-eyed expectations.

I returned to France in late July. I would be heading home soon, so I arranged to return a Finnish phrase book that a friend had lent me.

When I arrived at her apartment in Paris, she told me that a Finnish friend would be stopping by. Because he had been in the U.S. and she and I had both been in Finland, we could compare notes about our countries.

As we were chatting, the doorbell rang and Jouko Voutilainen, the graduate student from Ohio State who had inspired my trip to Europe, walked in. Speechless, we stared at each other.

It was fate and coincidence. I would be leaving France in two days. He was leaving for Geneva the next day. We talked for two hours. I never saw or heard from him again.

My first encounters with Jouko Voutilainen and Jacques Ratineau changed my life. As a French-speaking American agronomist, I found that many doors were opened to me in international agriculture.

After working for Quaker Oats in France as a marketing and product development manager, I was recruited by USAID to teach agricultural extension in Morocco. Later, I joined the USAID program for wheat production improvement in Morocco, where I collaborated with Dr. Norman Borlaug, winner of the Nobel Peace Prize in 1970. I continued my work in Algeria and Mexico, then joined the World Bank and held positions in Europe, the Middle East, North Africa, and Latin America.

Thank you, Jouko, for lighting my fire.