Homecoming

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Translated from the German by Michael Henry Heim

Published by Weidenfeld & Nicolson

Extract

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I

WHEN I WAS YOUNG, I spent the summer holidays with my grandparents in Switzerland. My mother would take me to the station and put me on the train, and when I was lucky I could stay put and arrive six hours later at the platform where Grandfather would be waiting for me. When I was less lucky, I had to change trains at the border. Once I took the wrong train and sat there in tears until a friendly conductor dried them and after a few stations put me on another train, entrusting me to another conductor, who then in similar fashion passed me on to the next, so that I was transported to my goal by a whole relay of conductors.

I enjoyed those train trips: the vistas of passing towns and landscapes, the security of the compartment, the independence. I had ticket and passport, food and reading; I needed no one and had no one telling me what to do. In the Swiss trains I missed the compartments, but then every seat was either a window or aisle seat and I didn't need to fear being squeezed between two people. Besides, the bright wood of the Swiss seats was smarter than the red-brown German plastic, just as the gray of the coaches, the trilingual inscription "SBB—CFF—FFS," and the coat of arms with the white cross in the red field were nobler than the dirty green with the inscription "DB." I was proud to be half Swiss even though I was more at home with both the shabbiness of the German trains and the shabbiness of the city my mother and I lived in and the people we lived with.

The station of the city on the lake, the goal of my journey, was the end of the line. The moment I set foot on the platform I couldn't miss Grandfather: he was a tall, powerful man with dark eyes, a bushy white mustache, and a bald pate, wearing an off-white linen jacket and straw hat and carrying a walking stick. He radiated reliability. I thought of him as tall even after I outgrew him and powerful even after he had to lean on the walking stick. As late as my student days he would occasionally take my hand during our walks. It made me uncomfortable but did not embarrass me.

My grandparents lived a few towns away on the lake, and when the weather was fine Grandfather and I would take the boat there rather than the train. The boat I liked best was the big old paddle-steamer, the one that let you see the engine's glistening oil-coated bronze-and-steel rods and cages in the middle at work. It had many decks, covered and uncovered. We would stand on the open foredeck, breathe the wind in, and watch the small towns appear and disappear, the gulls circle the ship, the sailboats flaunt their billowing sails, and the water-skiers perform their tricks. Sometimes we could make out the Alps behind the hills, and Grandfather would identify the peaks by name. Each time I found it a miracle that the path of light cast by the sun on the water, glistening serenely in the middle and shattering into prancing slivers on the edges, followed along with the boat. I am certain that Grandfather explained to me early on that it had its basis in optics, but even today I perceive it as a miracle. The path of light begins wherever I happen to be.

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IN THE SUMMER of my eighth year my mother had no money for a ticket. She found a long-distance truck driver—I have no idea how—to take me to the border and hand me over to another driver, who would drop me off at my grandparents' house.

We were to meet at the freight depot. My mother was busy and could not stay. She deposited me and my suitcase at the entrance and ordered me not to budge from the spot. I stood there anxiously watching each passing truck, relieved and discouraged in turn they passed. They were bigger and made more of a racket and stink than I had realized: they were monsters.

I don't know how long I waited. I was too young to have a watch. After a while I perched on my suitcase and jumped up whenever a truck seemed to slow down and want to stop. Finally one did stop, and the driver hoisted me and the suitcase into the cabin, and his mate placed me in the bed behind the seat. They told me to keep my mouth shut and my head below the side of the bed and sleep. It was still light, but even after it got dark I couldn't sleep. At first the driver or his mate would turn and curse me if my head stuck up above the bed; then they forgot about me, and I could look outside.

My field of vision was narrow, but I was able to watch the sun go down through the passenger-seat window. I caught only fragments of the conversation between the driver and his mate: it had to do with the Americans and the French, deliveries and payments. I was almost lulled to sleep by the regularly recurring sound, the regular, restrained tremor of the truck as it passed over the large slabs forming the surface of the Autobahn in those days. But the Autobahn soon came to an end, and we drove over bad, hilly country roads, where the driver could not dodge the potholes and was constantly shifting gears. It was an uneasy journey through the night.

The truck kept stopping: faces would appear in the side windows, the driver and his mate would climb in and out, let down the tailboard, shove the cargo around and restack it. Many of the stops were factories and warehouses with bright lights and loud voices; others were dark filling stations, rest areas, and open fields. The driver and his mate may well have combined their official duties with a bit of business on the side—smuggling or fencing—which lengthened their time on the road.

In any case, by the time we reached the border, the truck I was supposed to meet had left and I spent the dawn hours in a town whose name I do not recall. The main square had a church, a new building or two, and many roofless buildings with empty windows. As it began to get light, people came to set up a market, hauling sacks, crates, and baskets on large, flat, two-wheeled carts, to which they had hitched themselves between the shafts with loops over their shoulders. All night I had been afraid of the captain and his helmsman, of being attacked by pirates, of having to pee. Now I was afraid both of being picked up by someone who would do as he pleased with me and of going unnoticed, being left to my own devices.

Just as the sun grew so warm that I began to feel uncomfortable on the fully exposed bench, from which I dared not stray, a car with an open top stopped at the side of the road. The driver remained in the car, but the woman beside him got out, put my suitcase in the trunk, and pointed to the backseat. Whether it was the large car, the fancy clothes the driver and his companion wore, the self-assured and nonchalant way they had of moving, or the fact that just over the Swiss border they bought me my very first ice cream—for a long time thereafter I pictured them whenever I heard or read about the rich. Were they smugglers or fences like the truck drivers? I found them equally cre, though they were young and treated me with consideration, like a little brother, and delivered me to my grandparents in time for lunch.

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THE HOUSE MY grandparents lived in had been built by a globe-trotter of an architect: it had eaves supported by artfully hewn wooden struts, a formidable mezzanine bay window, a top-floor balcony adorned with gargoyles, and windows framed by round, stone-in-stone arches—a combination colonial country seat, Spanish fortress, and Romanesque cloister. Yet it held together.

The garden helped to make it a whole: there were two tall fir trees to the left of the house, a large apple tree to the right, a thick old box hedge in front, and wild vines growing up the right side. The garden was spacious: there was a veritable meadow between the street and the house; there were vegetable beds, tomato and bean plants, raspberry, blackberry, and currant bushes, a compost pile to the right of the house, and, to the left a wide gravel path leading to the rear entrance, which was framed by two hydrangea bushes. The gravel would crunch underfoot, and by the time Grandfather and I had reached the entrance Grandmother would have heard us coming and opened the door.

The crunch of the gravel, the buzz of the bees, the scratch of the hoe or rake in the garden—since those summers at my grandparents' these have been summer sounds; the bitter scent of the sun-drenched boxwood, the rank odor of the compost, summer smells; and the stillness of the early afternoon, when no child calls, no dog barks, no wind blows, summer stillness. The street where my mother and I lived was full of traffic. Whenever a tram or truck drove by, the windows rattled, and whenever the machines employed to demolish and reconstruct the neighborhood buildings bombed during the war went into operation, the floors shook. There was little or no traffic where my grandparents lived, neither in front of the house nor in the nearby town. Whenever a horse

and cart drove past, my grandfather would tell me to fetch a shovel and pail and we would coolly collect the dung for the compost pile.

The town had a train station, a landing stage for boats, a few shops, and two or three restaurants, one of which served no alcohol, and my grandparents sometimes took me there for Sunday lunch. Every other day, Grandfather made the rounds of the dairy, the baker's, and the cooperative grocer's, with occasional side trips to the pharmacy or shoemaker's. He wore his off-white linen jacket and a likewise off-white linen cap and carried a notebook that Grandmother had made by sewing together bits and pieces of blank paper and that he used for shopping lists, holding his walking stick in one hand and my hand in the other. I carried the old leather shopping bag, which, since we made the rounds every other day, was never so full as to weigh me down.

Did Grandfather take me shopping every other day just to make me happy? I loved going shopping: the smell of the Appenzeller and Gruyère in the dairy, the scent of the fresh bread in the bakery, the variety and quantity of food in the grocery. It was so much nicer than the small shop my mother sent me to because she could buy on credit there.

After our shopping expedition we would walk to the lake, feed the swans and ducks with stale bread, and watch the boats sail past or take on and let off passengers. I felt the stillness here as well. The waves beating against the seawall—that too was a summer sound.

Then there were the sounds of the evening and the night. I was allowed to stay up until the blackbird had sung. Lying in bed, I heard no cars and no voices; I heard the church bell toll the hour and the train rumble along the tracks between the house and the lake every half hour. First the up-lake station would ring a bell to signal to the down-lake station that the train was leaving; several minutes later a train would pass, and several minutes after that the down-lake station would signal the train's departure. Since the lat-

ter station was farther away than the former, I could barely hear the second bell. Half an hour later the train would come from the down-lake station, the sounds repeating in reverse order. The last train ran shortly after midnight, after which I might hear wind in the trees or rain on the gravel. Otherwise it was perfectly still.

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LYING IN BED, I never heard footsteps on the gravel: my grandparents did not go out in the evening, nor did they have company. Not until I had been with them for several summers did I realize that they spent their evenings working.

At first I gave no thought to how they earned their keep. I could see that they did not earn money like my mother, who left the house in the morning and came back late in the afternoon. I could also see that much though not all of what graced their table came from their garden. I knew by then what pensions were, but never heard my grandparents lament, as I heard elderly people at home lamenting their low pensions, so I never thought of them as pensioners. I never thought of their financial situation at all.

My grandfather left his memoirs when he died. Not until reading them did I learn where he was from, what he had done, and how he had earned his keep. Much as he liked to fill our walks and hikes with stories, he rarely told stories about himself. He would have had many to tell.

He could have told stories about America, for instance, because in the nineties of the nineteenth century, after a landslide that devastated his house and garden and soured him on village life, his father, like many of the villagers, had emigrated there. He took his wife and four children, intending to turn the latter into fine

upstanding Americans. They went by train to Basel, by ship to Cologne, and on to Hamburg, New York, Knoxville, and Handsborough by train, ship, and cart. The memoirs recorded Cologne Cathedral in all its glory, the expanse of the Lüneberger Heath, the sea both calm and stormy, and the welcome given them by the Statue of Liberty and by relatives who had settled in America and either thrived or come to grief. Two of my grandfathers' siblings died in Handsborough, and a hard-hearted relative granted them burial space only next to, not in, his cemetery, and I finally understood why the photograph hanging in my grandparents' bedroom showed a small, attractive cemetery surrounded by a cast-iron grill with a stone gate and two shabby graves set off by boards. The emigrants landed on their feet but were not happy: they were homesick, an illness that can be lethal. Grandfather's memoirs report how often for those who had died in Wisconsin or Tennessee or Oregon the cause of death that was read aloud in the village church or entered into the church records was homesickness. Five years after the six emigrants had set off, four returned with the large trunks the village carpenter had made for them.

My grandfather could also have told stories about Italy and France. After apprenticing as a weaver and spinner, he worked for many years in Turin and Paris, and again his memoirs reveal the interest he took in the sights he saw and the countries and peoples he came to know, the miserable wages, the wretched living conditions, the superstitions of the Piedmontese workers, men and women alike, the conflict between Catholicism and secularization, and the growth of nationalism in France. The memoirs likewise reveal how often he suffered from homesickness. But having assumed the management of a Swiss spinning mill, taken a wife and founded a family, and having bought a house on Swiss soil, he finally felt he was living in accordance with, rather than at odds with, his nature.

When on the eve of the First World War he switched over to a

German mill, he did not have to abandon his homeland: he commuted back and forth over the border until the postwar inflation slashed his income, first in Germany, then, even more, in Switzerland. He tried to spend it as soon as it came in on items of lasting value, and I still have one of the heavy woolen blankets that he acquired in great numbers from a disbanded German horse hospital and that were indestructible. But horse blankets do not nourish a woman who must be strong and healthy to conceive and give birth, and so Grandfather started managing another Swiss mill. He remained true to the Germans, however. He was always moved by the fate of Germans abroad, perhaps because he thought they were as homesick as he so often had been.

He would help Grandmother with the cooking, and one of his duties was to take the round metal sieve with freshly washed lettuce leaves outside and swing it until the leaves were dry. Over and over he would fail to come back in, and Grandmother would send me out for him. I always found him standing in front of the door staring down at the drops now speckling the flagstones. "What's the matter, Grandfather?" The drops reminded him of the Germans scattered over the world.

It was not until after my grandparents had made it through the Great War, the influenza epidemic, and inflation, and after my grandfather had turned the mill into a successful operation, that the son arrived. From that point on there is an occasional snapshot glued into the memoirs: my father with a folded paper cap on his head and a hobbyhorse between his legs, the family seated around the table in the gazebo, my father in suit and tie on his first day at the Gymnasium, the family astride bicycles, each with one foot on the ground and the other on a pedal, as if just about to ride off. Some pictures are simply lying loose: my grandfather as a schoolchild, as a newlywed, as a pensioner, and a few years before his death. He is always staring straight ahead with a serious, sad, lost look, as if he could not see anybody out there. In the last picture a

skinny old-man's neck topped by furrowed face is sticking out of an oversize collar like a tortoise head out of its shell; the eyes are timorous now, reflecting a soul ready to retreat behind stubbornness and a fear of people. He once told me that all his life he had suffered from headaches stretching from the left temple via the left ear to the back of the head, "like a feather in a hat." The word "depression" never came up, and he probably had no idea that a patient claiming to be sad, lost, and timorous might well be diagnosed as having such a condition, though who knew that at the time? Still, it rarely reached the stage that kept him from getting out of bed and working.

He retired at the age of fifty-five. The mill had been merely a way of putting bread on the table: his passions were history, society, politics. He and some friends purchased a newspaper and became its publishers. But their position vis-à-vis Swiss neutrality ran counter to that of public opinion, and their limited financial resources made them vulnerable to the competition. The venture gave him and his friends more pain than joy, and after a few years they were forced to abandon it. But his activities as a newspaper publisher had brought him into contact with book publishers, and the last project he undertook—and worked on every evening with my grandmother—was to edit a collection of short fiction he called *Novels for Your Reading Pleasure and Entertainment.*

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HE LIVED FOR the history that he read in books and that he told me on our walks. No stroll, no hike, no march, as he liked to call them, was complete without a story from Swiss or German history, especially military history. He kept an all-but-inexhaustible trove