

Ruth D.

"I knew from the start: this is the city for me."



Ruth D., f., born in Hagen, Germany in 1935, in Zurich since 1961

Where do you come from?

From Hagen in Westphalia. Hagen is a little industrial place. At that time it had about 160,000 inhabitants. I lived in a suburb there with my parents, my grandmother and my half-sister. For a while I also lived with a sister of my mother's. We had a big garden with thirty fruit trees and lots of shrubs. There were niches in the garden where I could sit on a little footstool. I wasn't allowed to sit on the ground at all. In the Ruhr the ground's always a bit dirty from the coal dust. I could invite friends into the garden. The property was surrounded by a large privet hedge. Through the gaps in the hedge we could look out onto the street and watch people, giggling and whispering. I felt safe there.

But there were fears. I was born in 1935, and the war began in 1939. On evenings when there was an air raid warning, we had to pack our things and spend the night in the cellar. I had a little suitcase of necessities. Because I was the youngest of the family, they often put me to bed early down in the cellar on one of those bunk-beds. I was often frightened there. I knew the others were enjoying themselves upstairs, and there was I in the dark cellar. Later, when it got more dangerous, we went into the Stollen, which are chalk-pits, where we were safe from the air raids. In 1943 the town centre was very badly damaged in a bombing raid. Our district was only partially affected.

Then the government announced that it was too dangerous for schoolchildren to stay in the Ruhr region, and we were evacuated. My mother, my sister and I went to Pomerania. I lived there for two years, and it is almost the most beautiful time I can recall. This Kolberg¹, the

¹ Since 1945, Kołobrzeg in Poland

Baltic Sea, the white beach. My mother, who always sheltered me very much, began to work half-days there as a secretary. So I had a lot more freedom.

What did your father do for a living?

He was a civil engineer and did a lot of his written work at home. His desk was in the conservatory, and next to it there was a little table. When he was working, I used mostly to sit at the little table and draw too - for instance, my first floor plans.

How were things after the war?

The journey from Pomerania took several weeks. We ended up in a little backwater in Sauerland. It took about six weeks for my father just to track us down. We arrived just before the end of the war, on 4th or 5th May, in Landemert. In July we were back in Hagen. Our house was still standing. American soldiers had been quartered in the detached houses all around. They had set up their kitchen in one of them. We had practically nothing to eat. They used to throw their leftovers into holes in the garden, pour petrol over them and burn them, so that we Germans, the defeated enemy, would have nothing from them. There was this black guy among the cooks. I often used to stand at the fence and look over when he brought out the leftovers and threw them in the hole. One day, he had a 500 gram tin can with him; he looked at me and put it on the hedge. Then he went off. The tin was about one-third full of scrambled eggs. Scrambled eggs made with sugar. We'd never had that. After that he'd leave a tin out for me every day. That was how I came to try, for instance, pork with apple sauce. As a soldier the black guy could have been punished for that, he took a risk.

I had a wound on my knee, and it wouldn't heal. The black guy noticed this and took me to the medics. They treated me with penicillin. A doctor told me later that this probably saved my leg.

I've noticed since that I like black people a lot, and that I feel drawn to them. On holidays or in England I've had a lot of contact with black people. As I remembered this story again, I realised there's a connection to this.

Something of the fears of those years has remained too. There was a military show in Zurich one time. It was great fun for my daughters to climb on the tanks, but my heart nearly stopped. Then came an air display over the lake. I could barely stand it. I could have screamed. I hurried home afterwards. It's very important that people speak about traumatic experiences and don't bottle everything up.

What schools did you attend?

I started school in Hagen, and went to primary school there for two years. I had another year of school in Kolberg. Then there was the journey back, so that actually I had three years of elementary school. In 1946 the first grammar school, a convent school, reopened. I was there for six years, until first leaving certificate. Then, at the age of 16, I wanted to do an apprenticeship in civil engineering. My parents were aghast: me, a woman, amongst all those rough, blunt builders. So I attended the commercial college for two years. The qualification corresponds to a commercial diploma here in Switzerland.

After that I worked at the town savings bank in Hagen for seven years. In my last three years there I was a cashier. It was very demanding and hectic compared to later in Switzerland.

In the meantime I had met some young men. Most of my friends were engaged or married, apart from me. I'd not yet - at least, in my mother's eyes - met the right man. Shortly after I'd broken up with another one and a girlfriend of mine and I felt the need for a change, we heard that it was also possible to work in Switzerland. We sent applications to various banks, and it worked. Fourteen days later we got word from the Volksbank that we could start work there. I only wanted to stay a year so as to get better prospects of further education in Germany.

Can you still remember your first day in Switzerland?

We moved into a room in Seefeld and then made our way to find our new place of work. Thus we took our first stroll along Bahnhofstrasse and found the Volksbank there. As I crossed Quaibrücke for the first time, I was completely stunned: the view of the Limmat below, the city, the Grossmünster, and then the lake beyond . . . I knew from the start: this is the city for me. I would stay here. I walked to the bank every day and I thought to myself every day: this is the city for me.

I soon met my future husband. He showed us the Sechseläuten parade. Actually, I wasn't interested in him, but strangely he had no interest in my girlfriend. He seemed to be much more interested in me. At the beginning I often told him I had no time. Finally, I thought I could at least meet him so that he could show me Zurich and something of Switzerland. So we met each other quite often and I travelled a lot during the first year, with him or my girlfriend: Baden, Solothurn, Olten, Freiburg, Geneva, Lausanne, Neuchâtel, Lugano, Locarno and Liechtenstein. Everywhere we found in the travel guide, in fact.

How were the first two or three months for a German in Switzerland?

At the beginning, of course, I couldn't understand a word. They all spoke dialect in the office. It took two or three months before I could follow a conversation to some degree. My husband always spoke High German with me, though, and straight away explained the differences

between the dialect and High German. At first, by and large, Swiss acquaintances adjusted the way they spoke for me: it sometimes sounded as though they were reading me an essay. I missed all spontaneity when High German was spoken. That's why I prefer it, even today, when Swiss people keep on using their dialect for longer conversations. That way, everyone express themselves clearly. That's the best for communicating. It allows less confusion, even though I'm aware that, when I first open my mouth, there is an obstacle to be overcome for the Swiss. There are a lot of Swiss who don't like speaking High German. My mother in law always says: "I'd rather speak French than High German". Probably it's often felt by Swiss people to be a necessity, a conforming. And I don't want this kind of conformity.

What sort of image did you have of the Swiss when you still lived in Germany and hadn't seen Switzerland?

I'd read a travel guide about Zurich in Germany. It said that about 50 millionaires lived in the city. I imagined that there were very rich people there. I imagined Bahnhofstrasse as very elitist, because it was said to be the most expensive shopping street in Europe. Otherwise, Switzerland was a holiday destination, although ordinary Germans couldn't holiday there because it was so expensive. So I was all the more surprised that we were able to travel so much. If you know where to look, you can travel in Switzerland on a low budget.

What was your contact with the Swiss like?

At work there was no contact at all with Swiss people in the first months, but we had contact with other foreigners: mostly Austrians and Germans and a few from Sweden. But it was difficult to get into contact with the Swiss. I don't know if it was just to do with the language, or whether the Swiss were more reserved. But because I met my husband so quickly, I soon had contact with Swiss people and also met families. But there was no direct contact with Swiss people from my side in the first years. That only came after I was married and had the children.

How were you accepted among your husband's family and acquaintances?

Actually they all thought I was really nice, because I wasn't a typical German - whatever that means.

Are there things in Switzerland to which you are particularly attracted, and are there others which give you trouble even today?

The landscape certainly attracted me, especially the Zurich area. The historical growth of the city is visible, something which the great German cities lost in the war. And also, oddly, the reserve and taciturnity of the Swiss. Because of this, I can also be reticent when I choose,

while in Germany this is far less possible. I always had the impression in Germany that I had to be extroverted.

What experience did you have of anti-German sentiment after the war?

In the beginning, if I took a stroll by the lake in the evening with my friend and we chatted in High German, it could happen that suddenly people behind us would say: "*Schon wieder diese Sauschwaben*" ("more of these bloody Swabians"). At first I didn't understand what they meant at all. I'm not a Swabian at all, I'm from Westphalia. Then I realised that they just meant Germans. After that I'd turn right around and say "I'm no bloody Swabian, I'm a Prussian", even though I'd never until then laid claim to being Prussian. I simply had the feeling that I had to contradict them somehow. I wouldn't let them abuse me just because of my language.

One time this happened to me in a flat we were moving into. I'd just cleaned the laundry when someone patted me on the shoulder and said: "good job. But then, the Germans always made good housemaids." I felt that was degrading. When I once complained about anything, it was: "you would've done better to stay in Germany."

I also tried to get involved in politics. Then they said: "if you want to get involved in politics, you should do it in Germany, not here. We don't need it here". These are hostile remarks. But it depends very much on your own sensitivity, whether you feel insecure just because someone says: "you're a foreigner". You can also say: "I'm a foreigner, and I bring my own story with me".

What do you feel you are today?

If I'm on holiday in Germany, I'm quick to say: "I'm from Switzerland". And then they say: "But are you originally from Germany?" So abroad I say I'm Swiss. I also feel Swiss in Switzerland, because I'm interested in what happens here in Switzerland, especially what happens in the city of Zurich, both culturally and politically. I like to belong to it and join in with it. So first of all I'm a zuricher, even if it doesn't sound like it. I'm a zuricher with all my heart.

As regards foreigners, has the climate in Zurich changed since the 60s and 70s?

Yes, but not in the direction I'd have wished. Germans, Austrians or English are perceived as less of a foreign threat. But when someone comes from former Yugoslavia, or Turkey, or a third-world country, then they have to deal with a lot of resentment. It's disturbing that someone who comes from an economically more significant country is also treated as a more significant person, that your humanity is not important, but the economic background you're

from. A lot more tolerance and acceptance is needed. After all, people don't leave their homelands on a whim.

How are your and your daughters' connections with Germany?

I have no close relatives there any more. I still have school-friends I'm in contact with, who visit me here and whom I visit there. And my daughters maintain their contact with the children of this school-friend. My daughters value this connection; they see it as an expansion of their horizons. Their opinion is that they get new ideas and experience greater diversity through this.

Have you looked for contact with other Germans here in Zurich or has it developed spontaneously?

I haven't looked for it, but it arises very quickly from the language of its own accord. You talk a lot about yourself then. Today I'm still in contact with Germans or former Germans. There is a woman who lives here in Witikon who lived 100 metres from me in my home town, and now lives about 500 metres from me here. Our parents were friendly with each other.

