Some Roots Start in Pockets

by Heidrun West

The rose bushes have never been as opulent as this year. The branches arch under the weight of blooms, spilling their beauty into this fragrant morning of our twenty-sixth year of marriage. We have all grown. The weeding, watering, feeding and pruning have turned this dull patch into a garden.

I have not always been a gardener, and when I look back at the beginnings of our married life, I see a few potted purple and white petunias in a window box on a balcony in Geneva, nothing more. I understood so little then - about petunias and about partnership. Marriage was just a shift of roles from being a daughter to being a wife, a transfer of allegiance. I was not aware then I needed more than a partner, that I was desperate for an identity I could be comfortable with. But first I had to learn about seedlings and their need for consistent care before I understood that only plants with a strong root system survive transplanting.

My roots, however, did not have favourable conditions for growth. I was born in Sudetenland, in the northern corner of what now is the Czech Republic. As Sudetenland has been eradicated from the map, my existence is founded on the void that it left. And yet I want to claim a piece of ground, a cultural heritage for myself.

The border regions of Czechoslovakia were first settled by German-speaking tribes in the 12th century, and remained Germanic until they were forcibly integrated into Czechoslovakia in 1918. These German-speaking people were part of Hitler's Germany from the time of the Munich convention until 1945. This annexation meant my father had to fight in Hitler's army. At the end of the war, my family was expelled from Sudetenland to Germany together with three million refugees of German origin.

In 1946 - I was just over a year old - we were ordered to leave. Being allowed to take only what we could carry, my mother had piled everything she could into the stroller with me. It was February, and the roads to the station were thick with slush and ice. The stroller was hopelessly overloaded, the axle soon broke. I still wonder what kept my mother from breaking. Like cattle, we were boarded up in wagons bound for an unknown existence.

My father had just been released from an American prisoner-of-war camp and was working on a farm in Germany. With luck, stubbornness, diligence and bribery, he had been able to find out about our transport and was waiting for us when we reached Southern Germany after our seven-day odyssey.

At first we shared one large room with twenty-five people at a refugee centre, but then we were allocated two rooms in a farmhouse. Formerly storage rooms for grain, they were one floor above the pigsty - rooms befitting our status as refugees. The connecting door to the farmhouse was bricked up and a wooden staircase built along the outside, so we would not dirty the house with our presence. The stairs led past the open window of the pigsty, where in winter the warm air would condense and freeze on the wood turning the whole staircase into a treacherous path to the outhouse next to the manure heap. That degradation may sear my skin now, but as a child, one is spared the pain of deeper reflection.

I was four years old when my baby brother contracted diarrhoea. As 'pigs from Sudetenland', we were sent away from the doctor's door. My father 'organized' a five-ton truck to take him to the nearest hospital, an hour's drive away. My brother died of dehydration as my mother placed him in

the nurse's arms.

By the time I was school-age, I understood that *Flüchtling* (refugee) was not a nice word. I became adept at adapting. I learnt to be unobtrusive, to make other people's behaviour my own, to speak their dialect - anything not to be noticed. But I did not learn to identify with my passport that declared me as German.

I was eleven when my father found a job in Switzerland. I clearly remember the joy and delight I felt: there are no wars in Switzerland! I could barely believe my good fortune. We had a real apartment with central heating, a bathroom and a toilet all to ourselves! What luxury, what paradise! But then came the first day at school. I had no idea how different Swiss German was from *Schwäbisch*. The teacher made a joke, the whole class laughed, except me - I had not understood a word. I felt forlorn, cut off. And I sat alone, because "Germans stank." Suddenly it was wrong to be German, when in Germany it had been wrong NOT to be German. In history class we drew the battle field of Morgarten in 1315, but there were no safe versions of the war that had just happened. When I asked my parents, I could feel their scars tearing. I did not want to see my mother cry.

At seventeen I left home to go as far as my savings would take me, which was to Edinburgh. There I soon learnt that doors would open more readily if I said I came from Switzerland - which, after all, was geographically true - than if I referred to my German passport. And my English was too limited to explain my personal history. Then I found a job in Geneva and met 'my Englishman'. I fell in love with him because he had a gentleness I had never experienced. He brought me orange juice when the other young men were trying to seduce me with wine. In Scotland I had met people with some of his traits, but I had never seen them wrapped in such a pleasant package. I was hooked. Life without each other became increasingly meaningless, and we started thinking about marriage. It was time I was introduced to his parents.

We squeezed into his red Mini and drove to Coventry for 'inspection'. I knew his parents had lived through the *Blitz*. I had heard how his father had dug through the shattered bricks with his bare hands to rescue the baby whose faint whimper he could hear somewhere in the rubble. The baby died in his arms.

And there I sat on their sofa - a young woman whose father had fought in the army that had poured destruction over Coventry. The words in their last letter to my fiancée, "your plans to marry Heidrun have come as a real blow to us," stood in the room. I hardly opened my mouth, afraid I might hurt them with my German accent.

I drank tea when I would have preferred coffee. I ate the sandwiches and the cake that were offered to me, although I could still feel the waves of the Channel churning in my stomach. Exhausted from the long journey and the effort of making a good impression, I was glad when we headed for bed. As a guest I had the privilege of using the bathroom first. What a relief to wash off 700 miles of dirt! But when I wanted to unlock the door, try as I might, the key would not budge. Should I sleep in the bathtub or call for help? I certainly did not want to make any 'fuss' - a crime I knew the English abhorred. My future in-law's bedroom was next to the bathroom, my fiancée's further along the corridor. I tried to call him without his parents hearing me. To no avail. Soon they all stood outside the door. I could hear my father-in-law say, "we'll just have to break down the door. The lock must have rusted through, we haven't used it in years." As feet and fists hit the wood, the door opened with a crash. I could not believe my eyes: Laughing faces met me.

Yet painfully aware of the trouble I had caused, I could not share their laughter. I only wanted to shrink back across the Channel. My fiancée's dry comment "can't take you anywhere!" did not help either. British humour was not something I had taken in with the rules of English grammar.

Everybody except me - thought the whole situation was terribly funny. Being conditioned to locking doors, I had come to a home where locks were not needed. But in the end, my turning the key in the lock had the unexpected effect of unlocking the door between us.

Shame and guilt throbbed through me the next few days as I walked past remnants of the war, visited the old cathedral that bombs had reduced to a mere shell and the new one commemorating the many dead. Just being born in Sudetenland, a part of Hitler's empire, made me feel I was somehow responsible for that devastation.

Our visit to Coventry had appeased my future in-laws, but soon our wedding arrangements suffered another setback - this time from my parents. They were delighted with my fiancée; it did not matter the slightest that my father had once been indoctrinated to see the English as enemies. No, it was not prejudice, simply fear of not fitting in at their daughter's wedding. Everybody would be conversing in a language my mother neither spoke nor understood. My father refused to participate because he had seen an English film in which the father of the bride led his daughter to the altar in some peculiar step. No, my father was adamant, he was not going to make a fool of himself. After much panic and pleading on my part, they did come. With friends and family, we counted ten different nationalities at the ceremony - a truly multicultural wedding.

With my marriage licence, I acquired the right to apply for a British passport. I swore allegiance to the Queen and Her Heirs, making sure not to pronounce the 'h' in heirs, as our Danish friend had done to everybody's amusement. The blue passport made me a member of the United Kingdom and its colonies. Yet, my husband was quick to point out, "British you are, English you will never be." I am still ONLY British, but it is a joke - not a threat. Our second son, Michael, who was born in Zurich, has a British passport too, but does not identify with his heritage: "I was born in Switzerland, this is my home, my friends are here." He intends to apply for Swiss citizenship, even if it means doing Swiss military duty. Anthony, our first son, was born in Philadelphia. Like Michael, he never lived in England, but the five years in the US left such a positive impression on him that he applied for an American passport, which he now holds in addition to his British one.

Acquiring British citizenship, in my case, meant losing my German nationality. But I went further, also denying my German mother-tongue and letting English become the language of our everyday talks, our arguments, our intimate moments. Not that I was aware of this denial of my past. That understanding came much later.

I remember that precious moment when I was first alone with my newly born son. With motherhood, my own mother-tongue was forcing itself back into my consciousness. I felt this chain of women behind me: my mother, my grandmother - and I had become a link in that chain of German-speaking women. English suddenly did not seem natural. To coo in English was like hearing someone else coo. But German sounded just as odd, like an unfamiliar echo from deep inside me. During the four years in Philadelphia, I had hardly spoken German. When speaking it to my baby, was I taking him away from my husband? My maternal instincts won. I sang the songs my mother had sung to me, because they felt right. And my husband sang the nursery rhymes from his childhood.

I learnt about Humpty Dumpty and Jack Sprat who ate no fat, about Rupert and Noddy. I went on to study the Victorians, their social history and love-lives. I even acquired a fair knowledge of modern British poetry, but I have never learnt English humour. My husband claims this is due to one of my legs being longer which makes pulling it so easy. I have, as yet, not been able to pick up a warning cue in his deadpan voice. He gets me hopping mad before I notice he's joking. I am what Piaget calls 'a concrete thinker', stuck in the footprints of my ancestors. I am not sure how much of my German-ness has rubbed off on my husband, certainly not my self-discipline (which he calls 'pig-

headedness') nor my orderliness. Every morning we go hunting for his car keys, office keys, magnetic card and wallet. If anything, his easygoingness has rubbed off on me. My handbag now also occasionally features on the 'officially lost' list.

What has changed, of that I am certain, is his way of handling disagreements. In his family, fights never happened. So when our first quarrel took shape, my husband coolly picked up the newspaper and started to read. I stood in front of him, letting loose a diatribe of accusations. No response. The only sound coming from him was the rustle of the GUARDIAN as he turned the pages. I fetched my coat and dramatically made my exit, slamming the door behind me. Out in the cold, dark street, my anger drove my steps, but I kept listening for his footsteps. He must be sorry by now, he must be coming to get me back, I thought. No steps. No place to go. Slowly, I walked back. Softly, I opened the door. He was still READING!

When we quarrel now, he booms his "you always do" at me before I have a chance of lancing my "you did it again" bit at him. When I tell him I am not deaf, he screams back, "I never scream." But he does.

Over the years, my parents-in-law have accepted me as their daughter. In turn, they have become my 'parents-in-love', the misnomer my students frequently pronounce. In my in-law's house I met a cheerful thoughtfulness and kindness I did not know existed. My father-in-law shared his love for gardening with me. We were never happier than when we walked through a public garden together, our pockets bulging with seeds and bits of plants we had snipped off with our fingers. My husband always walked a long distance away from us, too embarrassed to be associated with 'thieves'. "Imagine, if everybody did that!" he would complain. But his words could not stop us. WE knew it was good for the plants! I still have many flowers in my garden that started as seeds in our pockets. Now that my father-in-law is dead, I carry on his tradition as a gardener. I try to use the same care with which he handled a fragile seedling. I prune the roses, divide the perennials, plant daffodils under trees and crocuses in the lawn, and sometimes I even remember to clean the tools. The day my father-in-law died, I went into the garden, took a number of rose cuttings and planted them close to the flowering cherry that was already in bloom. An uncommonly large fraction took root, and every year more buds appear. They vary in colour from delicate pink to dark red, from ivory to amber, but they all bear the same name: 'Granddad Roses'.

My husband, unfortunately, did not inherit his father's talent. As a scientist, he has developed his own binary method, distinguishing between plants that can be cut (or killed) with the electric lawn mower and those that are halved with the hedge cutter. He considers this not only a highly efficient and effective method, it also grants him the time to pursue, as he says, more scientifically challenging tasks. Certainly, as far as gardening is concerned, I am the one to keep the English flag flying.

I have learnt more than nursery rhymes from my husband, more than gardening from my father-in-law, and more than positive thinking from my mother-in-law. They have taught me to appreciate a sense of fun and jolliness and to enjoy making a fool of myself at times. I've put it all in that bag marked 'identity', the bag I am still filling at forty-seven.

I will probably never have an irrefutable sense of 'this is my home, this is my city, this is my country'. But I will certainly have a nice garden - wherever we are.

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