

**I Belong Here, Everywhere. *Heimat* in the Plural**

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Translated from the German by Didem Uca

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Ever since I received my certificate of naturalization, I can prove, once and for all, that I am a German. Those of us who have spent too many years living as “foreigners” in Germany or who, like myself, have lived in fear of deportation, can attest to how it feels when the state finally, officially, acknowledges that we belong here.

My perspective and sense of self have been decisively shaped by this naturalization process and my being forced to contend with questions about my origins and place of belonging. I have been on a continuous search for answers. Even now, with my German passport in hand, I wonder if others will view me as truly German once they find out that I was once an asylum seeker. How can I disclose my immigration history while simultaneously emphasizing that I am just as “German” as Germans who are not from immigrant backgrounds? The question “where are you from?” is inextricably entangled with that lovely German word, *Heimat*. But how do I define *Heimat*? Is Germany my *Heimat*? Or perhaps the towns of Warendorf or Pohlheim or the city of Essen? Or, rather than pinpointing my *Heimat* on a map, what if I feel at home whenever I’m with my favorite people, no matter where that may be? Is home where your friends are?

When asked what he associates with the concept, Minister of the Interior, Building, and *Heimat* Horst Seehofer responded, “For me, *Heimat* is, pure and simple, where I feel safe and at home, where I realize: I belong here.”<sup>1</sup>

Well put. But this also explains why it is so difficult—indeed, nearly impossible—to feel “at home” in a place where you are constantly made to feel as though you do *not* belong. Racism and discrimination have prevented people of immigrant heritage, especially newcomers, from feeling that they can claim Germany as their *Heimat*. And yet, despite these challenges, many do just that. Though their own versions may look a bit different than what our “*Heimatminister*” has in mind.

### **From Syria to Cologne. *It is what it is.***

After my events, I get to hear from people with interesting life stories who share what having more than one *Heimat* means to them. Sometimes, particularly when there’s catering, we talk for so long that we eventually end up being the only ones left in the room. I truly treasure these encounters and wish that there were more venues and opportunities to foster such discussions.

One specific encounter that has stuck in my mind was when I met a man—let’s call him Firas—who grew up in Syria and came to Germany as a refugee. He was 26 years old at the time and had been living in the country for seven years and in Cologne for three. I was just about to dig into a hearty plate from the buffet when he exclaimed, “Thank you so much for creating #MeTwo! It showed me that I’m not going through this stuff alone. This initiative means a lot to me, because I’m a #MeTwo-person, too: I was born in Syria but feel German and have made a new *Heimat* for myself here!”

He continued that, due to his accent, people often ask where he is from. “They hear that I can’t speak German very well and have an accent, so, on some level, it’s no problem that they ask this. I ask other people where they are from, too. People hear a foreign accent and get curious. But as soon as I say, ‘I’m from Cologne,’ they want to know where I am *originally* from. And I eventually give in and say ‘Syria’ to appease them so we can move on to another topic. As soon as

they hear that keyword, 'Syria,' I can see it in their eyes: I've become a refugee. That really brings down the mood. They act sympathetic and surely mean well, but I've started a new life here and am trying to put down roots. I don't like being seen as a refugee over and over."

I understood all too well what Firas was saying. We left the hall with his girlfriend and continued our conversation at the bar. "Then what should I do," he asked, "when someone doesn't accept 'Cologne' as my answer and instead insists on asking how things are in Syria? Do I tell them about the war? That's a pretty heavy topic to discuss with someone the first time you meet them."

Real talk: We need to recognize that questions about a person's heritage can be downright triggering when their old *Heimat* is linked to traumatic experiences. You don't have to be a psychologist to understand that, particularly for a refugee, relentless confrontations with their heritage may pour salt in old wounds and cause their grief to resurface.

For the first three years, Firas didn't mind when people asked where he was originally from, because, at that time, he had still seen himself as a refugee. The question was essentially synonymous with, "so which country did you flee from?" But after he had spent several years building a new home for himself here, it no longer felt right. How was he supposed to navigate this? Linguistic challenges aside, he did not feel inclined to explain such a personal matter in two minutes flat.

At this point, I will mention that Firas's girlfriend was a white, blonde German woman from a non-immigration background. He told me that they had been in a happy, committed relationship for the past two years. "I left behind a country in rubble and ashes. My family is scattered across the world. Of course, there are times when I wish that things were how they used to be, that I could live with those closest to me in a peaceful Syria. But things are different now. All I have left from my first *Heimat* is my memories and dreams. Today, *Heimat* means my relationships, particularly my relationship with my girlfriend. She and her family are the center of my world now. They have taken me in with love and treat me like a son. They're a very accepting family. And my girlfriend and I are expecting our

first child soon, who will have one Arabic and one German name. A #MeTwo kid!" When he was done, he eyed me expectantly.

He clearly wanted validation, needed to hear that I agreed with him and thought he made the right choices. Goodness gracious. In moments like this, where I myself am overcome with emotion, I often don't know if I should say anything at all. But this time, my joy won out. So, I encouraged him by saying, "You're doing just great. If you say Cologne is your new *Heimat*, then it is. Next time, you can try explaining that you have more than one *Heimat*. You're not a refugee anymore; you're a Colognian. This does not conflict with your feelings toward Syria. And if the other person still won't let it go, start quoting the Basic Law of Cologne: *Nothing stays the same. What's past, is past. What'll be, will be. It is what it is. Whaddya gonna do about it?*"<sup>2</sup> Of course, he knew these kernels of folk wisdom by heart, so we both burst out laughing.

No doubt Firas's story resonates with countless other folks with personal or familial histories of immigration or asylum-seeking whose own notions of *Heimat* have changed over time. A constructive conversation on new ways of approaching heritage and *Heimat* is long overdue—if not since the arrival of so-called guest workers (*Gastarbeiter*) many decades ago, then certainly since the significant influx of refugees beginning in 2014/2015. We need to ask: At what point is a person no longer labeled as a refugee, an immigrant, or a "guest" who is on the verge of leaving, but rather, as a German? At what point is a refugee no longer a refugee but rather a student, a restaurateur, or your friendly next-door neighbor? Let us be bold as a society and finally accept the fact that we can take these new relationships and experiences and turn them into new *Heimaten*, plural.

### **A values-based *Heimat***

Liberal social structures and concepts such as individuality and self-actualization, which I hold dear, form the core of the German values system. They should thus also be acknowledged by those who immigrate here. *Heimat* in the plural is my home. Fostering relationships with others in our communities can fulfill and ground us so profoundly that we begin to create a sense of *Heimat* through

coexistence—a values-based *Heimat*. Lofty though that may sound, it simply means that we make our homes in the places we share with the people dear to us, places where our core values are upheld. Critics will dismiss this as too abstract: “You just don’t know where you belong!” In my experience, however, this modern approach to *Heimat* is quite prevalent, especially among city dwellers—indeed, even among Germans *without* an immigration background. A more positive interpretation would regard this as evidence of the unravelling of a long held yet obsolete understanding of *Heimat* predicated on a fixed geographic place of origin and a supposedly “natural” sense of belonging.

Firas’s story illustrates what a values-based *Heimat* can look like in practice. He explained that he had completed preparatory German language courses and recently enrolled at the university. His day-to-day life was defined by being a college student—the campus camaraderie, an intensive engagement with his favorite subjects, and his friendships with open-minded, liberal classmates. He was fond of his studies, learning, and the people around him. Living in a shared apartment helped to enrich his sense of community. He enjoyed spending time with his roommates, who got him plugged into the local jazz scene. Music provided him with another new way to feel at home. And there are many other facets of his life I could list here. But, ultimately, both of our *Heimat* conceptions boil down to the same thing: they are values-based. In Firas’ life as in my own, there are people, attitudes, principles, and experiences that mean a great deal to us. A new *Heimat* is constructed out of all of these building blocks.

Other building blocks, such as democracy, are universal. When Firas discussed the political situation in Syria, he emphasized that, despite his strong attachment to the country, he cherished Germany’s rule of law, division of powers, and freedom of opinion. I had the impression that he felt the need to justify self-identifying as a Colognian. Among his friends and within his new family, this was no longer necessary; not having to explain oneself is the crux of *Heimat*. I told him that I understood his point of view and valued our constitution just as he did. We mused that we could, theoretically, feel equally at home in other democratic countries. For us, a values-based *Heimat* means that we view the metaphorical

building that houses the liberal-democratic basic order as our own—and that it is therefore almost irrelevant where this building is located. I could, for example, imagine living in France, because I know that the same pillars of democracy are in place as in Germany.

As I've already mentioned, there are, of course, myriad other important reasons—such one's relationships, ability to speak the language, and enjoying one's job—that make cultivating a sense of belonging possible. The most crucial of all, however, is a belief that Firas and I share: *Heimaten* can change; they can be found; and they can be additive. *Heimat* can be defined as the place or the places where we feel supported to become our truest selves and can form meaningful bonds with others.

That Firas felt comfortable sharing such nuanced reflections on his identity demonstrates once again that, unless we stop demanding one-word answers to questions about someone's presumed heritage, our conversations will never dig beyond the surface level. Instead of "But where are you really from?" why not ask, "So, what's your story?" Such exchanges would require the right conditions: genuine engagement and enough time. Sensing both, the speaker may choose to elaborate beyond the canned response that is usually expected of them.

There is also another factor at play here: People from refugee backgrounds who are not yet very comfortable speaking German may initially prefer giving simple answers like "Syria" or "Afghanistan" when asked where they are from. My sense is that, after gaining fluency and confidence with the language, they describe their views on *Heimat* in more complex ways and express their emotions more readily. For some, talking about their *Heimat* may be too painful, while others may simply wish to avoid a potentially awkward situation. These are all legitimate feelings and serve as a reminder to approach questions about heritage with more sensitivity.

Those of us with especially complicated personal histories, myself included, may throw our walls up when asked these reductive "where" questions, and then contemplate, as I used to do, "hmm, I wonder which snippet of my biography I should put on display this time? Or am I better off focusing on my

personal milestones? Or do I feel like going through all of it? Do I even have the time and the energy? Do we even know each other like that?”

*Heimat* is a multifaceted construct that is constantly reconfigured through experiences, relationships, and personal attitudes. It can no longer be equated with “roots,” because this would suggest that our sense of belonging is geographically predetermined and ignores that we can “put down roots” in many places. Indeed, everyone should have the right to determine where they belong based on their own individual considerations. If *Heimat* is a construct that is interwoven with our personal thoughts and feelings, then it stands to reason that people without immigration backgrounds may also devise their own particular responses to “where” questions. Someone born in Munich may give this as their answer. And if they have lived in Berlin for many years and feel settled and at home there, they can respond with “Berlin” or name their neighborhood of Kreuzberg, Pankow, or Spandau. In general, these answers are accepted without further scrutiny. And this is precisely the kind of unconditional acceptance that many of us with immigrant and refugee backgrounds who view Germany as our new *Heimat* want for ourselves. However, the outdated belief that people from our backgrounds be required to unpack our “foreign origins” continues to reign supreme. Your biography can either be German or immigrant. Anything out of the box boggles the mind.

### ***Heimat* in the Plural**

The sheer number of powerful and vulnerable narratives shared by hyphenated folks through the #MeTwo movement has proven that many of us wish to speak out against and combat the toxic exclusionism and racism that plague us precisely *because* we view Germany as our home. Through these acts, by exerting our democratic rights and contributing to Germany’s development, we endeavor to leave our own mark on our homeland. Isn’t that proof enough that we belong?

All too often, the prevailing discourse on *Heimat* has failed to include the diverse perspectives of each and every individual in our society. In my view, this should be the aim, or indeed the duty of the Minister of *Heimat* and of politics as a

whole: to recognize the ways in which various people from immigrant and refugee backgrounds approach the topics of *Heimat*, belonging, and identity; to take concrete actions to strengthen access to belonging; and to promote a more open-ended vision of *Heimat*.

So much would be gained in intercultural contexts if we were to simply refer to *Heimat* not in the singular, but rather as *Heimaten* in the plural. Yes, this plural form does exist; it even appears in the *Duden* dictionary. This would send the signal that no one is obliged to unequivocally declare one place as their *Heimat* or to choose between two apparently irreconcilable *Heimat* affiliations. There are, after all, hundreds of thousands, no, millions of MeTwo-ers throughout our country.

*Heimat* has been constricted by superficialities and “hard facts”—like one’s passport or place of birth—for far too long, thereby constraining many of us from immigrant and refugee backgrounds in a painful corset that merely exacerbates feelings of identity fragmentation. But our inner compasses do not align with one single place; rather they align with people, stories, and experiences.

Some people may find the idea of *Heimat* in the plural vexing. They push for an unequivocal answer to the question of origins, one that calcifies and remains unchanged over time. In general, we tend to assess “foreigners” under the rubrics that have been embedded within our brains since childhood. Our interactions with others are bound by the frameworks with which we are already familiar. But is it right to impose our ideas of *Heimat* onto others without walking a mile in their shoes? Our outlooks on life are as distinctive as our conceptions of identity. And if you look around, you realize that, in the 21<sup>st</sup>-century, in a world constantly spinning on its axis, the experience of feeling connected to multiple *Heimaten* is not as unusual as it may seem.

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<sup>1</sup> <https://www.zeit.de/gesellschaft/zeitgeschehen/2019-05/horst-seehofer-heimat-vermaechtnis-studie-heimatminister/komplettansicht>. (Translator’s note: Seehofer served in this role from 2018 to 2021.)

<sup>2</sup> The italicized section is written in Kölsch, the Cologne dialect.