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The man who gave Edith Piaf her first English lessons, created a daily crossword puzzle for 38 years and welcomed many of France's leading literary figures to the United States will step down February 1 from the job he has loved most.

Eugene Sheffer is retiring after twenty-five years as director of the Maison Francaise at Columbia University -- an organization that has been giving Columbia students a taste of French culture since 1913.

Mr. Sheffer will leave the five-story brownstone of Maison Francaise on Columbia's Morningside Heights campus to write, travel in Europe and return to Columbia in the Fall to teach an undergraduate French course. The 61-year-old director of the oldest Maison Francaise unit in the the country has been associated with Columbia and its French program practically without pause since he entered Columbia College as a freshman in 1922.

And his interest in languages goes back to the former Townsend Harris High School in New York, where he was president of the French Club and vice president of the Spanish Club.

Mr. Sheffer, whose retirement becomes official June 30, will take with him memories of Columbia visitors from France like Edith Piaf, Maurice Chevalier, Yves Montand, Charles Boyer, Jean Louis
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Barrault and Simone Signoret from the field of entertainment; and Jean Paul Sartre, Albert Camus and Vercors among the authors.

All of them and scores of others have visited Maison Francaise to speak, usually in French, to Columbia students and visitors.

One of Mr. Sheffer's more difficult jobs was in 1947 when he was recruited to teach a bit of English to Edith Piaf for the late French singer's first visit to the United States.

"I got her right off the boat," he said. "She could only say 'yes' and 'no.' In three weeks I had to prepare her for her Broadway opening. I wrote three-sentence resumes so she could introduce each song and she read them like a parrot. I didn't teach her much English after that. I didn't have to. She was made after that concert."

Mademoiselle Piaf was one of many leading French figures who came to Columbia after World War II and reestablished contacts in the United States that they had lost during the war.

Mr. Sheffer himself was unable to serve in the war because of a physical disability. One of the minor letdowns in his life came when, a native of Baldwin, Long Island, he volunteered to do native speaker broadcasts in French to be beamed to occupied France.

He applied to the Office of War Information, giving them a tape recorded sample of what his friends told him was flawless French. "I don't know if it was a question of policy or if they detected an accent," Mr. Sheffer said, "but the OWI didn't accept me. I wasn't too disturbed, though. On my visits to France, people have

occasionally asked me what part of France I come from. They can't quite place the accent."

Mr. Sheffer remained on the Columbia campus during the war teaching French to midshipmen studying to become Navy officers. As a practical textbook for the course, he wrote the patriotically titled Aspects de la Guerre Moderne: Sur Terre, sur Mer et dans les Airs, which in English is, Aspects of Modern Warfare: On Land, On Sea and in the Air. The thoroughly researched book was used throughout the United States and in Europe in teaching military French.

After the war, Mr. Sheffer and the late New Yorker correspondent A. J. Liebling collaborated in writing La Republique du Silence, or The Republic of Silence. The book was a history of clandestine writing done in occupied France between the fall of France and the liberation of Paris. Mr. Sheffer spoke with most of the major writers of the French Resistance in selecting the writings to include in the book.

Mr. Sheffer has taught French at Columbia at the same time that he has directed the Maison Francaise, and many of his students have become French professors and government officials. But French hasn't been his only love. The Columbia scholar has been creating puzzles since he was 15 years old and for the last 38 years he has written a daily crossword puzzle for the King Features Syndicate. The puzzle appears in about 150 newspapers daily.

Even in his puzzles, though, Mr. Sheffer has leaned to his chosen field. He has written several crosswords in French, including a puzzle using exclusively medical terms. "That one nearly killed me," he said.

And he admitted about his daily puzzles: "They have a distinctly Gallic flavor. I always slip in a word or two of French."

Mr. Sheffer hesitated to talk about himself, but he said about the organization he heads: "I am very proud of the role Maison Francaise has played in the cultural and academic world here. Its chief role has been the propagation of French culture through American university students. . . My first allegiance is to Maison Francaise."

The French Government hasn't been unaware of Mr. Sheffer's work. In 1950 he was named a Chevalier of the Order of the Palms Academiques for his scholarly work. And in 1960, in a ceremony conducted at Columbia by the Cultural Counselor of the French Embassy, Mr. Sheffer became a Chevalier of the Legion of Honor.

Quite an honor for the former president of a high school French Club.

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