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REFUGEE'S REFUGE

John Bendix

Calling it a second 'home' is too strong, or was for my parents, though visitors oohed and aahed at the view no less than they did from the living-room of my parents' 'first' home in California. This second place was for the summers, every now and again the winters, high up in the Alps. For them, it was an annual escape for more than 20 years starting in the mid-1960s. For me, it's been more than 45 years. I know it well, like to be there, but hesitate to call it home: it's too big a claim, even for a repeated visitor, to say one belongs.

In California, guests at the house gazed straight out through the Golden Gate Bridge, across the Bay to the Farallon Islands when the weather was perfect, San Francisco to the left, Mt. Tamalpais to the right, bleached pale at times, smoggy and gray at others, wide and distanced at once. In Switzerland, there were slanted granite mountains beloved by climbers to the left, shaped like the rounded back of some dinosaur, and a set of lower, grass-covered crests, in a green more vibrant than you could ever see in Northern California to the right. Or so my artist mother always said. High above, straight ahead, were four, snow-glinted, glaciated peaks. California expanded your horizon, clear to China, if you wanted your vision to stretch that far, but bleached it out too. Switzerland focused it, made you concentrate, greedily drink in what was right before you: surfaces, altitude, colors, textures, weather. Details.

My father was a man of words, a man of the book. He would have started by using the dictionary, one of his own homes, preferring the precision of definition to the sloppiness of ordinary usage. He would have defined his terms:

A domicile, a place of residence. Yes, it was that, but in any particular year, only a temporary one.

A social unit formed by a family living together. Not really. By the time the Swiss apartment arrangement was established, we children were teens or grown, stopping by on trips from here to there. This wasn't really for parents with children: it was more a place and time for the nucleus, a husband and wife, and visitors, many of them.

A familiar or usual setting, a congenial environment. That it certainly was. My father worked on his articles, his books, his lectures; my mother on her paintings and drawings, discovering eventually that small-scale works were the least complicated, unobtrusive way of pursuing her craft. Locals didn't know much about him: it was enough to know he was well-known, well-respected, that people came from quite far away to visit him up here in the mountains. My father cherished this time of being inaccessible, but also loved the little touches. In the absence of a bank in the village, a call down to the town in the valley would a few hours later result in the postmaster's young daughter appearing at the door and handing him an envelope with the money. Choice cuts of meat would be delivered the same way, as would books from the National Library. If it wasn't delivered, then he had lugged along what he needed for the season, usually in several cardboard boxes. My parents regularly escaped the apartment to take walks on this mountain terrace, to go to the one local store, or, on Sundays, to enjoy the *piccata milanese* at the only hotel nearby, halfway to

the next village. It was always made the same way, week after week, and cost the same amount, year after year. It was a Sunday ritual, like the regular summer ping-pong matches I played as a teen with my father, down at the boarding school – regular, that is, until I got good enough to beat him. Then we stopped playing. My siblings and I had attended this boarding school, together with the children of the hotelier's family, and we followed the ups and downs of that family, sometimes staying overnight at the hotel itself. We knew them with that friendly reserve stationary hosts display to their repeated, episodic visitors (and vice versa), though the relationship extended to the grown children even visiting us in California. Though we weren't close, we treated one another warmly – or maybe it was the other way around. In a village of dairy farmers, the hotel catered mostly to outsiders like us, and the family running the hotel stood apart: when the grown children of this family married, it would not be to Swiss but to partners from Austria, Hong Kong, Britain.

'The' apartment was actually several over the years. First, it was one at the end of the village road heading down toward the cliffs overlooking the valley, a renovated, dark brown building with little of the charm of a proper chalet. Functional, but not homey, a place to go out from, a place to store things in, eat, sleep. Not a place to live or spend much time in. A few years later, it was the middle floor of a modern-style chalet, half-way to the next village and right next to the main road. The owners lived on the top two floors; an architect's office was on the bottom floor. My father and the architects regularly commiserated over just how difficult and demanding – especially over money, over what was and what was not permissible, over how demands ratcheted up year after year – just how utterly impossible the landlady who lived overhead was. Her husband, like many men in the area, was taciturn, long-suffering, often away from the house. The architects were local men, trained in the big city, and they reassured my parents that this landlady wasn't being especially difficult with him, or for that matter, with them. She

was difficult with everyone. Not such a bad thing she lived so far outside the village itself. What saved this apartment, aside from the exercise of walking back and forth to the village to go shopping or for that Sunday *piccata*, was the view that stretched from the valley floor up to the snowy peaks. It was so much vertical magnificence that you had to sweep your head upward to take it all in at once.

Across the street stood a farmer's pale chalet, recently built, with a well-tended garden in the front that sloped down to the road. A small pigsty stood to one side, and the farmer supplemented his income by serving as the mail carrier for his brother, the postman. One day, seeing the handsome farmer's wife working on her vegetables as she often did, her blonde hair as always done up in a tight braid crowning her forehead, a sparkling, sun-drenched day with the mountains across the valley close enough to touch, my father stopped to ask her whether she ever tired of the view. After all, she lived here all the time, knew no other. She straightened up, shaded her eyes, looked out across and past my father's head, and said, not unkindly, that yes, there were times when she had to just stop what she was doing and admire the view. My father retold this encounter for years, as though it held a key to why he kept coming back. Though he easily might have turned it into an analytic comment, he just let it stand as an observation, an anecdote.

Perhaps that was because the Swiss mountains held a far different resonance for him. Writing half a century afterwards, he recalled how as a 22-year old he had

crossed the Swiss border at Basel and stopped off in Luzern for a boat ride on the *Vierwaldstättersee*. The mountain air gave me an exhilarating sense of release from oppression. In March, Hitler had marched into Austria, and in May, news of the Czech mobilization reached me. The contrast between the Swiss countryside and the menace of war could not have been greater. In retrospect, I realized the pressure I had been under for the preceding five years (Bendix, R. 1986: 194).

My father was writing about fleeing his native Germany in 1938, a country that had rejected him and his family. When he entered Switzerland, he was both homeless and facing an utterly unknown future, and was putting the country he'd been born and raised in behind him. The five years had been spent living under Nazi rule in Berlin – a period of his life he rarely talked about later. Switzerland held out the hopeful promise, however fleeting, of a different kind of *Heimat*, that metaphoric and emotionally charged romantic German idea of feeling closely bound to a particular location. It was a brief respite, and not like the home he would find, create, and fill with life in the U.S. Yet I think the 'exhilarating sense of release' it gave him, at a time when he needed it most, still resonated decades later and made him glad to be able to return year after year to those mountains.

The last apartment represented a kind of arrival for my parents, located as it was right in the village center and in one of the oldest chalets, one burnt black by the Alpine sun. It was only a few rooms located right under the eaves, in the house of the widow who owned the village store, and whose own rooms you had to walk through to get to it. She didn't mind: in fact, she enjoyed the sense there was life in the house, even when one of us was noisily clacking away on an old, heavy, electric typewriter right over her head as she sat in her kitchen. It was a small place but inexpensive enough to rent out year-round.

More than 15 years ago, referring to this village, I wrote: "It is not comfortable to feel at home in a place you do not belong," adding – with more bathos than needed – that it "was as much of a home as I shall ever have" (Bendix, J. 1990: 115). My experiences and sentiments were not shared by my parents, in part owing to language. Though my father of course spoke German fluently and my mother understood it, they never learned dialect. By contrast, as a native English-speaker speaking Swiss dialect, I've been very flattered to have been repeatedly mistaken for an *Auslandsschweizer* by locals. That means be treated as a Swiss émigré who, due to long residence abroad, has partly forgotten his native tongue – treated as not entirely alien, in other words, merely as a little distanced from his culture, his native idiom, his roots.

One result was that forms of resonance have been open to me that were closed to my parents, despite their long familiarity with the place, or even meaning certain social or cultural nuances had to be explained to them. They knew they were liked, even respected as repeated, loyal visitors whose very regularity of return made them be seen at least by some locals almost as part of the landscape, an enrichment, or a welcome element in the yearly cycle. They knew, and forever remained acutely aware, of their status as outsiders, while I (never mind that I was in fact an outsider) didn't need to be treated entirely that way, perhaps didn't behave that way, had been there repeatedly since I was a child.

The story about asking the farmer's wife what she thought about the view can be read, then, to say that outsiders like my father can find common ground with locals, since locals understand an outsider might ask that kind of question and have a perspective differing from theirs. In that same situation, I might instead have commented, in her cultural and linguistic idiom, on how neat and flourishing her garden looked, thereby partaking of what I understood, and knew, to be her preoccupation. The unconscious boundary maintenance of my father thus has become a moderately conscious boundary blurring on my part.

I'm not sure I entirely agree with what I wrote in 1990, though, due to the complexities of what 'home' and *Heimat* connote. My parents organized their lives in Switzerland around portability, taking little with them in material, though perhaps a little more in immaterial terms, including my father's acute awareness of having been a refugee and accommodating, though never entirely warming, to U.S. culture. He was forced to leave a German *Heimat* and make a new 'home' in America, and a Swiss mountain village could neither fully be a new *Heimat* for him, despite its promise in 1938, nor could it entirely be a second 'home'. The sense of belonging was too incomplete, the outsider status too pronounced: this was a temporary domicile, a congenial environment to be sure, but fundamentally a place to relax and reflect and be at ease, even be honored by visitors, some famous, making the trek to see him.

My father would have found it impossible to live in that village permanently, though: curiously enough, I would too, if for somewhat different reasons. I've discovered I have feelings of *Heimat* for my native California, though I've not spent much of my life there. Nevertheless, it was very important both culturally and linguistically for shaping who I am, and it is the place I identify with. I also chose to leave it, and that makes it far easier to return to, which was not the case for my father's German *Heimat*. As for 'home,' if it is where the heart is, then that heart can be affixed to many places or persons.

Instead, and it is a notion my father was very fond of toward the end of his life, it is more a matter of *Wahlverwandschaft*, elective affinity. His affinity, he often said, was to the university. That was where he had felt most at home, though he admitted it became less comfortable to live in as the years went by. My elective affinity is to a country where I can pass, almost, as an insider, a place I feel at home in, comfortable in, familiar with. A congenial domicile. What is odd is not just that I don't *really* belong there by the more formal criteria of ancestry or nationality but

that this comfort extends to German-Swiss culture as a whole and is unconnected to a particular location – hence to a home that is not a *Heimat*. Perhaps it is just that, ultimately, that a 'second home' at its best really represents.

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John Bendix first went to the place he describes at age 5, then 8, then 13, and then as frequently as he could. A U.S.-trained political scientist now living in Germany, he has taught at 12 universities in 5 countries over the last 20-odd years. He makes his living currently as a German-to-English translator/editor. Still, the way he wrote this piece is to hide the fact that he really doesn't know much about doing ethnography ...
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