

Mary Crist Fleming, International Educational Pioneer, Dies at 98

Mary Crist Fleming, founder and director of American international schools in Europe and a pioneer in the field of international education, died on 27 January, 2009, at her long-time home in Montagnola, Switzerland, in the middle of the campus of The American School in Switzerland (TASIS), which she founded in 1956. Mrs. Fleming was also the founder of TASIS, The American School in England, in 1976, and of several other schools and programs, most still in operation, in Europe. A dozen years ago she donated the schools, programs, and campuses to the nonprofit Swiss TASIS Foundation, which Mrs. Fleming set up to continue her legacy. The schools are widely considered the finest American international schools abroad. Mrs. Fleming has been recognized for her contributions to American and international education by commendations from the U.S. Department of Education (1983), President George H.W. Bush (1990), and Harvard University (1984), which is her alma mater. She was given an honorary degree by the American College of Greece.

Mary Crist Fleming was born in Boston, Massachusetts, on September 10, 1910, the only child of two school founders and directors, Haldy Miller Crist and Frances Leavitt Crist, who founded, owned, and operated the Mary Lyon School for girls in Swarthmore, Pennsylvania. She was educated at her parents' school, in Lausanne, Switzerland, in Perugia, Italy, at the New England Conservatory of Music, and then at Radcliffe College, Harvard University, from which she graduated with a degree in French in 1933. From early on a Europhile, she spoke fluent French, good Italian, and German, capacities that were to serve her very well in a lifetime of educational initiative and endeavor in relating Americans to Europe and Europeans to America, as Secretary of Education T.H. Bell pointed out in his commendation of her at the U.S. Department of Education in 1983. From the mid 1930s on Mary Crist was leading educational trips of young Americans to Europe, driving herself and covering the continent from France to Turkey, with many adventures in between. Italians, Slavs, Greeks, and Turks were especially astonished to see an elegant, self-assured woman driving and leading a small fleet of cars filled with young American women on frequently unpaved roads in southern or southeastern Europe. She spent a night in an Istanbul jail because she did not have visas for her girls. In 1935 her educator-parents financed her visit to the Soviet Union, about which she was required to write a book, privately published with illustrations in 1936 as **No Soap in the Soviet**. In later years she was to meet and admire the English journalist and broadcaster Malcolm Muggeridge, whose satirical-documentary novel **Winter in Moscow** was also published in 1936.

In 1940 Mrs. Fleming married William Thomas Fleming of Philadelphia and between 1933 and 1943 she was Assistant Director of her parents' Mary Lyon School, nursing her mother in her final struggle with cancer. The School was commandeered in 1943 by the U.S. Navy for the war effort and she briefly moved it to the Barbizon Plaza Hotel in New York City to finish the academic year. A Francophile as well as a Francophone, she was meanwhile helping to raise money for the Free French opposition to the Vichy collaborationist regime. From 1943 to 1953 Mrs. Fleming ran the Frog Hollow Country Day School in Lansdale, Pennsylvania, from which she would each summer take her trips

with students to Europe, with particular attention to southern France, French Switzerland, and central Italy. Her children Gai, Thomas, and Lynn were born between 1941 and 1946. She moved her family to Europe permanently in 1956, opening The American School in Switzerland (which was to become known by the acronym TASIS) in a rented villa in Locarno, Switzerland, with her own three children and nine others. She soon moved the School to Lugano, where it occupied two different sites before being consolidated on one campus in the hill village of Montagnola, surrounded by the Alps and overlooking the Lake of Lugano. In the early years the school was mainly comprised of Americans, but today its K-13 enrollment of 560 students includes over fifty nationalities. For many years Mrs. Fleming was unique in being a female school and summer-program founder and Director in static, hierarchical, bureaucratic, male-dominated societies in France and Switzerland, whose authorities deeply mistrusted her dynamic American self-reliance and risk-taking, but were often charmed and won over in spite of themselves. Mrs. Fleming always wore flashy bracelets with old gold coins, but she also liked to say that she had “more mortgages than coins.”

Mrs. Fleming’s “joie de vivre,” charm, inspirational speaking capacities, organizational abilities, and risk-taking educational initiatives attracted not only students and parents but dedicated faculty and administrators of several nationalities to her schools and programs, including, briefly, colleges in Lugano, Switzerland, and Florence, Italy, that grew out of her very successful “Post Graduate,” 13th-year program in Lugano, which had been praised in an article in **Time** magazine in 1965. In 1976 she and her daughter Lynn and a cadre of her finest administrators and teachers founded TASIS England, The American School in England, in Thorpe, Surrey, now a thriving boarding and day school of over 700 students. She also founded and operated schools in Greece, Cyprus, and France, where uncertain economic and political developments made their continuation impossible. She was also a founder of the European Council of International Schools (ECIS), now known as the Council of International Schools (CIS).

Mrs. Fleming’s enormous charm, personal charisma, and educational vision earned her the gratitude, love, and loyalty of generations of friends, teachers, students, parents, and staff over a 65-year career in education. She was famed for her courtesy and generosity to her kitchen staffs, maids, gardeners, and handymen, whom she or her daughter Lynn usually took on an annual holiday trip. She was the subject of newspaper and magazine articles, a popular novel for young people (**Bloomability** (1998) by Sharon Creech, a Newbery Award-winning author, former TASIS faculty member, and wife of one of the TASIS Headmasters), and a commemorative volume, **MCF: What a Life!** (1990), edited by her daughter Lynn Fleming Aeschliman and with an introductory greeting by President George H.W. Bush. Her life story was also made into a musical comedy of the same title, with words and music by the American composer Todd Fletcher, a former TASIS faculty member, which was staged for audiences in Switzerland, England, and New York City. She was the main subject of a Boston University doctoral dissertation on educational leadership.

The educational vision of Mary Crist Fleming was rooted in the proprietary, classical-Christian, Anglo-American independent-school tradition of her school-founder parents,

with four particular additions: an insistence on the importance of learning European languages so as to communicate directly with people (for whose personal names she had a phenomenal memory); an emphasis on highly-organized course-correlated travel throughout Europe, with faculty guides and chaperones; a high priority given to drama, art, and music; and the insistence on beautiful surroundings as a setting for her educational enterprises. Her schools and programs were and are almost always located in beautiful settings in historic buildings, in Switzerland, England, France, or Italy, which were then tastefully renovated by her or her daughter to adapt them to educational use and were then augmented by new, classic buildings in the same style. Always elegantly attired herself and with beautiful manners, she loved beauty and believed that it nourished young people's spirits. American architect David Mayernik's lovely neo-classical M. Crist Fleming Library, built on the TASIS campus in Switzerland in her honor with alumni, parent, and friends' contributions in 2004, won a 2005 Palladio Award sponsored by **Traditional Building** magazine (New York).

Mrs. Fleming married twice, with both marriages ending in divorce. She is survived by her three children by her first marriage, Mrs. Gai Fleming Case of Brevard, N.C., Mr. W. Thomas Fleming III, of Washington, D.C., and Mrs. Lynn Fleming Aeschliman of Montagnola, Switzerland, all three of whom serve on the TASIS Foundation, and by four grandchildren. But her larger family numbers in the thousands of people who were touched and inspired by her vision, inexhaustible energy, grace, courtesy, and generosity.

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