

# HEIMAT / watan<sup>1</sup>

## Rayelle Niemann

“... Home is where my heart is, home is so remote, home is out of question, sitting in my throat – let’s go to your place...” Lena Lovitch, one of her popular songs back in the eighties. I close the door behind me and I am chez moi. Ich bin zu Hause. I am at home. I leave the world outside. I am in front of my computer. I go online ... anywhere. Heimat?

When I am asked where I am from, a lot of the times I answer: “maandish balad” (I have no country). Not because this question gets on my nerves, well, it does sometimes, but mainly because I really don’t know what to say. This question pushes a door open, behind which a complex realm manifests itself. Actually, it is a simple question set for a simple answer. But it implies a lot of traps. Any answer might accumulate clichés and confusion, not precision. Maybe because living outside the country where I was born for a long time makes me sensitive to nuances, which would be obscured otherwise. There is a demand for reconsideration all the time. Being confronted with other people’s Heimat challenges more sophisticated reflections from my side. Maybe because apparently the word Heimat is an invention of the German language which is closely linked to much more than home or homeland will ever imply, laying out a huge tray full of fragments provoking tempered discussions. Usually I do not apply the word Heimat. In recent years, there have been approaches to redefine Heimat in Switzerland and Germany, to give it a more current aspect and free the word from encrusted historical and traditional point of views, in order to adjust it to the multicultural present—as some societies tend to carry this attribute nowadays. I remain sceptical.

Maandish balad.

The last sixteen years, I had my base in the German part of Switzerland; now I have been living in Cairo for one year. I was and still am fortunate to be able to live in different countries and cultures, to undertake intensive commissioned travels that allow me to dive into varied models of life. If Heimat is understood as a matter of having rights, enough to eat, being respected, then it would be a cause of basic simplicity. But this very common interest in Heimat, I discovered, is ignored and dashed away by higher, prevailing interests. Taking advantage of relatively modest fundamental needs seems to be no moral conflict. Being born German, the question of and the desire for Heimat, linked to a national identity, was always an important and present discourse. Especially for my parents who belong to the German generation that lost their Heimat several times, that had to move several times, but yet had to defend the Heimat; it was a big issue as well as a chance after the Second World War. There was the illusion to be able to start at point zero. All losses, all disappointments, all intrusions of privacy, and all regrets were transformed and canalised into a huge projection, a dream: to build a morally healthy society, with enough space for the Heimat to expand once again.

Heimat linked with a national identity, I found difficult to refer to. My cultural background is German, not Middle European. It is German. I never felt comfortable with it, as it did not open up a space, but it was rather full of restrictions. I do remember having intense arguments with my parents during my teenage years

because I would declare that I was a world citizen. Through their eyes, I was basically betraying and offending the foundation they were trying to establish after the war, providing a so-called secure and happy place for their children to be proud of.

The word Heimat and its connotations made me feel uneasy. Always there was something to it, a certain demand to which I could not adapt. The offered Heimat was too narrow, too static. It demanded an overall appreciation and identification I could not live up to. I reached out for a broader world. A world with space to breathe, without having to fulfil specific behaviours, customs, regulations, expectations. A world where I just could be myself, whoever this would be, without having to face the pressure to belong to something, to be the same as, to be part of something which did not feel like mine. Of course, this causes loss and alienation and fear. The human desire to belong to something is sown. But realising intuitively and consciously that the “new world” was being built on disguises, without providing space for different needs—mental and physical space mostly being identified as a certain mean for interests serving hierarchies and power—I tried to find family some place else. I did not call it Heimat, maybe “geistige Heimat”, but most of the time I would call it family. Extended families were very much in fashion and in need in the seventies and eighties, providing cosy nests for radical thoughts and activism. It was a very important time to sharpen and shape consciousness and awareness. To rewrite her/his story, to widen the canon despite to ruling limitations. But somehow, it became obvious quite quickly that this implemented new regulations, new limitations, new expectations striving after fulfilment—new hierarchies even if the language was different. I felt uncomfortable. Once again I had to free myself from sweet and well-meant chains, which claimed to offer security and home. I understood that Heimat, family, was not be linked with a certain place, nor was it linked to certain structures and ideologies. Heimat is multidimensional and metaphysical. I find Heimat in books. I find Heimat in music and songs. I find Heimat in different cultures. I find Heimat in some landscapes. I find Heimat in talks. I find Heimat in some moments. I have Heimat as memories. Heimat became more flexible, more challenging, and livelier. Heimat became a matter of immediacy. I started to feel at home in different languages; discovering that there are expressions one cannot translate in order to express certain emotions, certain atmospheres. One can paraphrase, but then allowing that the true meaning vanishes.

My Heimat is scattered throughout the world. My Heimat is in good hands with some people. People I met. People I will meet. Heimat is something very individual. It is something quite intimate. And unique. My Heimat is not tied to a house, a tree, a street, a field, to belongings or a nation. My Heimat is within me. I carry it around with me all the time. Sometimes I can share it with others. Sometimes I cannot. Sometimes it makes me feel privileged. My passport supports this privilege. I am aware of it. Although sometimes I have the feeling that I am missing something. However, it was a long and sometimes painful struggle to reach this point. Times of restlessness, resentment, defeat, and parting had to be passed. Experiences had to be processed, reassessed. Heimat became a continual ongoing process, a lifetime project I am not concentrating on otherness. I am concentrating on what is there to be shared. And there is a lot to share. Not everywhere, not everything and not with everybody. But in the wide world, in the small world one meets people with whom it is possible to share and shape a mental and emotional topography, regardless of background, education, class, ethnic and cultural heritage, gender. Heimat should be a state of mind, not defined by exclusion, but defined by the application of common sense, acknowledging that diversity enriches

life and the capability of experiences. Something broader, almost something universal, wider than immediate kinship, blood, and ground. Heimat as a construct in a conventional sense limits a lot of possibilities. Heimat as a construct on a metaphorical level might leave some chances open. Especially needed in times when neo-geopolitical approaches are launched as ultimate solutions serving economic interests, while exploiting resources and human labour, re-establishing narrow-minded national and racial ideologies.

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### Notes

1 Arabic for Heimat (homeland).

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