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Refusing Nostalgia: On Geographical Flight and Cultural Amnesia

The past is a foreign country: they do things differently there.

--L.P. Hartley, *The Go-Between*

As a child, I was a map gazer. I'd set my small finger down in Alsace, in that blessed valley of castles, church spires, vineyards, and rolling fields of sunflowers between the Vosges Mountains and the Rhine river, then I'd tramp my fingers like a small scissors eastward through Germany. I'd touch down on the shore of the Danube and trace its long artery, the eastern route my ancestors took in 1803 to reach Odessa on the Black Sea. I longed to feel under my fingertips the slow progress of the overland caravan, the teams of oxen, the pots and pans, the crying babies—a 1,900 mile journey—just to reach the acres of unbroken steppe land near the Black Sea that had been offered to my ancestors by Czar Alexander I.

Odessa! Just the name conjured images. I was growing up in North Dakota, in a small town named Napoleon, which was near a bigger city named Bismarck (equally evocative names) but Odessa sounded to me like destination number one, conjuring images of poor Odysseus trying and not trying to make it home from the Trojan Wars. And the Black Sea fascinated me. It was nothing like the Red Sea or the Dead Sea, but black, meaning the unknown, possibly danger. I admired the mettle of my long-ago ancestors. They had walked through the Black Forest to get to the Black Sea.

They made homes for themselves in those villages they created in South Russia in 1803, surviving the trauma of flight and exile from their homeland, and they lived there as an ethnic minority for almost three generations. The promises they were given—freedom from taxation, freedom from military service, the freedom to keep their own language, religions, and schools—held for about eighty years.

When some of the promises were withdrawn and young men were forcibly conscripted, my great-grandparents' generation and their young children fled Russia and immigrated to America between the years 1886 and 1911. Answering the invitation for free land through the Homestead Act, they repeated the pattern of flight, exile, and resettlement. This ethnic group, now sprinkled through much of the central United States, is called the Germans-from-Russia, a name that's fuzzy in its definitions and forever shaped by flux. The migrations that mark us are preserved in our hyphenations, but the fact of our arrival in America was never codified. We never became the "German-from-Russia Americans." Some stories are too complicated to tell.

As a young girl, growing up in the 1950s and '60s in North Dakota, I was only vaguely aware of this ethnic history, but even the sniff of it, the whiff of uprootedness, was glamorous when compared to the everyday sameness of our hemmed-in midwestern enclave, which seemed like an 18th century European village, except with television and automobiles. My grandfather made sausage and rhubarb wine in the root cellar. There were many chores to do and animals to tend to. My father's idea of a

Home/Lands.

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family outing was to pile all of us in the car on Sunday evenings and drive us around to look at the crops.

In the village, rotund old men sat around on park benches gossiping with each other in German, and whiskery grandmothers endlessly baked and canned and sewed and gardened. There was a lot of church-going and polka-dancing. The older people spoke an archaic dialect of German, mixed with a broken and heavily-accented English. In the local cafes, along with roast beef dinners or hamburgers and French fries on the menus were choices like knephla soup, sauerkraut, and fleischkuekle.

When I would ask my grandma Geist about the village in South Russia where my grandfather had emigrated from (one had to address all questions to Grandma Geist, because Grandpa Geist was notoriously quiet), Grandma would say, “We all came from the same place.” Hardly the stuff of legends. I wanted the story of flight—the villages they left under cover of darkness, the stale bread passed between many hands, the stony fields traversed in the middle of the night. I wanted the story of arrival—the storm-filled ocean passage, the train ride slicing across the North American continent, the first sight of the trading post town in the Dakota Territory where our people purchased carts and oxen to transport themselves to their remote land claims yet farther in the north.

Instead, at gatherings where my grandparents would sit around and play cards with other couples they had known since youth, my grandmother might tell a joke in English, and then turn to Grandpa and say the punch line to him, in German. All the old people would laugh and rock in their seats. When I protested—for I didn’t know German, we were encouraged to learn only English—my grandmother would insist that it was only funny in German. “There’s no way to say it, in English,” she would explain.

Some small detour of meaning had occurred, something lost between the tongue and the brain. Even then, I felt myself cut loose on the ice floe of English—all the fun, saucy and forbidden stuff happening in another language. But now that they are all long gone, I realize that it was they who were drifting away on the ice floe of German. Now I am left behind, a fully vested American on the mainland of English.

They had little of the backward glance in them, my maternal grandparents. I would go so far as to say they refused nostalgia. The word “nostalgia,” has its origins in Greek words, but not in Greek culture. Cobbled together from two Greek roots—*nostos* (meaning “return” or sometimes “journey”) and *algeo* (meaning “pain,” “sickness,” or “sorrowful.”), the term “nostalgia,” was coined in 1688 by the Swiss Doctor, Johannes Hofer, to describe the “sad mood originating from the desire to return to native land.” In *The Future of Nostalgia*, Svetlana Boym reports that Hofer first documented this phenomenon in various people displaced in the seventeenth century—“freedom loving students from the Republic of Berne studying in Basel, domestic help and servants working in France and Germany, and Swiss soldiers fighting abroad.” Dr. Hofer observed that this new illness “caused the afflicted to lose touch with the present” resulting in the “longing for the native land to become their single-minded obsession.” The patients’ symptoms included a “lifeless and haggard countenance,” an “indifference toward everything,” and “a confusion between past and present, real and imaginary events.”

According to Boym, Swiss scientists found that sensual cue such as “rustic mothers’ soup, thick village milk, and folk melodies of Alpine valleys were particularly conducive to triggering a debilitating nostalgic reaction in Swiss soldiers.” Military superiors were forced to prohibit the soldiers from playing, singing, or even whistling native tunes. Later cures for bouts of nostalgia were more radical. Boym reports that in 1733 when the Russian army was stricken by nostalgia just as it ventured into Germany, the commanding officers announced that the “first to fall sick [with nostalgia] would be buried alive,” a practice which apparently was carried out on numerous occasions, and which seemed to have an almost instant palliative effect on the sufferer.

In the case of my own grandparents, I might be able to theorize that the acute pain and privation of their early childhoods and adulthoods would have been enough to shake the nostalgia right out of them, but I have no records—no letter collections, no journals, no family stories. In the absence of information, into that negative space of silence, it’s difficult to formulate a theory. Perhaps the silence speaks for itself.

When I go to the state historical archives for more information about the quality of life in the early days of settlement, I find that some archival records do exist. Primary among them are the 1930s WPA (Works Progress Administration) records that employed writers to travel around counties in North Dakota and interview the remaining immigrant generation. An interview form was utilized that asked general questions about family data (names/birthdates), date and year of passage, name of ship, cost of ticket, etc. There are more general prompts at the end of the interview form that invite the interviewee to offer additional data on political events (county seat fights, party caucuses, vigilancies); social events (weddings, dances, games), industries (trapping, soap making, picking buffalo bones), and misc. (frost, hail, drought, cyclones, hoppers, blizzards, prairie fires, epidemics, Indian scares, claim jumpers, etc.).

The extensiveness and specificity of this final category leads one to assume there was a great deal of miscellaneous trouble to be found in the early days of settlement. But what’s striking about the WPA interview documents is that while the interviews with Irish, English, German, Norwegian, and Swedish immigrants are often longer and full of lively detail, the interviews with the German-Russian immigrants tend to be short and filled with only cursory details. One WPA worker jots a personal note at the end of a report, writing, “I can get very little information from this couple. When I ask them what they do in their leisure time, they reply they have no leisure time. ... I can only assume they believe me to be an insurance salesman.”

All the interviewees were invited to append any additional narratives of early pioneer life to the back of the formal WPA interview report. Generally, there are no such additional materials to be found from the German-Russians, but one loquacious interviewee, Peter Borr, who lists Holland and The Netherlands as the origins of all his family’s migrations, chooses to include a 48 page “Pioneer History,” as well as an extensive history of the early days of the Van Raalte Reformed Church including complete lists of the names of charter families.

But the most stunning section of the Borr interview appendices is an eight-page report titled “North Dakota Sudden Deaths,” in which Mr. Borr has taken it upon himself to record the details of 207 sudden or unusual deaths, such as the following examples, that occurred in the territory between the years of 1886 and 1936.

1886: John Robinson shot by Carlson near Apple Creek.

- 1888: Bollinger kills self out of fear of arrest for not paying debts.
 1888: Grens frozen to death east of Mound City.
 1896: Young man killed by lightning while cultivating corn near Gackle.
 1889: C. Hanson shoots his head off near Hull.
 1898: Mrs. Reynolds found dead in shallow pond, shortly after Mr. Reynolds was found shot through the heart, lying on a log at Omio.
 1913: L. Tinholt mysteriously disappears at his opera house, while it burns.
 1927: Son of Mitchell dragged to death by pony nine miles north of Herried.
 1918: Jack Bickle dies from Dr. Till's treatments.
 1924: M. Bickle crushed under wagon at Artas.
 1920: C. Vorlander shoots self on daughter's grave at Eureka.

Just this sampling of the death entries, simply stated in one-line summaries, reveals the violence, hardship, and trauma of the early days. Although my grandparents lived through many of these years and experienced their own hardships, you would not have known it had you met them at the end of their lives. Instead of dwelling on the past, they foisted all their love, time, and energies on two things: us, their grandchildren; and the land itself.

“Never let the land go out of the family.” This is a caution I heard often and always growing up. As the owners of the center farm, the original homestead, my family has become the caretaker of a legacy that's important, if only conceptually, to cousins and uncles and aunts who live in places far and wide. What makes a piece of land go solid under your feet? How to explain this nostalgia for land that overtakes otherwise pragmatic people?

Mircea Eliade observed in *The Myth of the Eternal Return* that “archaic man saw settled land as sacred and the wilderness as profane.” Wilderness or uncultivated regions were part of the undifferentiated void, something that called to be shaped and molded to our needs.

Eliade theorizes that when our ancestors performed rites of cultivation such as plowing, seeding, and finally inhabiting a piece of land, they saw themselves as “cosmicizing” it and making it sacred by matching its shape to the cosmic model that existed, at least, in their imaginations. According to Eliade, people who settled virgin land felt themselves to be performing an act of creation. Like God, they were doing elemental things—separating the light from the dark, the earth from the sky, the land from the ocean. They were making order from chaos.

At that moment, according to Eliade, no matter how difficult the work, they felt their lives take on a greater resonance. Their actions connected them to ancient, ongoing patterns—what Eliade described as a “ceaseless repetition of gestures”—and they felt their connection to a chain of being that stretched back beyond themselves to known and unknown ancestors. Family land, by association, becomes that symbolic locus, that geographical record of the sacrifices and successes, as well as connection to ancestors. All the hardships are conflated, folded in, tucked away and eventually forgotten by succeeding generations, and only the fact of the land—solid, concrete—remains.

Whatever sentimentality I may have observed in my grandparents, may have more accurately been defined as *heimat*, a German concept that's equally as nebulous as

nostalgia, but even more problematic. *Heimat* can mean homeland, abode or habitat. It can be a landscape, and a landscape we have experienced. Its meaning is elusive, and has been reinterpreted over the centuries and used for political ends, Felipe Hernandez writes in *Transculturation*, but at its core *heimat* means “a feeling of belonging together in one place, a feeling of being at home.” Hernandez continues, “*Heimat* is such that if one would go closer and closer to it, one would discover that at the moment of arrival it is gone. It has dissolved into nothingness.”

And so as I try to approach describing it, the ache for that feeling of belonging to those people who are now all gone, but the feeling only increases even as the image of them fades before me. Perhaps I am the one who suffers most acutely from nostalgia—nostalgia over the *heimat* they created for me as a child in that place, against which I bristled and struggled to escape as a child, but now as an adult return to unceasingly in my imagination.

My grandparents had the doubly-complex dilemma of having a past that was not only figuratively a foreign country—the natural foreign country that all childhoods are when we glance back at them from the far distance of our later years—but a past that was also literally a foreign country, one about which they did not seem to have memory or language to share with us. And so I experience nostalgia in multiple layers—ache for my own foreign country of childhood and all the foreign countries that disappeared unarticulated on my grandparents’ foreign tongues.

Now I search through old newspapers, written in languages I do not know; letter collections; archives. I visit graveyards, nursing homes. I smile at old people I see in the street, hoping they will tell me something about the old days. I scan the faces of modern-day refugees I see on CNN, hoping to get a glimpse of a long lost grandparent.

Most of the time it’s sad and lonely work, and then sometimes you get lucky. A few years ago, when I was doing research for my memoir about growing up a rebellious farmer’s daughter on a North Dakota wheat farm, *The Horizontal World: Growing Up Wild in the Middle of Nowhere*, I visited older relatives and tried to ask them questions about the old days. Usually my questions were met with the same suspicions as the WPA workers must have faced when they traveled around for the interview project in the 1930s.

Then one day, during a very ordinary conversation at my older cousin, Tony’s, kitchen table, he began to tell me about the milk letters he remembers from his childhood that had come for my great-grandfather from brothers and sisters he had left behind in the Black Sea villages when he fled.

Tony explained that the letters were written in two layers, the first of which was visible to the eye, penned in ink or pencil, reporting mundane news from the village (births, natural deaths, weddings). Well into the 1920s, my great-grandfather received these letters from those he had left behind in Russia. By then, he was a prosperous North Dakota landowner, but the news from Russia only grew more troubling.

The second layer of the letter—invisible and written in milk between the ink lines—was blown dry on the breath of the worried author and undetectable to the eyes of the government censor. This second layer, the milk letter, begged for money and told of mass starvation and farm collectivization. It told of grave robbing, church stripping, and of sons and fathers herded up and taken either to servitude in the Russian military or to forced labor camps in Siberia.

My older cousin, Tony, who was a boy at the time remembers my great-grandfather sitting on a stool in front of the north window of our farmhouse holding the shaking letter up to the sunlight to illuminate the milk letter so that it could be read, a stream of tears flowing down his otherwise stoic face as he took in the hidden news. A few years later, Tony said, the letters stopped coming and all talk of Russia ceased.

I grew up in that farmhouse in the 1960s. I sat at that window, most often scanning the highway for the bus or the carload of friends that was coming to take me for some adventure in town. One road led to another, all of them away. But I'm ready now to take up my spot at that north window, to hold everything up to the fiercest light, to report the invisible layers of stories I find hidden there.

“Refusing Nostalgia” Coda: Looking Forward

Every Christmas Eve during my twenties, when I would find myself invited to a boyfriend's house, or, later, celebrating Christmas with my first husband's family, I would move through the holiday staging with a smile on my face. Upon our arrival, people would come out the front door, throw their hands up in the air, rush to embrace, offer to help with suitcases and packages. The shoveled driveways led to decorated foyers which opened to warm kitchens, festive living rooms—the bright wrappings of presents under the tree, the smell of evergreens, Nat King Cole on the stereo, turkey and stuffing in the oven, the small glass of sweet wine in my hand. I told myself just smile, admire everything, and keep moving.

The moment would come when we sat around the tree and opened the presents, taking time to admire the choices, making eye contact as we thanked the gift-givers, and receiving thanks in return for gifts given. During these evenings, I always had a set-jaw feeling of just-get-through-this. Soon, I would excuse myself to the bedroom, to the bathroom, to the most private corner of the house possible for a visitor, and there I would proceed to cry my eyes out. Shoulder rocking, nose blowing, muffled sobs. Tissue after tissue of tears wiped away. Red eyes, swollen nose, mascara smeared away. Ten to fifteen minutes of this, maybe half an hour. Eventually, someone would be sent to find me, usually the man (boyfriend or husband) who had brought me into this family. And then explanations would be required—no, everyone had been lovely to me; no, the presents were just what I wanted; no, the turkey hadn't been too dry, the stuffing too moist.

No, no one had said anything to upset me, to make me not feel at home.

So why was I crying? How to explain this thing I didn't even understand myself to this now deeply offended boyfriend or husband's family that I was just getting to know? How to explain this feeling that lovely as this family, house, and gathering was, it wasn't home. It wasn't Mom's turkey and stuffing; it wasn't our sweet homemade rhubarb wine, or Dad on the couch listening to Bing Crosby. It wasn't Grandma and Grandpa Geist sluicing up the long snowy driveway in their red Chevy with the big wingtips for fenders, coming through the door with presents, Grandpa hanging back

with a shy smile, Grandma rushing forward, all laughs and sighs, her hands in the air, already embracing your cheeks, pulling your face to hers.

This moment of time in my family from 1956 to 1972, if I could freeze it, bottle it, market it, would be a kind of brand symbolizing home. So it wasn't the food, the presents, the trappings. It was, I realize now, the feeling that we were all there—that no one was missing.

Growing up, it was all I knew. It happened every year, numerous times—Easter, Thanksgiving, Christmas, every other Sunday, Fourth of July, Corn Show. One could take it for granted. The props, costumes, weather, and food would change, but the people would always stay the same—Mom, Dad, Grandma & Grandpa, me, my three sisters, and my brother. Just the nine of us. My father's parents were dead by then, and my mother was my grandparents' only surviving child. They had no other grandchildren to rush off to. We were it, and for a long time, we were the everyone of "is everyone here?"

Strange rumblings began to appear on the horizon when my oldest sister, Colleen, brought her boyfriend, Al Vosburg, home from college. He was to become her husband soon, but he was an only child, easy enough to incorporate—we just annexed his parents and became twelve. Still there were other places for Colleen and Al to go to on holidays, choices to make between here and there—a slight crack in the assumption of everyone-is-here.

Then my sister, Judy, married into a large extended family of Sperle's with lots of uncles and aunts and grandparents and great-grandparents. There were thirteen children in her husband, Mike's, family (he was the oldest) and when Judy had her first baby later that year, she became sucked into the irresistible orbit of Mike's family only to make appearances at our family gatherings during which we spent all of our time observing, admiring, and cooing over the baby-ness of our family's first grandchild. But he was the Sperle's first grandchild too, so he had to be shared.

Very soon, Grandpa died, decreasing our number, and new people were added—a wife for my brother Rick; a husband for my other sister, Charlotte. So the large door had been thrown open allowing entry into our family and exit out and into other families. By 1972, we weren't just us anymore.

I'm trying to analyze this idea of "everyone is here" without making too much of it. After all, I was the baby, the last one who'd made it into the family back in 1956 before the gate was closed for all those years. And I suppose you could say that I've suffered from a kind of belated, time-release sibling-rivalry—the kind that first children experience when suddenly a new baby appears in the house: *Where did he/she come from? And when will he/she be going back to wherever he/she came from?*

But I was sixteen when this happened, when the gates of my family opened to allow new people in. Still I'm surprised to realize how strongly I believed that things would never change—that it wouldn't always be just us.

And I'm trying to make a little fun of my younger self here. In the summer of 2008, when I traveled to the island of Paros in Greece with the International Writing

Program, and was invited to sit around in a circle with a group of writers from all parts of the world to talk about ideas of home and home/land, I realized that I was the one in the circle who harbored the most pristine, naïve notion of how people form affiliations and attachments to place, home, and family.

When I listened to Nirwan Dewanto, the Indonesian poet, talk movingly about the catastrophic events in his country that led to his father's murder, and when I listened to Nikos Papandreou and Anastassis Vistonitis, two writers from Greece, speak about the political events in Greece that led to their respective family stories of uprooting, disinheritance, and flight, I realized that this was the story my grandparents had been guarding us from all those years when they lapsed into German, when they answered questions about the old country with "we all came from the same place," or "that was God's will." My great-grandparents and my two grandfathers had lived this story of dislocation, and so when they got to Dakota Territory, they became pathologically located and fixated on ideas of home and land.

It's hard to see with clarity the conditions inside one's own family history and childhood, so it's taken me too many years to understand this. Mostly now I wish more than anything that I could go back and tell them that I *know* now what they were trying to do for us, that I appreciate it, that I'm sorry for leaving so quickly, for pushing out into the larger America, for not turning back soon enough to see them before they were all gone, disappeared from the face of the earth.

But this kind of overt declaration of love or the facts would have been an embarrassment to them, those austere stewards. They would shake their heads and laugh at my foolishness. Just look at what they have created—a woman with a childhood so soft that she has the freedom to look back with nostalgia.