

Anna J.

"I don't feel bound either to Hungary or Switzerland."



Anna J., f., born in Zurich in 1973 to parents of Hungarian origin. Her father has lived in Switzerland since 1958, and her mother since 1970.

Where did your parents come from?

My mother has crossed borders for political reasons more than once. She grew up in a region which was granted to Czechoslovakia under the Treaty of Trianon in 1920. Along with the whole family, she was ethnic Hungarian. At home they spoke Hungarian. That meant that she grew up in Czechoslovakia, in what is today Slovakia, as a member of a minority. What's more, she was a pastor's daughter – a very unfavourable combination under anti-religious communism. Within the family, Hungary was always highly idealised. If taking the Slovakian forms of names was ever an issue, the response was always: "No, we're Hungarians. We speak Hungarian." The children went to a Hungarian school and took a Hungarian school leaving certificate there. My mother really wanted to study, but this wasn't allowed because she was a pastor's daughter. She tried all sorts of tricks, for instance giving her father's occupation as "shepherd", meaning "shepherd (of souls)". She tried to get around the regulations like this, but it didn't work.

When she was twenty years old, she decided to emigrate to Hungary: to the idealised land, where the idealised language was spoken. That was where the bombshell fell: they were described as Slovaks, because they came from this Hungarian-Slovakian region. She wanted to study but the response was: "had you attended a Slovakian school, we could have accepted you as a foreign student. Because you attended a Hungarian school, we cannot accept your school-leaving certificate." That was the second great blow, in a similarly Soviet-dominated Hungary, which probably led to an emotional distance from this country. She then

tried to take several lesser courses of training. She had to forget the idea of studying. In 1970, after five years, she saw her first chance to leave Hungary and came to Switzerland.

What was her start in Switzerland like? Did she tell you about it?

She did, but, interestingly, she didn't tell me very much. She found leaving her second home was not as bad as leaving the first. The first time, her roots were cut off. The second emigration was a sort of escape from Hungary. Not because she was hounded politically, but because she felt she couldn't get ahead. She came to Switzerland with great expectations and then she found work here straight away. Because she was young and motivated – she was born in 1943 – she had a positive reception here. She met my father, a Hungarian born in 1932, at a Hungarian event. At first he lived in Budapest and then, when the war started, they moved to the countryside at Lake Balaton. His father was very active in movements that sought to restore Hungary to its 1920 borders, and therefore he was persecuted and discriminated against for a long time. So my father couldn't study either. He even had trouble finding work, so he worked for different companies and attended various evening courses. But as soon as he had reached a certain level, the question about his father would arise.

Where did he stand politically in the Hungary of the nineteen-fifties?

He was never active politically; because it was hopeless from the start, he wanted to stay out of it. He wanted to get ahead, to achieve something, but he was always disappointed under a dishonest and crooked system. Then, in 1956, as the situation in Hungary escalated, he had a chance to leave. After escaping he went to the reception camp. The refugees had many troubles, so there was great solidarity between them. If it happened that someone had found a job at a factory and asked, "Can I bring a mate with me?", and the head of personnel said, "Yes, I'm still looking for people", then the next day there would be *four* of them at the factory gate. So my father came across Austria (1956 – 1958) to Switzerland. At first he also tried to get a university education here by spending days studying at the university and nights working at the freight depot. Later he had better and better jobs, and so less and less time to study. Since he didn't have a very strong constitution, he had to stop this, and so give up the idea of a university degree. He became a laboratory technician, worked for various firms and ended up with a large and prestigious company, where he stayed until he retired.

How did your parents' social network develop?

They fitted in here pretty well. My mother speaks a Hungarian German, a mixture of Swiss German and High German. She has a good social network. Many of her acquaintances are Hungarians or come from another country. A circle of Swiss friends also exists, but it's smaller, and perhaps not as close. It was formed largely around us children – me and my

brother – in the school and at kindergarten, and so ended with the ending of our school years. We children were certainly an aid to communication.

It was easier for my father to develop a social network, because he had a steady job and so he also had good contact with Swiss people. My mother was always looking for work, but she was told again and again “sorry, the job’s been taken”, although the post would be advertised for weeks afterwards. She often put this refusal down to problems with language. Something of the greatest importance for both my parents was that they had not been allowed to get a university education and, for my mother, that she had to take work here which did not match her school education and intellectual abilities.

How did you learn Swiss German? What language did you speak at home?

We always spoke Hungarian at home. My parents made the intelligent decision to speak the language they knew well with their children. We wouldn’t learn any bad German from them. Then there was the language that was spoken outside. As children, we couldn’t tell that one was Hungarian and the other was German. Then we learned German in kindergarten. We also attended courses in Swiss German and picked the language up easily. And there was no great problem at school when it came to writing High German. Very often we had an advantage, because colloquial Swiss German was not so familiar to us that it interfered with the written language.

How old were you when you felt that Swiss German and High German were your own languages? Or have they remained to some degree foreign?

No, they haven’t remained foreign. There was even a time when Swiss German dominated very strongly, simply because that was what we spoke most frequently. At that time it was also the language which I spoke with my brother. With our parents, however, we always spoke Hungarian. When I was 13 or 14 years old I began just to speak Hungarian with my brother.

Why?

Beforehand, we had chosen which language to speak depending on the topic, and we had also mixed the languages. If the word ‘sheet’ came more easily in German, for instance, we’d simply take ‘sheet’ as a German word into a Hungarian text. Another strong connection was with the Hungarian scouts. They were forbidden in Hungary during the communist era. In exile, Hungarian scout groups formed all over the world which, as well as the well-known scout tradition, wanted to pass on the language and the culture. From the age of 13 or 14 we took on leading roles, and my brother and I had to speak on various topics that cropped up. That was naturally a Hungarian issue.

When did you first visit Hungary?

In my first year of school, to visit my grandparents. We didn't go to Hungary every holiday. Unlike others, I could never say: "we're going home". Because I've never lived there, it's not my home. It's the country I come from. Sure, I idealise it. It means something to me. I say that my roots are there.

What does "the ideal Hungary" mean, then?

The relations, for one thing. We were a small nuclear family here. When schoolfriends used to complain: "oh, another family get-together", I used to be envious. If you grow up as a second-generation child, you hear a lot about the past: "at your age we experienced such and such. That was the war. Russian soldiers lived in our parlour when we were children. Father was taken away . . ." If you always get this, you have the feeling that you yourself are so naïve and inexperienced. Weak. You have no arguments against it. You have, as it were, experienced nothing. We are wrapped in cotton wool in our world. I always believed that life in Hungary was somehow harder, not wrapped in cotton wool like here. I also felt that things there had an inherent value. For instance, material values: when the borders went up, people were really pleased with packages such as tetrapacks and packs of yoghurt. While here I just see that we're producing more waste. So it's a different set of values. They valued it more because everything wasn't taken for granted.

Has your picture of Hungary changed since then?

Yes. For instance, the idea that all Hungarians are good people, because all the Hungarians I met in Switzerland were friendly, was one that I gave up when I understood that this is not the case. I also saw the political change, the way that a predatory capitalism broke out following the end of Soviet communism. I suddenly noticed that the country was losing its unique qualities and that its culture was being sold out. That was very distressful. Earlier I had always believed that I am actually a Hungarian, and that when I go on holiday to Hungary I am, in a sense, going back. And at some time I realised that I do not belong there at all, but was socialised here and that there I'm a westerner. There I am the Swiss woman. There I belong to those who left and made a great life for themselves abroad and now, with their good education and knowledge of Hungarian, come back and want to take the jobs of those who stayed. I've come across such thinking there, and it's understandable. I have the bad conscience that the well-off often have about third-world countries.

What does it mean to you to live in Switzerland and be Swiss?

I've been a Swiss citizen since I was small. For me, being Swiss is a positive thing. Hungarian culture broadened my horizons. I value Switzerland greatly, because I have had so many opportunities here, such as the standard of living, and the way that you're left in peace and can do your own thing. I can study, or work, or, for example, open a firm, if I want. I really appreciate that.

If you have the choice to stay here in Switzerland and continue working as a secondary school teacher or to go to Hungary, where are you drawn to?

I'm not drawn anywhere. I feel obliged to live neither in Hungary nor in Switzerland. I have the choice. It's an advantage if I choose one of these countries to live in, but in principle I could also choose a third. Each scenario has its pros and cons. I'd have no problem, with my language training and knowledge of Hungarian, if I went to Hungary. There are lots of companies which are setting up offices in Hungary. As the second generation we have a great opportunity to be go-betweens there. That would be a possibility. The question is whether I could really back the firm I'd work for, and whether I'd be taking someone's job away.

Is there a common feeling among people of the second generation?

I often wonder what my students think when I tell them my name in the first lesson. Often children who also have foreign names begin to smile: "aha, she's one of us". And I also have the idea that maybe the parents of Swiss children think: "aha, even the secondary school teachers are foreigners". On the other hand, you're also a role model for children, so that they can say "a foreigner's child can also become a secondary school teacher".

Second-generation people often understand each other better. They often have similar difficulties, similar thoughts, and have had to work through the same conflicts between family, background culture and the world in which we live here. Chances to work, and a certain choice of opportunities to work, are things second-generation people value most.

What should the host society do to make immigrants feel at ease? And what must immigrants bring so that they can feel at ease here?

On the one hand, there has to be enough space for the culture of origin here. If, as a child, I was mocked for being Hungarian, that was pretty serious. There has to be a readiness not only to express the new culture but also to give the old culture its place. In contrast to earlier times, the possibility exists today both to teach and to learn the culture of origin. We did that at the scouts. If this isn't possible, one day the need to live out one's identity will erupt. In my childhood I often experienced what immigrants must bring with them. It was said again and again: "you have to do play four roles: as a person, as a woman, as a representative of your

nation and as a representative of foreigners in general". Because if you work badly, then people say: "that's what Hungarians do". This led not to us being rebellious but thankful for what was possible here, and we tried to fit in.

Do you follow integration issues actively or do you abstain from politics?

I'm an active observer. As I interpret what my parents experienced and draw conclusions of my own, I see on the one hand the importance of politics for the individual. On the other hand, a party, an active political participation, is somehow repellent to me. I often ask myself, too, whether as a foreigner I have the right to join debates here. For instance at the school, in emotional discussions about foreigners, I've said to myself that I'm a foreigner myself, and so have not joined in, even though I have a Swiss passport. These are things that stay with you. And I've also seen the very strong patriotism that occurs in exile. Because when one has had to leave a country against one's will, there are very strong bonds with this country.

Is there not a danger that by idealising one's origins they can become an overpowering factor when sorting out one's own identity?

Growing up in the second generation affected me more strongly than my parents' origins. Another seminal issue was that my parents had not been able to study. The question of whether I'm Hungarian or Swiss isn't so relevant right now. There was a phase in which I questioned who I am very intensively. Then I tried to form my own connections to Hungary through a children's home project in Hungary: in a two-year project we collected money to restructure a children's home in the east of Hungary, the most backward part of the country. I wanted to make my own connections and to get to know this country myself. I also tried to study and to do a dissertation in Hungary. It didn't always work; it was an attempt to make contact. Afterwards I asked myself whether I belong here. With my background, with my attitude, though, I noticed that I have in part different approaches to things, different views. If people ask me whether I'm Hungarian or Swiss, I simply say that I'm a second-generation Hungarian in Switzerland.

Is there a possibility that second-generation people in Switzerland see themselves as a group and could exert an influence on the cohabitation of cultures here in Switzerland?

I hope so. It depends on how these people deal with their cultures of origin, to what extent they are ready, or obliged, to adopt the culture here, and how far the whole thing does not become a hotchpotch, a McDonaldisation.

How do you envisage the future in a multiethnic Switzerland, in Europe? Which themes interest you in relation to a multiethnic society?

It strikes me that certain nations, for example the Swiss, tend to be a little ashamed of their nationality. If Swiss people are asked to sing a folksong, for instance, they say: “no, I can’t”, or “no, I don’t want to”. In contrast the exiles know their folksongs, they have a certain pride in their culture, because it can’t necessarily be lived out, because they have had to work for it. As soon as someone has to work hard for something, they have some pride in it. Within Europe I see, on the one hand, efforts to do away with borders, to create something great. And within this greatness there is an ever stronger eruption of nationalism: small groups who wish to define themselves strongly within this amalgamation, who want to assert their rights. The difficulty is that the abolition of borders is an economic process, while the other is an emotional process. I’m afraid that this may lead to a conflict.

In Switzerland too?

Yes, in a certain sense. I wonder how the individual groups of the foreign population in Switzerland will express themselves. How strongly they will represent this exiles’ patriotism, which is stronger than the national feeling within the state itself. Will the groups be open to each other, or will they bring with them the conflicts they have experienced in their home states? If a particular background is present, the possibility occurs that energy will be free for this national thing. The people who were active in the Hungarian clubs must also have given a certain significance to the real Hungary to maintain these clubs. These energies could also be used to distance oneself from others.

