

A Luxembourg youth

One never really leaves one's childhood behind. Gentle friend or cruel wound, it accompanies us our whole life, often pursuing us, always catching up with us. On this steep path, childhood and adolescence are the steps towards the formation of the adult where the will to belong to a group, a tribe, a country, by adopting the codes, rites and uniforms, manifests itself with intensity, sometimes with a desperate eagerness.

For my part, I dreamt my childhood before living it. Perhaps I even fled into the imaginary from a reality that appeared too dull to me, too narrow, too codified. I never wore the shirt of a football team, any more than the kimono of a judo club, the scout uniform, or the military uniform... images of a youth that Charles Fréger captures through his objective. From very early on, I sensed that I was different. I belonged elsewhere, to another world, liberated from styles and trademarks, far from all identification to a social group. An oddness that made me conspicuous to my playground classmates at the Carnot Highschool in Paris. Useless to say that I would have liked then to draw force and comfort from the council of Jean Cocteau - *"that which others reproach in you, cultivate it! Because it is you..."* - this is so true that to escape from the common lot insulates and invites you to suffer all the mockeries. Never, however, did I doubt my identity. Better, I identified myself very quickly in the Grand Duchy of Luxembourg, my mother's country of origin and the fatherland of my grandparents where I had the habit of returning for the short school holidays. *"Where will you go this winter?"* asked my classmates, *"To Luxembourg,"* I responded with a pride mixed with scorn for these little civilized souls who believed that Luxembourg was a garden of greenery nestled in the heart of the VIème district of Paris! I intensely lived this mythified and sublimated membership to Luxembourg with whom I felt a community of destiny.

Much too much small to be taken seriously, made fun of but coveted by its powerful neighbours, Luxembourg became an ideal of life: proud of its roots and its glorious past, attached to its independence and its sovereignty, that had decided to compensate for its territorial exiguity through the achievement of a universal vocation. I was a stray branch of the Luxembourg tree, lost in the Parisian jungle. And I felt revived again in the warm and loving cocoon my Luxembourgish grandparents had woven around me. Undoubtedly because in Luxembourg the parental discipline was slackened appreciably... Each child has his magic kingdom. A house of family, a pleasant memory, a comforting feeling, a place, a face... My magic kingdom of childhood was an authentic kingdom, a Grand Duchy whose sovereigns quickly became the icons to venerate, all the more so as my grandfather sent me (as if they were holy pictures) postcards representing the Grand Duke Jean, his wife the Grand Duchess Joséphine-Charlotte and their children. They became closer and more familiar to me than distant members of my own family.

"Childhood has its odours," wrote Cocteau. My most beautiful memories of childhood have the flavour of *kramich aux raisins secs tartinés de beurre*, the colour of the flag with its horizontal bands of which the paleness of the blue never failed to delight me, the warmth of the Christmas market on the Place d'Armes or the saraband of *Péckvillercher* at the time of the *Eimaischen*, the splendour of the valleys of the Sûre and of the

Pétrusse or the Renaissance lines of the Grand Ducal Palace... while the castle of Colmar-Berg seemed to lock up behind its high gates the most secret of my dreams of the future journalist chronicler of *Gotha*! Without a doubt I was dazzled by my passion for Luxembourg, almost blinded by an immoderate and unconditional love.

This attachment to the country did not only find its *raison d'être* in the love I carried to my grandparents, or in that part of myself of which I was proudest, but nourished itself, little by little, to construct a patriotism all the more disembodied since I lived all year long in Paris and since my passport kept pointing out to me my French condition. Who can tell me what Luxembourg really is? Some will say that our country is a relic of the History that became the driving force of European modernity. Others will define it by its mosaic of cultures, its mish-mash of people and languages, point of passage at the crossroads of Europe.

Who could reproach me for having maintained an ardent flame for a sometimes idealized, often dreamt of, Luxembourg, always sublimated by my imagination? From this the physiognomy of a country is like the face of a friend: with the passing of time and distance, the imperfections and the defects tend to grow blurred. The immediate and daily vision loses place to the sole regard that finds its value in the adventure of a life: the tender eye of a childhood that has been found again.

It pleases me to introduce the brilliant work of Charles Fréger and his pointillist vision of Luxembourg youth. It deciphers with humour and empathy the daily lives of the young girls and boys who compose her population in all her diversity. His work attests to one thing: the Grand Duchy has all the appearances of a true country, but just smaller. In miniature, therefore in larger. Because the social fabric did not distend, human rapport remained simple and direct. The feeling of membership is undoubtedly stronger there than elsewhere. I like the words of Saint-Exupéry who wrote, "*One is of his childhood, as one is of a country*". Imaginary or real, dreamt of or sublimated, my childhood is certainly an enchanted kingdom, but a political and geographical state - a state of mind also - which has the name of Luxembourg! That is enough for me to love it.

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