Henryk M. Broder on *Heimat* (1999)

Abstract

Henryk M. Broder is a well-known German commentator with Polish-Jewish roots. After German reunification, he authored the following reflection on the term "Heimat"—a kind of mythical or romantic idea of home or homeland. Broder contrasts the Polish provincial past with the German cosmopolitan future. In contrast to other Germans who came from "the East" and to other Jews who longed for a homeland in Israel, Broder revels in the freedom of not being bound to a single *Heimat.*

Source

Heimat—No Thank You!

Henryk M. Broder, 52, is an editor at Der Spiegel. *He lives and works in Berlin and Jerusalem.*

Several years ago, I took a train from Berlin to Cracow without having looked at the route on a map beforehand. At some point the train stopped; I looked out the window and saw the sign "Katowice" on the platform. I thought it must be a hallucination. I went over to the window. The sign was still there, and on the other platforms, too, were signs that said "Katowice."

So it wasn't a hallucination. It was a dream—or nightmare—since Katowice, the former German Kattowitz, was the town where I was born in 1946.

Eleven years later, in 1957, my parents left Poland to escape Polish antisemitism and orchestrated communism. At the time, it was a move whose causes and consequences were unknown to me. I was only upset by our needing to leave behind our dog—a dachshund—and not by the loss of our "home," which we relinquished along with our Polish citizenship. We stayed in Vienna for a year, then moved to Cologne. I learned German at school, though we continued to speak Polish at home.

Katowice was not often talked about. When it was, it made us shudder: life was hard; you had to stand in line for everything; the sky was gray all year round; there was only warm water when my mother fired up the boiler with coals that my father had to lug from the basement to the third floor.

The train stopped for only a few minutes. There was not enough time to get out, just enough time for me to realize that this was neither a dream nor a nightmare, but a snapshot from the past. A real déja-vu, so to speak.

On the return trip from Cracow to Berlin I got out at Katowice. My curiosity was stronger than my desire to get back to Café Einstein again and eat Kaiserschmarren as soon as possible. There I stood for the first time in 35 years in the station square in Katowice, and I couldn't understand it: apart from the relatively recent advertisements for Western product brands, nothing had changed. I remembered a gray, ugly town, and here it still was: gray and ugly and comfortless and even more run-down than it had been in "our" time, when there were no Kantor shops yet—trading booths where one could exchange currency into zloty and zloty into real money.

A few Coca-Cola signs and Marlboro umbrellas tried in vain to brighten up the post-socialist dreariness a bit. I looked around and a strange feeling arose in me that I had never felt before: a feeling of gratitude toward my parents, who had spared me all this. I wanted to call my mother on the spot and shout "thank you!" into the telephone. But it wasn't possible to make a call to a foreign country from a phone booth, so I had to postpone this

outpouring of emotion to a later date. How fortunate we are, I thought, that we can choose our home at least, if not our family. Freddy Quinn sang:

"Burning hot desert sand—far away from my homeland . . .
Where flowers bloom, green grasses grow, my home was there long, long ago . . .
Where I found my true love that is where my homeland is. . ."

In my case it was not a green meadow where flowers bloom, but instead, Cologne on the Rhine, where I managed to live for more than 20 years for the one reason that from there, it was only one hour to Maastricht, two hours to Liège, and three hours to Amsterdam. Especially at the start of carnival—the fifth season of the year in Cologne—I picked up and left, since the collective explosion of mandatory good cheer was intolerable when sober, and I had never learned to get drunk.

My parents had "expellee ID cards" that allowed them to visit the zoo at a reduced price and otherwise ensured preferential treatment. For instance, they were not required to pay the obligatory radio and TV license fee—at least, so said my father. He also rode the tram without paying and whenever tickets were checked, he showed his "expellee ID." Cologne was our "home of choice" [*Wahlheimat*], that is, our home of second choice, although my parents did not long to return to Poland, did not belong to an expellee association [*Vertriebenenverein*], and were anything but "revanchists." But a Polish Jew with a German passport is constantly being asked where he feels "at home," especially if he behaves with a certain ambivalence, for instance, if he speaks another language at home and prefers to spend vacations in Tel Aviv rather than Mallorca.

Being encouraged to profess one's "true home" itself has a threatening quality. It sounds like the command to take the correct exit at customs and to declare all the goods you have brought with you according to the rules. Whenever I was asked about my home, I felt like a traveler smuggling contraband in his luggage. Not everyone has it as easy as Freddy Quinn: "where I found my true love that is where my homeland is . . ."

Love for one's home is a type of phantom pain. They both originate in a place that no longer exists. Originally "home" was the village or the farm where a person came from. The word was neuter: *das Heimat.* Only when the word mutated to the feminine form, *die Heimat,* did it become as emotionally charged as the word "mother." Just as a person has only one mother, so should they have only one home. "Do not forget the home where your cradle used to stand; in foreign realms you'll never find a second fatherland."

In this view it is ideal if a child is born where their parents themselves were born, if they spend their whole life in the same place and eventually also die there, to be buried in their home soil. But such an ideal case at this point must be an exception rather than the rule, except perhaps in isolated regions such as Tibet or Tirol, where "home" is a synonym for "a life sentence." In reality the notion of home often only materializes in retrospect. "One must go to foreign countries in order to find the home that one has left behind," Franz Kafka wrote in 1924. Franz Werfel asked in 1931, "do we only have a home once we have lost it?"

This is probably true. In Israel there are "German Landsmannschaften," Rhinelanders, Bavarians, and Hessians, who meet regularly to share memories of their former home. German Jews, expelled from Germany 60 years ago, whose children were born in Palestine or later, Israel, and whose grandchildren no longer speak German, long to return to the German forest, to drink German beer and sing German songs. The receptions held by German ambassadors in Tel Aviv feature quasi-comfort food: sausages and potato salad, the best compensation for injustices suffered.

Such an idea of home is chiefly sentimental and harmless; but there is also an aggressive variant of love for homeland that is dangerous. In Kirjat Arba, a settlement near Hebron in the Israeli-occupied West Bank, I met American Jews from Brooklyn, Philadelphia, and Chicago, who attempted to explain to me in broken Hebrew that Judea and Samaria are "our home" and that the Palestinians who have lived nearby for generations should emigrate to Saudi Arabia "where they really belong."

For "home" is also a question of power. Having a home also means being able to say who belongs there and who doesn't—which doesn't necessarily also mean expelling people. Many former residents of East Germany also left their home with the downfall of their republic, in a sense became "homeless" without having moved at all. Some found a "new home" in the PDS [Democratic Socialist Party], in which they mourn together for the old home. And in the 1960s in West Germany reference was often made to the "homeless leftists" whose leaders, according to their allegiances, liked to travel to Moscow, Peking, or Tirana so that at least when on vacation they could experience a feeling of belonging—thus, of home.

But having no home can also be an enormous advantage. Since I stood in the station square in Katowice and looked around, I know how kind fate has been to me: thanks to my parents' wise decision, I was spared having to choose between a career as a symbolic dissident or a practical collaborator in my natural homeland. And whenever I travel through a region that is ugly, dilapidated, and depressing, I wonder: why do people stay here? Why don't they leave? Only because a decrepit home is better than none at all?

But as I get older, a sense of home makes itself felt in me as well—very gently and discreetly, but nevertheless. I came to Berlin in August 1990 in order to experience the "re-unification," after I had already missed the fall of the Wall. I planned to stay three or four months and then leave again. The three or four months still stretch onward, and whenever I leave Berlin for a trip to Augsburg, Jerusalem, or New York, I already look forward to returning.

I fear that one day Berlin could become my home. For someone born in Katowice, this would not be a catastrophe.

By Henryk M. Broder

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