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# Immigration and Identity: It's Not That Simple

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I flipped through the pages of a newly-arrived Ikea catalogue: chairs, tables, cupboards with clean lines, and Swedish names—familiar offerings. And yet, there was something new. Tucked in between pictures of dishes and rugs were human interest stories of “global nomads.” Glossy pictures showed carefree men and women who, in search of meaning and adventure, had settled in new cities and countries. The catalogue highlighted their sparse and stylish apartments, outfitted with particleboard coffee tables and mass-produced décor of Ikea’s making. After all, these were just temporary digs—until *wanderlust* strikes again or something better comes up.

What struck me was that this trend of the global nomad was presented as something overwhelmingly uncomplicated. These folks were *free* to pick up and take off. How exciting! Granted, the stories in question were being pitched by the supplier of most global nomads’ furnishings, wherever they end up. But it does seem that the idea that we are *of* a place, and that place has some claim on us is apparently passé. After the most recent presidential election in the United States, when the fears of a more liberal cultural climate dawned on the horizon, several of my American friends asked me whether I thought they should leave. Would Poland (my native land) be a better place to raise their children? Should they consider emigrating—leaving the only home they and their children have ever known for something better? It’s not that simple, I kept thinking. I knew leaving everyone and everything you know is *not that simple*. Even if life were to improve in many ways, there always remains a pain of loss.

The choice to become a global nomad, a citizen of the whole world but of no place in particular, is only made possible by financial and political privilege. There is another, uglier, version of beginning a new life elsewhere, which is forced emigration, when you *must* leave your homeland out of fear, because of war, or starvation, or because your family and children lack a basic dignity of life.

My family—my parents, brother and I—fled our homeland for various reasons when I was eight. We left Poland shortly before communism crumbled. My parents packed our Fiat 125p full of camping gear, and we sought asylum in Western Europe where we had traveled under the guise of a vacation. We were not alone. A steady stream of asylum seekers from Eastern Europe infiltrated the West throughout the 1980s, seeking opportunity and dignity away from the watchful eye of fellow comrade and state. Many ended up in the United States, while others awaited their fate in immigration camp limbo, wondering whether any of the great Western democracies would grant them and their families asylum.

After a few failed attempts, West Germany granted us permission to wait on their soil for the paperwork to settle in the United States or Canada. We lived in an immigration camp with many others, sharing tight quarters and the hope for a better life. The wait for answers often took years. Some would-be émigrés were turned away and sent back home, crushed. Others headed to new lands and

lives. My family was given permission to resettle in Canada, where we arrived in late March, 1991.

Were you to chart the feelings of a newly arrived émigré, you would see peaks of euphoria and excitement at the new, woven together with vales of despair and sadness over what was lost. Over time, the peaks grow smaller and the valleys shallower, giving way to the mundane ups and downs of common experience, whether émigré or not. You find a place to live and work, find your footing in the intricacies of a new language, find your way around and eventually find a community, often made up of people who are newcomers to the land, just like you. The startling strangeness of a new place and clime eventually gives way to an easy familiarity: this becomes home.

With the help of many generous Canadians, my family settled in a small town in Ontario. It took some time, but my parents both found work. We moved out of our flimsy rental and bought a house and two cars, privileges denied to many Poles back home. I learned English, got an education, and later married a wonderful American, which prompted another move, this time to the United States. All five of our children were born here.

Melting pot that it is, the United States is home to many people like me. I blend in. I speak English with no accent. I have learned how to adeptly shift between my old culture and the new. I have settled comfortably in American suburbia and am grateful for the life I have received.

And yet, and yet. *It is not so simple to leave one's homeland.* For one, you never truly leave it behind. Poland continues to exercise a claim over me and this is a burden I don't always shoulder gracefully. What am I? Polish? American? Canadian? Some hyphenated combination of the above? On infrequent visits back to Poland, I am little more than a tourist, albeit one who slips quietly into my old skin, peppering my rusty Polish with phrases gleaned from my cousins and eating rye bread breakfasts like the locals. But I no longer understand how daily life works in Poland. My relationship is with the country I left behind, not with Poland as it is now. I no longer belong there.

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The stuff of daily American life is much more familiar. I have lived in the United States for many years now, after all. But even still, when it comes to the great symbols of American nationality—the flag, anthem, monuments, etc.—my heart comes up short despite the fact that, rationally, I know they have profound meaning. When teaching my children the Pledge of Allegiance, I say the words along with them, but feel like a fraud, my hand lying limply across my heart. I work to convince myself that I really *am* pledging allegiance, but the words always ring hollow. Despite learning many of the great episodes of American history, these stories are not my own. But at the same time, having grown up in a home where pride of all things Polish was merely implicit but rarely explicitly taught, I shamefully know little about Polish history. I'm not sure whether that is my story either. *Poland, my homeland, do I belong to you at all? But can I really call myself a true American?* The burden of leaving one's homeland comes with not knowing who you really are, not fully belonging to any place or people.

This tension between where I now make my home and where I come from is most apparent when navigating between generations, older and younger. I may be a cultural chameleon, but my children were born here and feel comfortably American. “You're Polish, mama,” they say. Yes and no, I think to myself. In many ways, I have become “Americanized”—so much so that I'm not sure how much Polish culture I will successfully pass on to my kids. I have tried to teach them my native tongue, but only with

partial success. They balk at putting in effort to learn Polish when their mama speaks English so well. And yet, even though my own Polish identity remains tenuous and fraught, my children not feeling Polish at all is still painful. Even more painful is the cultural disconnect I often observe between my children and my parents. Though they have now lived in Canada almost as long as they had in Poland, my parents' formative years were back in the Old World. My children's typical American childhood, with its baseball, ballet, and Mother Goose rhymes, is in many ways an enigma to them. I find myself explaining to my parents what it is that my children mean when they share details about their life and, simultaneously, explaining to my children what it is that my parents mean when they respond. This is not a question of a lack of love between grandparents and grandchildren, rather, one of a painful cultural divide we are always trying to overcome.

Emigrating does not merely mean leaving a place, but leaving behind people, often family. For me, it meant moving away from my beloved grandmother who had lived with us since I was born. Aunts, uncles, and cousins, and my other grandparents also stayed put when we left. There were, of course, letters and occasional phone calls in those pre-FaceTime days, but over years spent so far apart, ties have loosened and I no longer feel connected to their daily lives and they equally struggle to relate to mine. Actual visits are rare and brief. I am only an occasional guest who drops by for dinner every few years. Perhaps we would all feel closer if I were better at video chats? I'm not so sure. As it stands, my children rarely recall even having family in Poland and could hardly communicate with them if they were to call. When my paternal grandmother died three years ago, I felt that my last great anchor to my native land was lost. She was the last person who had clung to my still belonging to Poland, the last one who still counted on my visits.

I shared some of these thoughts and experiences with the same friend who had asked me about emigrating after the last election. "But aren't you glad you live here now?" she countered with some alarm. *Yes, I am.* I am profoundly grateful, especially for the good life my family is able to enjoy. I am grateful for my American husband, my sweet American children—even though they might never understand their mother's complicated national identity. It's just that emigrating is so very complicated and touches so many aspects of one's identity.

So, when that Ikea catalogue with its features on carefree global nomads arrived in the mail, I was quick to recycle it. I stand by the fact that you *cannot be a citizen of the world without coming from a specific place*. That place has a claim on you and it is no small thing to leave it behind. This is why **John Paul II** boldly proclaimed that people have the *right not to emigrate*, because it is indeed such a great rupture to one's life and sense of self. No one should be forced to leave their homeland because they feel unsafe or unable to live with dignity. Equally, this option should be available for those who wish to seek a new life elsewhere, which John Paul II affirms as well. Setting out in search of meaning or adventure, or to find a better life for one's children and their children, is not inherently wrong. One just has to remember—we are all rooted somewhere and uprooting and replanting is always more complicated and painful than picking out a new couch and coffee table.

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