For more than 50 years, while their countrymen back home have been making war, the students of Berkeley’s International House have been making friends and making love.

By Donna Rosenthal

As I was eating lunch under the olive trees at the International House patio with Ilana from Lima and Paulo from Florence, a boisterous blond man sat at our table. His outrageous jokes captivated Ilana and Paulo, but for me, his loud German accent stirred the ashes of the Holocaust. Feeling uneasy, I left, ignoring him. During that semester in 1968, I continued to avoid the German, and it was easy, with 600 students and scholars, half international and half American, living together in the imposing Spanish-Moorish-style building at the top of the UC-Berkeley campus.

But it wasn’t so easy the next semester when I joined International House’s student council, because the German was its most politically outspoken member. Although I could no longer avoid him, I still remained aloof. But one night he sneaked onto our all-women’s floor “disguised” in a flowered skirt and pink corset and leading a few other men dressed in drag. After an invasion party, the zany German led a group of us on a secret raid; we brazenly stole the doors separating the men’s and women’s sections. That night, my barriers of prejudice started to break down. Chris Sanders became my first German friend—and I became his first Jewish friend.

Most evenings, Chris and I joined the crowd in the International House’s Great Hall for a popular ritual: watching the news and hearing Walter Cronkite conclude, “That’s the way it is.” I started realizing that maybe that was not the way it was. Surrounded by students and visiting scholars from over 60 countries, I learned about the news beyond the sound bites. Afterwards, we sat around talking. I heard Czechs and Soviets arguing about the invasion of Prague, French and Americans debating Vietnam politics, Ibos and Yorubas quarreling about the genocidal Biafran civil war that was killing their families. It was like traveling the world without leaving home.

Twenty years later, after working abroad as a journalist, I returned to International House when my husband became its executive director. I was curious about the place that had helped me see through my national and ethnic

Photographs by Darcy Padilla

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Back home, I never socialized with anyone but Arabs. My friends at I House. Our friendships here are stronger than the barriers of class and years. I had wanted to see how it had changed in the intervening decades, an era when old walls came down throughout the world, and new grievances flared up. Was International House still making the world seem more like a unity of its students and scholars?

The students still put on cultural festivals for the Bay Area community. And they still gather around the TV in the Great Hall in a crowd that resembles a living United Nations. But the issues they debate are quite different. Ukrainians, Armenians and Russians ponder the future of the Commonwealth of Independent States, and black and white South Africans watch video footage of violence back home. A Haitian student shudders at painful scenes of Haitian boat refugees. During the Gulf war, Kuwaitis and Iraqis, Israelis, a Syrian and a Libyan watched Scud attacks beamed via satellite onto the big TV screen.

"I remember students from around the world watching intently as the Berlin Wall came tumbling down," says Bonnie Wasserman, student council president in 1989. "I looked around me and realized how many of us at I House had taken down the walls within ourselves. The world was not only changing on the screen — it was changing through us at I House. Living there taught me more about politics than my graduate classes in political science."

It's hard to believe that back in 1928, "I House," as it is often called, was a radical idea. More than 800 Berkeley residents staged a protest against constructing this building where international students and Americans, men and women of all colors, would live together under one roof. Property owners feared I House would cause Berkeley to be overrun with blacks and Asians. In those days, black students couldn't even get their hair cut on campus, and fraternities excluded non-Caucasians.

That's one reason why Harry Edmonds, the man who started the first International House in New York City in 1924 with financial support from John D. Rockefeller Jr., decided to put the second

Francisco Lira says it was a "social shock" for him when he moved into I House. "In Mexico, people of my class don't mingle with the rich."

International House up on Piedmont Avenue — on fraternity row — where it would punch bigotry and exclusiveness "right in the nose." The West Coast I House opened in 1930, with a gift of $1.8 million from Rockefeller. It was the largest student housing complex in the Bay Area, and the first coeducational residence west of the Mississippi. Since then, these two houses have inspired similar experiments in international living in cities around the globe.

Berkeley's I House is founded on the idea that friendships can transcend nationality, race and religion. As a former Turkish resident put it, "This is our home; here, you never feel like a foreigner." More than 40,000 alumni around the world have lived this experiment. Numerous government leaders, ambassadors and captains of industry, several Nobel Prize winners, and world-renowned mountaineer Arlene Blum have spent some of the more memorable days of their youth here. It is where Jerry Brown met Rose Bird, where Pete Wilson pored over his law books, and where John Kenneth Galbraith says he experienced an "intensity of discussion beyond any I've known since, in 60 years of public life."

I House is much more than a dormitory with a dome. Everything from lunch to laundry can be a culturally broadening experience. When Harue Minakawa, a visiting professor from Hokkaido, Japan, came to Berkeley to study African-American women writers, she'd never met Europeans or other Asians. "One night at dinner, an Iranian who lives on my floor sat with us," she recalls. "I always was afraid to smile or even say hello, because he's a Middle Eastern man and I never wanted him to think I was interested." But as she started speaking with the Iranian mathematician about her field of interest, she was stunned to hear him talk with great knowledge about Toni Morrison and other black women writers. "Farhad knows more than most Americans. Most of all, he's breaking down my stereotypes about Middle Eastern men."

International House residents, mostly graduate students and scholars, learn to communicate across cultural and political lines. A group of students from Taiwan and the People's Republic of China, separated by hostile governments, now sit together for the first time at a dinner table halfway across the world. Eric Olander, a blond American, tells them in fluent Mandarin about his work in both countries as a radio reporter. "Everyone moves in here with prejudices," he says, "but here we slam ourselves head-on into them — at the dinner tables, in the elevators, in the library."

Recently Olander ate with students from Jordan, Syria, Israel, Denmark and South Africa, all arguing about the Middle East. At one point, he recalls, "it got so heated that one student's veins were throbbing out from his forehead. But we finally agreed to disagree and channeled our anger into creative tension. At times
I made good Jewish than politics.”

we even laughed. I House is like a mini-U.N., but better: The students do what their leaders can’t. If we put our world leaders in a place like this, a lot of important problems would be solved. If only Shamir and Assad could live here, they’d be forced to confront their stereotypes and problems as we do.”

“Here I meet people from countries I’ve only read about in National Geographic, from Bhutan to Bolivia,” says Helsio Tokeshi, an effusive third-generation Japanese-Brazilian. He had his first cross-cultural adventure when he entered the dining room. “I sat with a guy with an Asian face like mine, but was shocked when he said he’s from L.A. I just assumed all Asians were foreign students like me.” Students are astonished when they find out Tokeshi is from São Paulo, until he explains that Brazil has the world’s largest community of overseas Japanese. Tokeshi says that making Japanese friends for the first time is giving him insight into his grandparents’ heritage, yet it is also making him realize how Brazilian he is. “When I started hugging a Japanese friend, she looked offended. That’s when I realized that’s an offensive greeting in Japan.”

Sometimes cross-cultural misunderstandings occur during meals. When an Indian student refused to let a male staff member pour water for her, she had to explain that it is improper to be served by an older man with a higher status. And two years ago, when a Kuwaiti student’s friends surprised him on his birthday with a scantily clad bellydancer who started whirling around on his dinner table, hundreds of students were delighted, while others, led by a Belgian feminist, expressed outrage. In I House style, instead of a destructive blow-up over the exotic entertainment, the incident set off a freewheeling discussion lasting several days.

The strange foods in the cafeteria sometimes induce culture shock. When a physicist from Shanghai saw a dish labeled “turkey,” he opened his dictionary and grimaced. “Turkey? That’s an animal we keep in zoos.” To make his bowl of raw vegetables “edible,” he doused them with hot water and microwaved them. A woman from Taiwan shakes a bowl of green jello and laughs. A law student from New Guinea puzzles over the box of Nut ‘n’ Honey Cheerios cereal, and a musician from Kiev studies a jar of peanut butter.

Much of the cafeteria food is labeled, lest the Sri Lankan Hindu find forbidden beef in his burrito, or the Sudanese doctor discover pork in his Thai noodles. Pleasing such a mélange of discriminating palates is challenging. Some students complain the food’s too bland; others, that it’s too spicy. Some want chopsticks; others have to adjust to not eating with their hands. Then there are special religious observances: the Muslims who fast during Ramadan and the Jews who eat matzo during Passover. And the American dinner hours can pose problems — appalling early for most Latin Americans, Italians, Spaniards and Greeks.

Students sometimes sample exotic food, like okra and sweet potato pie on “Soul Food Night,” spätzle on the 700th birthday of Switzerland, or buffalo-meat tacos, Cherokee stew and wild rice for a Native American feast. The rice question reflects the culinary challenges of a multicultural environment. The Bhutanese like their rice red with chilies; many Indians doctor it with curry or yogurt; and some Iranians like yellow rice with pine nuts. Some Latin Americans want it fried with beans, while the vegetarians may want it brown with sesame seeds. Many Chinese prefer it separate and hard, while most
Japanese want it soft and sticky.
When a Japanese student asked his friend Jeff Whitelow from Detroit why African Americans like fried chicken and watermelon so much, Whitelow found it "quite amusing. I told him I'm a vegetarian, and as for watermelon — well, having friends from all over the world is teaching

When I answered in Mandarin, he was shocked. Finally, while he was writing a paper on Marxism, he decided he wanted to talk to me about it. I thought, 'Why 3 in the morning?' But I'm a sucker for a good conversation, and this one lasted until dawn. It led to many talks between us covering Chinese customs, traveling, romance and

Rican physicist asked Thai architect Preechya Sittipunt if Thailand was an island, she was amazed. "I teased him about his terrible knowledge of geography," she says, "and when he asked me if I knew where Puerto Rico is, I answered, 'I don't know for sure, but at least I know it's not an island.' We realized we both had a lot of learning to do."

A West African recently showed how he could cut through years of misleading images. "When an American guy on my floor heard I'm from Ghana, he asked me if we actually live in trees. I answered, 'Yes, I live next to Tarzan,'" says Yorgen Anderson, a doctoral student in electrical engineering. "Most students think Africa's all jungle, and their misconceptions amaze me." Yet Anderson was stunned when he found out a Texan linguist on his floor was studying his tribal language, Ga. Being asked so many questions about his country's tribes and cultural traditions is forcing the Ghanian to examine things about his own culture he took for granted. "A big part of living here is discovering who you are."

he residents of I House have come to depend on CNN for news from home. Watching the Soviet Union's short-lived coup — and the courageous resistance to it — unfold last year on Ted Turner's network was riveting, says Evgenii Bernshtein of St. Petersburg. "History in front of me."

Ted Turner himself came to I House last month to be honored for his contributions to global communications and international goodwill. Thanks in part to CNN, the Great Hall is now more than a place of cultural exchange: In a sense, it is the prototypic global village, with people from around the world gathered in front of the gleaming tube to watch news from around the world. I House is "not a house for 'aliens' or foreigners," Turner told the 260 guests attending the fund-raising banquet. "It's a place where all people can feel at home."

Sometimes, though, TV at I House serves as another type of intercultural bridge. On Thursday nights, for example, the I House library empties and more than 100 students gather around the television, laughing at the same Bart Simpson antics they were addicted to back home in 44 countries — from Syria to France, and from Malaysia to Chile.

At times, students cross other bridges, meeting people from different socioeconomic backgrounds. In the laundry room, a student on scholarship shows a per-

Visiting scholar Pyoung Hoon Kim watches an American Indian dance ceremony, top: "No one can teach tolerance, but this place inspires it." An international chorus line tries to synchronize its steps, above.

me that it's not only in the U.S. that African Americans are victims of unfair media representation."

Last year, as Whitelow opened the door to his room, his new roommate from Hong Kong looked shocked. "Despair filled my soul," he recalls. "At first I thought, 'I want out.' But I realized, Why would a German, Argentinian or Canadian look at me differently? For the first few weeks we barely talked. Then, after I unpacked several Chinese language books, he asked why.

African-American culture. Our cross-cultural chats have made us aware of our commonalities and differences. Right before Christmas vacation, he asked with all the sincerity of a father's fear of losing a son if I would continue being his roommate next semester. Of course I said yes. Friendship is an evolutionary process."

Like Whitelow, some of the 300 American residents have traveled abroad; for others, I House is their first international living experience. When a Puerto
Greek students demonstrated outside the auditorium. But the protesters then came inside and engaged in an animated debate. Later that semester, during “Greek Night” in the International House cafe, Turkish students danced sirtaki to live bouzouki music with Cypriots, Greeks and Armenians.

The spirit of compromise that prevails at I House is a welcome relief from the armed discord that too often erupts abroad. “The fighting of people back home is such a contrast to I House,” says Slobodan Simic, whose mother is Croatian and whose father is Serbian. “Thousands of my people are killing each other over old hatreds. I am here to live together even though they have different religions, histories and languages. Here I feel that I am a citizen of the world and not just a member of an ethnic group.”

Other students say living at I House has made them re-examine the word “enemy.” After Iraq invaded Kuwait, Ayman Abdelbari nervously waited six months for word from his Palestinian family in Kuwait. “It was the worst time of my life,” he recalls. “I spent hours drinking on the TV, watching CNN with an Iraqi friend. Most of my I House friends were very concerned about my family, and they offered me money and emotional support, even though some were pro-Saddam. Our friendships here are stronger than politics,” says Abdelbari. Even though his grandfather lived in I House when it opened in 1930, this is the first time Abdelbari has lived outside Kuwait. “Back home, I never socialized with anyone but Arabs. Even though I come from a place full of hostilities to Jews, I made good Jewish friends at I House. I’ve learned that people are the same all over.”

Moved by these kinds of transformations, a former resident and her husband are funding a Middle East Dialogue project at I House, and hope someday to launch an international house in Jerusalem.

Sometimes the friendships become romances. Over the years, there have been thousands of I House marriages. Abdelkader Abbadi, a Moroccan representative at the U.N., met his future Dutch wife in the Great Hall. Kenneth Taylor, the former Canadian ambassador to Iran, who helped some of the American hostages escape, met his Chinese-Australian wife there. But some cross-cultural marriages have not been easy. Last year, when Hitesh Mehta, an Indian-Kenyan Jain, and Minoo Rahbar, an Iranian Muslim, announced their engagement, their parents burst into tears. “My father had always said no Muslim would ever enter our house, and Minoo’s mother (in Tehran) looked down on Indians as dark-skinned servants,” says Mehta, a professor of landscape architecture at the University of Nairobi. Finally, after seven months, both sets of parents agreed to the December marriage, which was attended by I House students from 23 countries.

In 1968, a Chinese-Indonesian-Brazilian student asked his Czech-Israeli friend Nadia Nagarajan to find him a room in I House with “anybody except an Indian,” recalls Nadia. “School was starting, and the only room available was with and Indian.” He reluctantly took it and later conceded that his roommate, Naga, “wasn’t so bad.” The three subsequently became close friends, and two years later, Nadia and Naga got married. Today the three are still close friends. “If only politicians could do what I House does,” says Nadia, “the world would be a much better place.”

Thirty-five years ago, when UC-Berkeley chancellor Chang-Lin Tien, who is also president of the I House board, first left Taiwan to study in Louisville, Ky., he felt “terribly isolated and scared,” he recalls. “There was racial segregation everywhere — counters, drinking fountains, buses — and signs for ‘colored’ and ‘whites.’ I had very little contact with white Americans, and one of my professors derisively called me a ‘Chinaman’ in front of the other students. If only we’d had an I House there.” After coming to Berkeley to teach, Tien says I House was one of the first places he felt comfortable. “Now when I go around the world, I keep meeting I House alumni who tell me moving stories about their old home.”

Nowadays, a debate rages on Tien’s campus, and throughout the land, over how to address the challenges posed by the growing diversity of the nation’s student population and society at large. In this fractious climate, it would seem that the harmonious Tower of Babel known as International House has lessons for us all. In the end, the most fitting motto for International House might be a quote from Mahatma Gandhi. “Let all of the cultures of the world blow through my house,” declared the great man of peace, “but let none of them knock me down.”

Donna Rosenthal's article on Jerusalem appeared in the Oct. 6 Issue of Image.