

**AMONG THE TURKS
AND THE MOROCCANS**

RASQUINET (Brussels, Belgium), 20 YEARS LATER

Jean Pierre Brasseur

In the Josaphat quarter of Schaerbeek (Brussels), Brother Pierre Massart is a familiar figure. What has made him popular there is not his height, but his active presence in a district, 80% of whose population is made up of immigrants mostly from Morocco and Turkey. This teacher has been the chief organiser of the Rasquinet association for the last 20 years and has been awarded the voluntary workers' "V" Prize. He speaks of his district and children with an enthusiasm the years have not blunted. And yet there have been harsh disappointments and he has experienced the problems of social workers who struggle against the tide in abandoned districts of towns.

Rasquinet was born in 1972 on the initiative of a number of people who regularly attended youth masses at rue de l'Olivier. The local children were brought along but they had to be taken out of the church during the liturgy. Brother Pierre and two Sisters decided to organise something for them. They went for walks and, following the example of street libraries, they organised games for them on the pavements.

Christmas under the beams

Every Christmas, Pierre Massart recalled, "we used to organise something in town. We'd go into the streets with our guitars and pots of onion soup. In 1972, a district youth officer asked us to organise the same thing in his district and he put the former Rasquinet factory at our disposal. It was cleaned up and decorated, and the central theme was "Christmas under the beams". When it was all over, we asked to stay, but the town authorities removed all they had put up for Christmas.

For Pierre and his friends this was the beginning of a whole series of attempts to keep the unoccupied premises. When they were demolished, they fought to have the waste ground it had occupied, and later to obtain other premises and materials from the town authorities. Between 1977 and 1984 there was constant conflict between Rasquinet and the town authorities. Not everyone was happy to see successful schemes organised in this immigrant district. With the advent of "Etés Jeunes" relations improved, but not for long.

The homework school and workshops

Starting on the street, we moved on to the ground floor of a small derelict house given to us by the town authorities. Here we ran activity workshops and a library. We stayed there for 15 years, and then we found a semi-detached house. Throughout this period we sought to provide children with playing fields and activity workshops.

After school, I would take these children to teach them how to read and help them catch up with their studies. I recruited some young people to form little groups to teach reading. In time these became sessions for doing homeworks. This latter function gradually became increasingly important as the demand for it grew. The only limitation was the number of helpers available to provide a daily service.

In the activity workshops we had to be more selective, and they were run by a music teacher, a woman with a degree in chemistry and a person who was good at choral reading and drama.

To help adolescents, Rasquinet set up the Association Jeunesse Josaphat. This is run by a 22 year old Moroccan who comes to the district on Wednesday afternoons and every evening. Those who come are aged between 12 and 16/17. They play mini-football and work on their own projects. He works in collaboration with other local organisations.

Children and retired people

It's difficult to find people to run Rasquinet and the homework "schools". Up to the present time, Rasquinet has seen 130 come and go, and not many of these were young people:

At present, there is one teacher from a nursery school who began working for us when she was a student. The others are primarily retired people. They act as fathers and mothers, helping children with their homeworks or their studies. Younger people find it difficult to be free between 15.30 and 17.30. However, as partially retired people and those who work half-time become more numerous, younger people may become available. Most people are recruited by word of mouth, and often from Christian backgrounds.

Many children do not understand the language well enough to follow with the others, and conditions at home are not conducive to work. The Turks in particular remain very attached to their ways, customs and habits. They all live in the same room, even when they have several at their disposal.

The Moroccans have adapted more quickly, but there are many delinquents among them: drugs and conflicts between the generations lead to broken relationships and violence. Things are becoming increasingly worse. We have to give children a view of life that is different from the one offered in broad daylight by drug dealers and other minor criminals.

We're not closing down!

Associations like Rasquinet are needed because many children do not yet have the necessary grounding to make a go of secondary school. And then there are certain immigrant communities which are slow to adapt to our lifestyle, and their youngest children need our help. The fight against delinquency is now more and more centred on prevention in districts like ours. It seems as if the type of action we've been asking for for 20 years is at last being envisaged.

We're very pleased about this, even though we see that there is a political slant to schemes and that there is a lack of coordination. ●

**Taken from an article which appeared
in DIMANCHE on March 21st 1993 - N° 11**