

To be or not to be "Au pair"

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TO BE OR NOT TO BE 'AU PAIR'

Pierre-Michel Béguin's recent article on au pair girls (*Swiss Observer*, May 1975) has prompted the following interesting comments from Mr Donald Campbell who lives in West London.

The editor wishes to express his thanks to Mr Campbell for his interest and for having taken the trouble to write this interesting account of some of his personal observations.

WGS

Your recent and most interesting article on au pair girls prompted me to write to you, in view of the great interest of so many of us in this subject.

By way of background, perhaps, I should mention that I am English, married to a Swiss who was once an au pair in England.

Exactly when is not for telling, as that might give away secrets that are not for general publication, but if I say some 20 odd years ago, that will not be an untruth.

Recently I have become "in loco parentis" to my niece from the

Ostschweiz, who, with her friend, came to England to become au pair with the idea of improving her English.

Prior to their arrival, Marili, my Winterthur-born wife and I gave serious thought as to whether it would be advisable for them to stay with us; and, need I say that such a thought gave us much pleasure.

But, reluctantly, we decided against this idea, as the opinion we came to was that more foreign languages would become spoken in our home than English.

Since the two friends became au pair or is it aux pairs? (I shall never know what is the plural), we have watched their progress in English with more than usual interest. Sadly the results are somewhat disappointing, and maybe so for the following reasons.

Both of them spend considerable time alone, carrying out the daily chores. Also, in both houses, there are very young children, with whom they have more contact than with the adults of the household. So, in the course of a normal day little English is spoken, other than the communications related to eating, cleaning, hours of attendance and children's simple needs.

In one family, the needs of the dog also!

Both babysit regularly as part of the normal routine, where again the idea of an au pair is defeated somewhat. But, to be fair, they are not exactly "upstairs, downstairs" as their living accommodation is good, but, regrettably, their English is not so good. In fact, their English has reached saturation point, and will remain at this pitch so long as circumstances do not change.

They were probably of the opinion, prior to coming to England, that their au pair experience would enable them to improve their English sufficiently for limited office work on return to Switzerland. This indeed would not have been impossible in certain other households where the following criteria had applied. And I list, as I see it, the essential minimum criteria for this purpose.

(a) At least the head of family or spouse, must have been born in England or be able to speak standard English.

(b) One member of the family should be home during daytime.

(c) The children, if any, should be at least 12 years of age (if teenage, so much the better, as then the au pair will be enabled to meet English youngsters about her own age, and with her own interests).

(d) The elder hosts must be willing to talk intelligently to their young guest, and attempt to teach words other than "Hoover, babysit, party, baked beans", etc., etc.

Perhaps, before applying for an au pair post the Swiss demoiselle should be encouraged to work out her own objective in coming to England. But which of us older readers could have done that at such tender years. Nevertheless, if a change of environment, or a chance to see other places are the main requirements, then the life of an au pair is probably the most inexpensive way of satisfying those requirements. And, to be fair, a certain amount of English may be learnt in the process.

In addition, the confidence of speaking the essential basic requirements of a foreign tongue in a foreign land can be gained in this manner. The young lady will have the confidence to travel alone on public transport, find her own way about town, and so become more amenable for further tuition which, at this stage, becomes essential if a good, acceptable standard of English is her aim.

Such tuition must, of course, be full time and enough free time should be available for private study and cultural pursuits.

I hope that readers will not find my remarks about an au pair's life too critical of my own folk. Good homes do exist, but they must be sought after. Remember the old English expression — "Yer pays yer money, yer takes yer choice!"

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Mr W. R. Walton has been appointed Divisional Managing Director of Leeds and Mr R. C. Whalley Divisional Managing Director of Sheffield.



One of our au pair girls who might, hopefully, benefit from Mr. Campbell's ideas!