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## We Are The Rootless Ones

Dépayser: v. tr. (1) *Mettre mal à l'aise par changement de décor, de milieu, d'habitudes. V. Dérouter, désorienter. Se sentir dépaycé. V. Perdu.*

Each year the International School of Geneva sends forth its graduates like the Larousse trade-mark, fortified (no doubt) by the wit and wisdom of the speakers at the graduation ceremony; each year its graduates travel hopefully back home to the land of their parents and perhaps of their birth in order to start university or college or to seek employment. At least that was what they thought. For many, however, travelling hopefully was definitely better than arriving, and some find that after they have arrived it is hard to be hopeful when travelling anywhere.

This represents a failure for which the International School is not directly responsible but of which it ought to be aware.

The trouble is that when many Ecolint students who have been in Geneva for at least (say) 4 years get back "home", they find that contrary to all expectation it does not feel like home at all. The symptoms of this malady are various. The climate feels different. The buses are different. The social structure is different. The Ecolint student may find the inhabitants a little parochial, perhaps, even a little dull. He is complimented on his command of English and is asked whether he used to ski to school. He is referred to as "that Swiss guy". He does not know quite how the public telephones work. He does not know what beer to order. In short, he does not *belong*.

To be sure, a lot of these things will disappear or become unimportant. But they are all things that you expect may happen when you travel to a foreign country, and because they are expected then, they do not come as a shock. It is perfectly normal to feel foreign in a foreign country. What is not normal is to feel foreign in your *own* country. This is the essential feature of the conflict: you do not feel that you belong there, but you feel that you ought to do so. In addition, you are treated, with great politeness, in ways which are calculated to heighten this feeling of not-belonging. The Ecolint graduate has been a stranger in a strange land for much of his life, and he knows how being a foreigner works. What he is not used to is being a stranger in his own land. It has been said that the Ecolint graduate is at home everywhere, but it would be more accurate to say that he is not quite at home anywhere.

For some, this culture-shock is not a serious problem at all, and will last only a short time. For many it is enough to be unsettling. For some it leads to confusion and unhappiness, and who knows how long it may last? It is not a minor problem. It is a very considerable problem experienced to different extents by a large number of Ecolint leavers. What makes it more insidious is that it is a problem which does not even begin to exist until the student is gone from Ecolint and from Geneva, but the seeds of its existence are planted and can only be planted while the student is still there.

Of course there will be a process of adaptation to a new set of circumstances and this process may be wholly successful. But for those who are not wholly successful, the term "cul-

ture-shock” is not really an adequate one in the context, for in addition to being an intellectual problem, this is also an emotional one and cannot simply be willed away. It goes to the root of a basic need of all human beings: a sense of security. To be sure, this security may be derived from other sources (family, friends, or religion, for example) but if it is made more difficult for an individual to belong to some place, he must seek some other thing as a surrogate, and this other thing may not be easy to find.

The causes of this phenomenon are not easy to find either. However, it seems that it occurs mainly among students who have remained at Ecolint and in Geneva for an appreciable length of time, and it appears not to occur to the same extent if at all among the parents of those students. What is the difference? The difference is this: students who have remained at Ecolint for a long time have spent an appreciable part of their formative years in the sort of society that Ecolint involves, and have put down roots in that society. They will have experienced many important and fundamental things for the first time in the context of that society: they have, to a certain extent, been imprinted with the marks of that society. The society in question is like no other on earth. The expatriate community in Geneva consists of a series of villages in a wider environment which consists on the material level of the physical manifestations of Geneva (the human environment of Geneva seems not to seep through much), and on the human level almost exclusively of the International School itself. Friends and acquaintances are derived almost exclusively from school. The neighbours and the wider family are remote. It is therefore an introspective community, all of whose members are sharing the same experience. In addition, the society has the advantage of being set in an attractive (some might say beautiful) city in an attractive (some might say beautiful) country. It is no wonder that the combination is addictive, but the addiction becomes apparent only after the drug has been withdrawn, and the withdrawal symptoms are not pleasant—and those who have not tasted the drug do not understand the after-effects.

What is difficult for parents to understand is that it is not the same for their children as it is for them. It is true that both parents and their children are part of a similar society. The same pressures are exerted on parents as are exerted on their children. But parents do not succumb to these pressures to the same extent. It is suggested that the reason for this is that the parents have already completed the process of maturing before they are subjected to these pressures, and have usually done so in a quite different environment. They already have their roots, and those roots are not in Geneva. They already belong to the home environment, and a posting to Geneva is a temporary albeit possibly long interlude. Their children, on the other hand, do not yet belong anywhere, but are of an age where they will begin to belong to whatever environment they are in at the moment.

The result of this added emotional buffeting may not show. It may show in uneasiness. It may show in a performance in college that was not as good as hoped. It is not for nothing that so many students return to visit Ecolint after they have left. It is not for nothing that some turn into wanderers. It is not for nothing that some return to live in Geneva. It is not for nothing that some adopt Swiss nationality. And it is not for nothing that some come to regard their passport as an accident of the laws relating to nationality and their homeland as merely a place for which no visa is required.

It may be argued that such a result is not undesirable. I do not subscribe to this view. The International School teaches tolerance and understanding but there is nothing in its ideals or teaching which requires its students to become emotionally stateless; there is also, unfor-

unately, nothing in its teaching which shows them how to avoid this. But it would be as well for the International School, for the parents of its students, and for its students themselves, to be aware of the problem, even though no-one may know the answer.

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