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In Praise of No-Man's-Land

HARRY MULISCH

My great-grandparents on my father's side came from Saxony and Bavaria. My grandfather was born in Graslitz, now Kraslice in Czechoslovakia, my grandmother in Erfurt. She married in Prague. My father was born in Gablonz, now Jablonec/Czechoslovakia. He grew up in Bielitz, now Bielsko in Poland, and studied in Vienna. As a career officer in the Austro-Hungarian Army during the First World War, he shot at Russians on the Eastern Front, at Italians in the South and, on the Western Front, at Frenchmen, Englishmen, Americans and whoever else appeared there on the scene. In Antwerp, this highly Aryan artillery officer got to know the ten-year-old daughter of a Jewish family with which he was quartered. This girl, nine years later to become my mother, was born in Antwerp, although she wasn't Belgian. Her grandmother on her father's side came from Zala-Egerczeg, which today is in Hungary; her father, in other words my grandfather, was from Vienna. In Antwerp, he married my grandmother, who was born in Frankfurt on Maine. After the war, this family had to flee Belgium and went to settle in Amsterdam. My father returned to Vienna, where he now suddenly possessed Czechoslovakian nationality. His eldest sister married a Pole and settled in Kracow, while his youngest sister married a Czech and moved to Brno, where my niece lives now. His father had died in the meantime and, when his mother died in Wiesbaden, he emigrated to Holland. There, he had his announcement of engagement printed in French, his marriage announcement in German and then, I was born in Haarlem as a Czechoslovakian child.

A little while later, my grandfather on my mother's side got a divorce and moved to Paris, where he married a second time to a French lady and had a daughter. I never came to know this French step-aunt of mine. My parents also separated after ten years and my mother went to Amsterdam. Her brother just succeeded in emigrating to America in time, where he married an American and now lives in Miami. At the beginning of the Second World War, the son of my Polish aunt, after whom I am named, was murdered by the Russians as an officer in Katyn Forest. A couple of years later, my grandmother and my great-grandmother on my mother's side were killed by the Germans in Sobibor. My grandfather survived the war in Vichy France and died later in Paris. After the war, my mother emigrated to the

United States, became an American and is celebrating her eightieth birthday this year in San Francisco. My father died more than thirty years ago in Haarlem, on his sixty-fifth birthday, still as disciplined as ever.

So where, indeed is my homeland? My mother is now on her fifth passport; first an Austro-Hungarian one, followed, after the First World War, by the Nansen Pass of the stateless person, after which came a Czechoslovakian one when she married my father, then, following naturalization (which also made me an official Dutchman), a Dutch passport, and now her American one. I was born in Holland and I still live there now. But was Holland born in me? I feel bound to the place of my birth, to Haarlem, my 'father-city', the forests and dunes that surround it, and to Amsterdam, my 'mother-city', where I have been living for thirty years.

My best friends are Dutch and I love the freedom of Holland, but I hate its Calvinistic iconoclasm. Although I probably heard more German than Dutch in my childhood, the course of world history made Dutch my language. But that does not hold true for Dutch history, indeed less so for the history of Dutch literature. I have never regarded myself as solely a Dutch writer, but always as a European one who writes in Dutch. My life is Dutch; but there is nothing Dutch in the history of which I am the product. A sentence such as this could never be mine: 'In the Sixteenth Century, we rebelled against our Spanish overlords'. It was a brilliant rising (which, by the way, was not conducive to the unity of Europe), but I do not in any way belong to that 'we', like my aboriginal countrymen. On the contrary, my father still wore the coat of arms of the Hapsburgs and, in the Sixteenth Century, 'we', some of us, were far away in Bohemia, others probably even further still in various Galician ghettos. What 'we' most likely did in the 16th Century was hold back the Turks from Vienna. I am at all times conscious of my family history, as well as of the places in which it has played its course. But there again, of course, only with some degree of irony could I say that 'in the 15th Century, we inherited the Netherlands'.

In any case, there is no need to be the 'we' of a country in order to play your part in it. That very same uprising against Philip II was led by a German prince, William of Orange, who, initially, had also served the Hapsburgs and whose family had just as little to do with the 'we' of Holland. But ever since then, the Dutch have had a great deal to do with his family and, since then, the history of Holland is to a major extent identical to that of this family, although, to this day, no Dutch person has ever married into their direct line. As far as that's

concerned, I have had just as much, and as little, to do with the Dutch as they have. For while I, on the one hand, am indeed the first to have been born in this country, the mother of my children, on the other hand, is a genuine member of this 'we'; her family can no doubt trace itself back to the Batavi. Nonetheless, as holder of a Dutch passport, I feel myself to a certain extent more connected with such as the fabulous Prague Court of Rudolph II of Hapsburg, Holy Roman Emperor, King of Bohemia and Hungary (where various Dutchmen played a role, by the way) than with the Oranges in a monastery in Delft. Perhaps the situation of such writers as Nabokov, Beckett, Ionesco, Canetti presents them with even more of a problem, they who changed both their country and their language. And besides these few colleagues, Europe has countless further migrants to whom this would also apply.

In short, my only homeland can be Europe as a whole. All its wars, to me, have been civil wars. I cannot imagine any homeland other than Europe. This, indeed, is something which people like myself share in common with the members of this international royal family, who succeeded for centuries in upholding division between peoples, who possessed these peoples and themselves very rarely belonged to them. Their 'we' was never bound to place. The proletariat of every country never succeeded in unifying themselves, but the monarchs of all these countries were never divided in this way. True, whenever they had family quarrels, they did have their respective proletariats fight it out with one another; and these pitiable souls gave themselves to the task without any awareness that the majestic symbols of their national pride were themselves internationally-related cosmopolitans. The form of address was always 'Dear Nephew' when the Czar of All the Russians, the Emperor of Germany and the King of England corresponded with one another; 'Dear Mama', wrote the Queen of France in her letters to the Empress of Austria.

That is the way things go. And why shouldn't Europeans imitate what has been done before by these royal and imperial super-families? Our many languages need not be an obstacle. In Latin America, the same language is spoken in umpteen countries, despite which they don't form any one political unit. The Soviet Union, in contrast, is a political unit, in which one hundred and fifty languages are spoken, one of them predominating. In Switzerland, four languages are spoken without any one of them being thought of as 'Swiss'. So there are different possibilities, and Western Europe is already becoming similar to the Soviet model, with the English language assuming the role of Russian. One federal way or another, the Western European Family will certainly come into being; the borders have almost disappeared

already. There was a time when tribes made war on each other, then came the time for wars waged between regions, which were later to be carried on between states. France and Germany have fought bitter wars; nowadays, the idea of a war between these two countries would be just as laughable as the notion of a war between Sparta and Athens. So progress has been made. Entities like the Federal Republic of Germany, France, England, the Netherlands, Austria or Italy are gradually acquiring the same picturesque status as Prussia, Saxony, Hesse, Bavaria and whatever all those places were called. (They are the strange ashes of feudal fires which have long since gone out.) At the end of the 20th Century, the nationalism of Western Europe is changing into provincialism, thank God.

After the tribal wars, the regional wars and the wars between states, it looked for a long time as if a war between parts of the Earth would follow, as modern counterpart of the all-destroying Thirty Years War over religion. Since Gorbachev, this has become unlikely, although not everyone can accustom himself so rapidly to the idea of political ecumenism. If we can assume that the nightmare of Europe's radioactive meltdown is gone forever, then the political unification of Europe is already overdue and we will need to hurry ourselves before the last, all-encompassing international problem comes on the scene. For even a Greater Europe, of course, is by no means the last stop, even the unification of First and Second World is not the end; these are simply steps on the road towards that greatest dream, a federal World Republic, the Kingdom of Everlasting Peace. We must constantly direct our eyes towards such a planetary league of states.

In the preamble to his philosophical study, 'On Eternal Peace', Immanuel Kant recounts that such was the satirical inscription on a Dutch innkeeper's sign which bore the painting of a graveyard. He leaves it open to question whether this message was addressed to man in general, to war-like heads of state, or to philosophers 'who dream that dream so sweet'. For Kant, this dream was 'no empty idea, but a mission which, being little by little accomplished, is coming ever closer (since the times in which identical progress is made will hopefully grow ever shorter) to its goal.'

So it is at such a stage that we are now engaged. Kant had a recommendation too: 'The maxims the philosophers provide on the conditions that govern the possibility of civil peace are to be taken as advice by all states fitted out for war.' He calls this a 'Secret Article', because, as he says, state authority would consider it an affront to its dignity to call in public on its own subjects for advice on the outlines of its foreign policy.