

In the air

Thirty years on

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Round anniversaries commonly bring on attacks of nostalgitis and my mind keeps sloping off back to the Monday, thirty years ago today, when I arrived here from London to work for Europe. The journey had not been a happy one. My old car broke down for the first time outside Namur in freezing pounding rain. After that, progress was regularly interrupted by bone-chilling minutes beside SOS-telephones, wondering if this was a sign from the gods that I should turn back or an initiation rite, and being interrogated by the breakdown people („What has my father's name to do with your sending help!").

They were reluctant to do so („You still there? Oh well, all right then."), but each breakdown man got me a bit further on and I eventually crawled over the border into „Luxembourg"... the Belgian province. Later into „Luxembourg“, the grand-duchy and finally into „Luxembourg“, the city. I had arrived.

It was one in the morning. My hotel was shut for the night. I parked in the first space I spotted and trudged off to find a room.

Next morning, the car was besieged by glaring taxi-drivers, a parking-ticket stuck on its windscreen.

Welcome to Luxembourg.

What was it like here in 1979? Coming from student life in London, the capital seemed small and staid, not exactly unwelcoming but uninterested in outsiders. There were not many places to go - the Municipal Theatre, a rambling museum with Roman remains, dusty stuffed creatures and dark paintings, a few art galleries, a sprinkling of cinemas - and a secret glory. The Cinéma-thèque was a triumph of content over contingency: a dozen rows of hard chairs, a low-tech screen and the chance to see some of the greatest films ever made.

The shopping streets in the centre, then open to traffic, were less shiny than today but more distinctive: the international chain-stores and luxury boutiques had not yet moved in to homogenise the high-street. The city's architecture was solid - less glass, less light. Kirchberg, where I worked, was un-urbanised, predominantly green, with fields of crops and wild grassy swathes.

I spent week-ends exploring the city and was drawn to the narrow streets round the Palace and leading down to the Casemates, with their cobbles and old grey stone, the

carved wooden doors and those round turrets. Words like „picturesque“, „fairy-tale“ even „time-warp“ came to mind, but the atmosphere was palpable.

Physically, Luxembourg was unlike anywhere I'd ever been: what other capital city has a green ravine running through it and hairpin bends?

And it was unusual in non-physical ways too: I went into a shop in *Grand-Rue* to buy a coverlet, chose one, but suspected it was too big. „Take it home and see“, said the assistant. „If you decide to keep it, come back in and pay.“

One morning, our street was roused by the beating of a drum and boisterous band music. Down in the road below, a sheep wearing a red scarf was plodding patiently along, leading a small group of musicians. My French neighbour and I exchanged looks of total bafflement. „Franchement, ils font n'importe quoi dans ce pays“, said she.

Most unusual, for me, was the linguistic schizophrenia. On my first evening, I asked an elderly woman for directions, in French. She answered unhesitatingly, in German. Some street names were in French, others in Luxembourgish, many in both. Among themselves, people spoke Luxembourgish.

For some time it was hard to „engage“ with the country. With a six-month contract, I felt impermanent, more involved in my old life than what would probably be just a short stay. Days were spent among fellow foreigners on Kirchberg, evenings mostly at home, reading. It was not easy to make Luxembourgish friends, there was no floating student population to merge in with and few meeting-places. If you went to a concert, you could scarcely go up to people in the interval and talk to them about the music. The temptation was to fall back on colleagues or your language group, where you most naturally belonged.

The contract became a career, the short stay a new life and I began to settle in. Friends introduced me to Luxembourgish with similar interests and we did stuff together, building up a store of common experiences that in time became shared memories, stories to tell each other and laugh over. Gradually I was being woven into the warp and weft of everyday life, the network of trust and knowledge that binds people together - a process that speeded up and deepened when I eventually met G.

And the greatest network of all, language? My everyday working language was French and my new friends spoke French and German and did so when we got together - at first, anyway: it's awkward speak-



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...and those round turrets...

ing a foreign language when you have a mother tongue in common and evenings would often, quite naturally, revert to *Lëtzebuergesch*. I could follow more or less but not join in - and anyway felt oddly inhibited, as if to speak the language would be to intrude on a private family sphere.

Eventually, almost without thinking about it, I did begin speaking, adding Luxembourgish endings to French verbs if I didn't know a word. When I got stuck, I'd ask. Everyone was helpful and my stock of language grew - is still growing. I'm certainly not as fluent as I should be after so long, but always working in French has inevitably played its part.

And despite everything, English remains my mother tongue: I have become part of Luxembourg's linguistic schizophrenia.

In May 1979, I got special leave to return to London to take part in the general election. Despite my vote, Margaret Thatcher came to power and half the „axis“ that would unleash the egotistical eighties upon us was in place. Not just Luxembourg but the whole world would change for ever.

Thirty years on and Luxembourg has been „home“ now for many years. On 2nd January 2009, I applied under the new law for naturalisation. It seemed natural.