

Thea W.

"My social network gives me the feeling that I'm at home here."



Thea W., f., born in Gosheim in the Swabian Alps in Germany in 1958, in Zurich since 1980

What sort of family and place do you come from?

I grew up in Gosheim, in the Swabian Alps. I have two older sisters and two younger brothers. My father had a handicrafts business. My mother helped out: she made curtains and later worked in a factory. We could visit her at her workplace. At lunchtime everyone came home. That was usual in the country, that you went home at lunchtime. In Germany you go to nursery school from three years old, which often means for the mother that she can go back to work part-time. The village developed from a farming village into a characterless industrial village. Both my parents came from a farming background. My mother came from the Black Forest to Gosheim, where she met my father, who was from there.

Were there particular places in Gosheim that were of significance to you as a child?

My father's workshop, which lay right next to the railway line: a wooden shed, which we as children often went to. Sometimes we had to help out. Then there was my grandmother, who'd often sit on a bench in front of the house just watching the world go by. Lastly, I remember my parents' house, with a huge garden, in which we planted everything we needed for living. Even today I think the strawberries from there are the best in the world, even if they never ripened.

I was raised as a Catholic, and that was an inherent part of our lives. On Sunday we went to church. And during the week each had their role to play.

What values were you given?

Faith and honesty. As a negative image the example of factory owners was presented to us, people who didn't go to church any more, had only pleasures in mind and for whom money played an important role.

One political event which I remember clearly was the Russian occupation of Czechoslovakia in 1968. My father was very worried that the Russians might invade us. We went over the railway line, I sat on his shoulders, and he told me about this fear of war, and from the overall fear of Communism. He'd been drafted in the Second World War as a 16-year-old. My mother used to describe many experiences of the war years too.

I recognised then that one can't simply say of this generation: "you're guilty. You knew what was happening." I used to ask: "why didn't they do anything?" They weren't able to organise themselves. They couldn't even grasp what was actually happening. For instance, in Rexingen, a village down in the valley near where my mother lived, there were a lot of Jews. During the war, they dropped leaflets over Rexingen that said: "*Rexingen im Loch, wir holen dich doch*" ("Rexingen in the hole, we'll get you"). In the end all the Jewish inhabitants were taken away on transports. Their properties were auctioned off; the money probably ended up in the SS's coffers. My mother's father bought a flower stand. I simply didn't understand why he did that and didn't resist the deportations. But they probably didn't know what was really going on in Auschwitz and Dachau.

What's more, it has to be said that the south of Germany didn't vote for Hitler. My mother always told me, too, that when Hitler came to the neighbouring small town, she didn't go to see him. What was also important for her was that the priest hadn't voted for the National Socialists.

As a youngster, what did you want to become?

I went to school until the leaving certificate. In fact, I wanted to be an actress. So as to get the better of the constant fear that I couldn't express myself or take on other roles. I really liked a figure such as Frisch's "Stiller": quitting the role allocated to him. I see this in my work at the hospital; when an alcoholic comes in, he's always an alcoholic. One rarely gets the chance in life to really do something different. Perhaps that's why I left Germany. Beginning something new wasn't exactly encouraged by my parents.

How did things go after school?

My parents didn't force me in any particular direction. After school I was sixteen and went to work in the factory to pass the time until I knew how I should go on. It was expected of us to go to work. The time in the factory was terrible, above all because of the boring work. At first I'd keep myself amused with calculations, e.g., how much I'd produce over ten years. At the same time I got information about other options. Near Gosheim there was a full-time school that had been established by the Catholic church. I looked after children there who at fifteen were hardly younger than myself. I also tried the social field, which was the training I wanted to take. I had read somewhere of the occupation of social education worker. I applied for the voluntary social year and came to Bad Durrheim to an institution where children from all over Germany were given therapies for all sorts of reasons. I earned 80 marks per month on work experience there. I enjoyed it, and I thought of working with children in the future in the field of social education. After about half a year, the decision to become a nurse happened. I was with my mother at the employment office where a brochure came into my hands. My mother said: "that'd be something for you". We went to Rottweil, where we were met by a nun. She could imagine straight away how I'd look in a bonnet and so made sure that I could do the training as a nurse. In 1976 - you have to be eighteen years old - I started my training.

The hospital in Rottweil was run by nuns. Practically all the wards, and the school administration, were managed by nuns. The headmistress was naïve; she believed the world just stood still. Once when on the way to church she came across a new sex bar, she phoned them up and complained that it would do us girls no good to have to pass by there. We had a very strict timetable. We were expected to be in the church from 6.15 until 6.45 and then to begin work at 7 o'clock. So we had just ten minutes to eat something. There was a rigid hierarchy, also among the doctors, who were all men. When the boss came on a visit, he'd snap his fingers and we nurses would disappear with our buckets and be seen no more. We were also told that we were not allowed to speak with the doctors. We were not to discuss any private matters with patients - and we weren't allowed to eat in front of patients either. Once I ate an apple and a patient said to me: "you enjoyed that, Sister Thea". I was ashamed, because it was forbidden. Everything was so regimented that I had stomach ache for three years.

On the other hand, this regime encouraged cohesion between us. I lived with my colleague in a small room. We're still in contact today. The school administration even exerted an influence over the decoration of our rooms. I had put up a picture of a woman smoking a joint. That was criticised. After that my friend and I were always trying to rebel. For instance, one time we were dealing with the issue of abortion. Although I'd never had any firm opinion on the question before, I argued that there are reasons which make abortion necessary. The nuns were absolutely appalled that I could even imagine such reasons might exist.

I found the training to be very far-reaching and restrictive. Because at the same time, I was in touch with the political and cultural movement of the middle 70s through my two sisters who were living in Stuttgart, with Brechtian theatre, anti-nuclear demonstrations, and discussions about anti-authoritarian upbringing. They opened up new perspectives for me. The term "*emanzipatorische Erziehung*" ("emancipatory upbringing") made a deep impression: upbringing not as domination and command, but as a process to which children as well as their parents could contribute a part.

I got to know an acquaintance of my sister's and could also discuss politics with him. It was new to me at this time that one could talk with men like that. That had never happened in contact with my peers before. I don't come from a household in which much was discussed, either.

What happened after your training?

I knew that I wanted to go, immediately. Straight after my training I found a post in a cardiovascular rehabilitation centre in Bad Krozingen, between Freiburg and Basel. I stayed there a year, from 1979 to 1980. I experienced a change; as a nurse I now had another position, we were no longer regimented, and we could speak to the doctors. At Bad Krozingen I met a man who worked in neurosurgery in Zurich and told me about it. I thought: "Zurich is exactly where I want to be". I remembered that I had visited an aunt of my mother's there as a twelve-year-old, and that I'd liked it very much. So I applied and came to Zurich in 1980.

What did you do at first, and how did you find Zurich?

I lived in nurses' quarters together with three Swiss. We hardly had any contact. From others that lived with Germans, I heard that they spoke together a lot more. I identified myself very strongly with the Germans and the other foreigners. When I had longer periods off, I used to go home or to Stuttgart. I had the feeling that I was here above all to work. I noticed that I was a stranger here - more so than in Bad Krozingen. And because of the language I was seen as a foreigner. On the telephone one time someone told me that he didn't speak with Germans. Another one wouldn't let a flat to me later on because I was German.

I was also made aware by the medical examination at the border that I had come into another country where I would be checked and investigated, and where, for instance, dark-skinned people were tested for tuberculosis. The first form that I had to fill out alienated me; one had to be "single and childless" to be able to work here. I noticed for the first time that one had to meet conditions. In the first three months, during the probationary period, I had the feeling that I had to adapt more.

I came to know a Czech medical student at the hospital. He had an asylum-seeker's passport. He was very interested in politics. He made me a little more familiar with Zurich, and also with the political scene. I came to know the *Autonome Jugendzentrum* (autonomous youth centre) with him. I followed this 80s movement, but I always felt like an observer. That was my first contact with the population of Zurich. Once when I was with this Czech on the street, the police drove up and fired teargas grenades at the people. I felt powerless, and that gave me solidarity with the other young people. We ran immediately; I was frightened that they could take me to the border. I don't now whether that would have happened. But I knew that he was a foreigner, and I was a foreigner, and we couldn't be involved here.

On the other hand, through a colleague I also came into contact with the women's movement. Those were the two places which brought me closer to Switzerland and to Zurich. At that time I had no Swiss acquaintances. If I was alone in the city, I felt excluded. I had the feeling that I didn't belong here, that I had no history here and that I was a stranger.

Did you experience tangible disadvantages as a foreigner here?

Yes. For instance, I was paid lower wages than the Swiss. And I couldn't simply change my job. One is always part of a quota and must apply for the work and residence permits every year. For the first five years I just got the stamp and hoped for a new residence permit. So I lived in an interim for years. I still did the training for intensive care and didn't know whether I would go back to Germany afterwards. On the other hand I found the working conditions better. I observed a higher estimation for the nursing profession here. I could take more time for the patients and found more opportunities to put into practice what I'd learned. The work here seemed to me to be more professional.

How did your connections in Zurich continue to develop? Was there a moment when you thought you would be here now?

Yes. When I asked at the *Kantonalen Maturitätsschule für Erwachsene* (KME - a college of adult education) whether I could do my *Matura* (general qualification for university entrance) there. And I suddenly discovered that it was possible for a foreigner. That was a great feeling. Then they told me that, as a foreigner, I wouldn't get any student grant. Nonetheless, I'd have no fees to pay, since I'd paid tax for two years here. That was the moment when I asked myself whether I should stay here or go back. I also asked myself, where in Germany? My friends in the village had long since moved away, and I could also stay in contact with my friends in Stuttgart from here. I often used to travel on the late train around midnight back to Germany, and I thought it was cool to travel at night and listen to music alone. It gave me a feeling of freedom. With the wages that I earned here I could also do more than I could have done on German wages.

Since I didn't pass the first exams at the KME, I took algebra and geometry courses and went to France twice for French courses. My Czech friend supported me. I worked 40 percent at the hospital and did the KME at the same time. I often went to scene bars with my friend to take part in discussions. In the meantime I'd found out where you could get left-wing books. My friend had grown up in a very critical milieu, and he could communicate this to me, although I hadn't been particularly politicised. I came further and further into the Zurich community in this way, and also through the KME, where I found other people who weren't conformists but had stepped out of their predicted career paths. I was also in a choir, and I brushed up my guitar playing. I thought it was great to be in a place where I could say: "this is where I did my school and got my *Matura*". I grew into it step by step. And I also knew all the expressions and abbreviations such as "*Handsgi*" (handicrafts) or "*Soz*" (Sociological Institute).

While I was at the KME, I separated from my friend. It troubled me that he wasn't rooted here, but always stayed in that observer role, wasn't really involved with anyone and actually couldn't integrate himself. I met my future husband at the KME. After the training we first went on a biking tour through Australia, and then I wanted to study. In 1991, after the birth of our daughter, we married, and so I gained dual citizenship. That is a great status. Purely formally I can stay German and finally have the possibility of voting in Switzerland. I thought it important before that one should vote in the country one lives in. Since I gained dual citizenship I haven't missed a single vote here. I also got a grant, which enabled me to cut my work to 20 percent. I don't know if I could have done it, working so much, studying and looking after the child. The grant helped me to finish my studies with a bit less stress.

What did you study?

At first I chose philosophy as my main subject - largely because I was envious of my philosophically well-versed ex-friend. In the seventh or eighth semester I switched to Sociology as a main subject with European Folk Literature as a minor subject: firstly, because I didn't have time to study all the important philosophers as well as working and looking after my daughter, and secondly because my observer role as a foreigner fitted in with sociology very well. I stood between the two countries. I'm neither German nor Swiss. I grew up in Germany and lived in Zurich. Given the background of my origin, society interested me as a phenomenon: I wanted to understand what it consisted of, how it functioned.

I always took up issues which were either to do with Germany or the women's movement or the 68 movement: with the stations through which I had moved in my life. For instance the autonomy of the new women's movement. It has always been important to me to find out something of the women's movement in Switzerland. At the same time, I wanted to know how it was in Germany.

I can't say today whether I will one day go back to Germany. I have the possibility, and that's good to know.

What's your experience of Swiss people and foreigners living together?

On the institutional side a lot of effort is made toward integration. At the grass roots there are limits, on both the Swiss and on the foreign sides. Some ethnic groups aren't interested in life here. They don't want their children to learn anything from the Swiss. In my daughter's school about half the children are foreigners. But a lot is being done there to encourage integration. There are smaller classes. They make sure that everyone speaks the same language - not simply German as a language of communication, but also very specific vocabulary. Care is taken, for instance, that "Tamil" is not used as an insult.

Do you feel connected with people of other nations?

I once sat in a train in Germany with a Sardinian opposite me. He told me how long he had been travelling, of his brothers who had emigrated, of homesickness. It all seemed to me to be very familiar. I know, of course, that there is a hierarchy among foreigners here. As a German I'm at the top, I don't belong to those foreigners who come from completely strange cultures, and I don't have any problems making myself understood. I've also always made efforts to get to know the various dialects and different histories and sayings, so as to broaden my picture and discover similarities between Switzerland and Germany.

What would you wish for the peaceful coexistence of the various cultures here in Switzerland and in Europe?

In the first place, tolerance, particularly in respect of religion and culture. Mutual concern. So that people don't think: "what we've got is worth more than what they've got". And that people stop behaving as though one were better than other groups. And a mutual coming together. There are great handicaps on both sides. Swiss women that come from other regions and have through internal migration experienced the feeling of being strange to a place, are more open.

What tends to make you feel at home here in Switzerland?

My family is very important. If I go to my mother, I'm also at home. If I go to my sisters, I feel just as comfortable, especially in their house. Here I have friends, connections at my daughter's school and at the hospital. So I have a social network here, histories in common with people that live here and that are rooted here. And that definitely gives me the feeling that I'm integrated and at home here.

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Nigg, Heinz (1999) Here and away. Living in two worlds. Zurich: www.migrant.ch
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