

## there's some corner of a foreign field That is for ever....?

In my case, Wales. What happens when one's roots lie in one country yet one lives in another? To some extent, in modern society, this is a process that all of us go through. We tend to move for educational and occupational reasons, sometimes many times in a life time. But some people take this to the extreme and move to a different country. This can be a small step - from Wales to England - or a larger step to a different continent - or an intermediate step, to a country in the same continent but with a vastly different culture to one's own. The step I took was intermediate. I am still close enough to be "home" in a few hours by plane, a day's travel by car or train. But I am far enough away to be able to observe the culture I "belong to" from a healthy distance. I went through a process, which I'd like to outline here: Firstly, I realised that I had been totally naïve! There is a vast difference between Wales and Switzerland. This may be blatantly obvious to everyone reading this, but you may well get caught out with the same thing one day. What are the differences? Well, Wales is by the sea, it's not far above sealevel and has a mild climate. Switzerland, on the other hand, is a landlocked country far above sealevel with a fairly extreme winter/summer temperature difference (generally 40° difference between a cold winter day and a hot summer day). I didn't realise, til I had been here for a while, that the sea meant so much to me. It meant so much that it would make me cry just to think of it. I also didn't know that mountains are very large lumps of rock. Silly really, but it was a shock to find out that I was very, very scared of them! They look so unfriendly compared to "Mother Ocean", I didn't like them at all and, when staying the night up in the mountains, I would have terrifying nightmares and wake up sweating and crying. Secondly, I found out that German speaking people don't speak German just to be awkward, they really do think, act, live in a different language and, worst of all, the language contains ideas that just don't exist in English! I was in a situation where I was trying to communicate with people I had no hope of understanding and they could never understand me, whatever language we spoke. Thirdly, the food was different. Not just "no marmite" (there's a very good Marmite-ersatz available) but just how a meal is presented, when one eats, how one even holds a fork. Fourthly, my (then) boyfriend was not the same person in Switzerland as the person I had met in Scotland. He was now at home, he had his friends, his family around him - which just accentuated the fact that I had none of that. And, because he had been "successful" in living in another country, I felt under pressure to do the same. My sense of humour has often been my saving grace and hides some of my tactlessness - but here a sense of humour (a British one) is misunderstood as rudeness. How one sees medicine, healthcare, religion - in short, everything - is different here to in Wales. So, how does one deal with this? To start with I was depressed. Then I drank too much and smoked too much. Then I went to live in England and felt just as displaced. Then I moved back to Switzerland and started warming to it - but homesickness struck in my first pregnancy and I wanted nothing more than to go home. So, we went. But I had already started the process of fitting-in in Switzerland, so no longer fitted-in in the UK. I felt out of place. So, we moved back again after two years in the UK. And I picked up the strings of trying to understand the Swiss again. It is now 8 years later and I cannot, not for one second, imagine living in the UK. One of the most important things has been for us (me and the then boyfriend) to both have tried out living in each others' countries and seeing how it is to live, day in, day out, in a culture you don't understand. It puts pressure on you in ways you can hardly imagine without trying it. There is no "it's like this" with easy suggestions of how to deal with it. Each person gets to experience it for themselves. I would suggest that it's a bit like having every weakness and insecurity you have magnified to such an extent that every good point about you diminishes to nano-proportions so that no one, not even yourself and loved ones, can see them. If you have a tendency to be a little bit of a nag bag you can be sure that, a few months into an emigration experience, you will be nagging enough to win the Derby. If you don't like making phonecalls, try doing it in a foreign country - even if the language is the same, the beepy noises are different. Is the phone ringing? Is it engaged? Going and buying bread can be such a challenge that you throw up before setting off. And as to things like tax and insurance and paying bills - it's all organised soooooo illogically that you can't believe it! Minor things, then, get blown out of all proportion and it's easy to forget who you are and what you are doing. Some people never get past this stage, even after living many years in a country. I know someone British who does not drive, does not work here, does not shop in the village, does not speak German and is generally totally miserable, so much so that I sometimes feel that my very presence is painful for her - I am "success" and she is "failure" (in her eyes). So, when did the tide turn? When I accepted that I was the idiot who made simple grammatical errors in my German, who gets past and future muddled up and sometimes waves her hands around wildly looking for words. When I accepted that there are some things I have blown out of all proportion and need to chill out about. And when I realised that I was throwing my life away hiding behind the "I don't understand, I am foreign, poor little me" thing. I did what needed doing, I gave myself a good talking to, a kick up the arse and dived in. And, funnily enough, my new Swiss friends don't see me as the idiot, in fact they know I am clever - although I do still make (way too many) grammatical errors, what I say isn't stupid, the words I use reflect my education and I understand the complex arguments that they present. I've also found that I have learnt a few skills - the ability to "lead", for one. The depths I went through have given me strength to do things I only dreamed about previously - and suddenly a whole new life is opening up to me, one I would never have imagined possible. Life in a foreign country is certainly the School of Hard Knocks but it's a bloody good school and one I wouldn't swap for the world. "If we destroy our roots, we cannot grow" Hundertwasser But I'd like to add that plants can be transplanted very well, they might go through a slightly weedy phase, but in the end they can thrive in a new environment - and sometimes make adaptations that surprise us! And, by the way, I love mountains these days and can't imagine living in a country that doesn't have nice big rocky bits. If you'd like to discuss or comment on this article, you can do so in

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