

Les Poubelles: A touch of French Culture

By George Simons

Yesterday I was shopping in the Casa (a shop for small household things) in La Bocca just outside of Cannes on the Cote d'Azur, when I saw the perfect wastebasket for my workspace on sale. There were actually two baskets there, one nested inside the other and, *hélas*, they resisted my best efforts to separate them. So I took both to the checkout expecting to find help there. The cashier tugged at one end, and I at the other while a longish line started to fall in behind me.

I suggested humorously that perhaps, since *les poubelles* were so tightly bound together, that one was *offert* (that it was a two-for-one sale). The customers waiting behind me smiled and nodded agreement, but the store manager who had arrived by this time said discretely, "*Non, non*," with the lateral wiggle of an index finger.

When the clerk and I failed at separating the baskets, the customers in the queue pitched in to help, with up to six or seven of them tugging simultaneously, several on each basket. Other customers lined up behind the tuggers to protect them from falling backward should the two baskets suddenly separate. It was a Max Sennet comedy waiting to happen. No success.

Then they started discussing creative solutions, trying some, arguing the merits of others. They tried separating the baskets with a knife, shaking them, various new ways of holding and pulling, pounding on the bottom of the outside one. No avail.

Finally, another store employee, with a disdain-for-amateurs look on his face, took the baskets from the crowd without a word. He went outside, put a piece of protective paper on the sidewalk and tapped the rim of the inside basket all around. *Voilà*, success!

Among the things I noticed (culture?):

- This was all far less likely to have happened in Holland, Germany or the UK, where if someone wanted to help, or suggest a solution, they would at least have asked me, before touching the product.
- Nobody got (visibly) impatient in the queue. I was next and it was my turn to be served, whatever the efforts and detours required (*égalité?*). When it was obvious that this was going to take some time, I asked the woman waiting directly behind me to, "*S'il vous plait*," take my turn. Her eyebrows raised, as if to ask if I really meant it, then thanked me very much before stepping up.
- When the ordeal was over, everybody in line automatically stepped aside so I could pay for my freshly liberated purchase.
- The stuck wastebaskets were everybody's problem (*fraternité?*), and everyone was entitled to have a go at pulling them apart. At one point the women suggested male muscle power and delegated the operation to "*les gars*."

On leaving, I turned to those still in line and said, "*Merci, tout le monde!*" Everyone was happy.