

# caught *between* cultures

**For the grown children of immigrant parents living in a neither/nor world, settling down as adults becomes a game of where in the world is home.**

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Irene Rasetti lives in Calgary, but says Italy still “calls me there.” In the double image, she wears her late father’s tie and tie clip, mementos of his emigration to Canada in the late 1950s.

**R**epetitive and simple to the point of becoming monotonous after two takes, the three-stanza Polish scout song was easy to learn, its annoyingly catchy tune impossible to forget. When I first heard it at a Polish-language summer camp near Garner Lake, Alberta, I was 10, maybe 11, but old enough to realize it was unlike the traditional camp songs about sitting around the fire or listening to the wind in the trees. It had a familiar patriotic sentiment like the classic scout songs about fighting for Poland’s independence and freedom, but it was also about gratitude. An imposed gratitude that only applied to us: the Polish kids whose parents came to Canada for a better life.

“Oh Poland, Oh Poland/ How can I tell you what’s in my heart/ You have given me so many treasures/ I love you,” is the English translation of the song’s first verse. With a barely there pause, just enough to catch your breath without offending your adopted country, the second verse begins: “Canada, Canada/How can I tell you what’s in my heart/You have given me so many treasures/ I love you.” Regardless of one’s chosen interpretation—a letter of thanks to both your home-and-native lands, or

an ode to divided loyalties—the last verse, with one “Oh Poland,” and one “Canada” is the kicker.

We, the young Canadian-Poles who had mostly unknowingly escaped the grip of Communism in the early-to-mid-’80s, only to return to Poland every summer into the arms of our *babcias* (Polish for grandmothers) after the collapse of the Iron Curtain, were supposed to be grateful to both nations: not nationalism at odds, but patriotic polygamy. Canada had offered security during a tumultuous time in Eastern Europe and had become our home, but Poland was where we came from and our elders wanted to make sure we knew our roots.

Most of us, including myself, had the same story: our parents made secret escape plans to leave Poland, often with a stopover for a year or two in countries like Germany or Sweden before the Canadian immigration papers were finalized. It was too dangerous to return to Poland before the collapse of Communism in 1989 but, afterward, we’d make biennial or annual pilgrimages back to Poland to visit family and to be immersed in and reintroduced to our birth country. Poland had given us life but Canada

had given our families opportunity, and as kids we were grateful without really knowing what any of it meant. But as adults most of us have figured out that equal love for two countries isn't as effortless as the camp song suggests. Instead of symbiotic existence, when you're caught between two cultures, gratitude often turns into confusion.

"Third Culture Kids (TCKs) are raised in a neither/nor world. It is neither fully the world of their parents' culture (or cultures), nor fully the world of the other culture (or cultures) in which they were raised," write David C. Pollock and Ruth E. Van Reken in *Third Culture Kids: The Experience of Growing Up Among Worlds*. "TCKs frequently build relationships to all of the cultures, while not having full ownership in any."

Third Culture Kids are children who have spent a significant part of their developmental years outside their parents' culture, and although the label is usually bestowed upon children who grow up in a number of different cultures, many of the same characteristics apply to children from immigrant families who have divided their time between two countries.

"As TCKs and immigrant children get older, in some ways they can bridge both of the cultures, especially during school and teenage years when they want to identify with their peers," says Becky Matchullis, a Calgary-based life coach who specializes in expatriate support and often works with TCKs and immigrant families. "But the defining of who they are can take longer because it's more complicated, and often, by their late 20s, early 30s, you will find them back overseas, not only because of the skills they have, but also because that feels more like home."

When the adolescent years of trying to fit in have been left behind, the university years of self-discovery have come to an end and it's time to put down roots of your own, the uncertainty of where you belong is often magnified.

## The Great Return

"I felt very Canadian when I was younger," says Karolina Czerska, 31, who immigrated with her parents and sister to Calgary from Warsaw when she was four years old. "But when I got older and into high school, I definitely realized our family did certain things that made us very Polish; we had open-faced sandwiches, for example." On a deeper level, there was always a feeling of being different no matter where she was, even though Czerska's blue-eyed blondness allowed her to physically slip between Polish and Canadian cultures seamlessly, unlike children who are visible minorities in one or the other country.

Regardless, when Czerska visited Poland with her family as a child, she knew she was unlike her cousins in ways that weren't easily definable. Upon her return to Canada, she also felt different from her peers. And those feelings never went away. After completing her bachelor of arts at the University of Calgary, including a stint in France during a student exchange, she wanted to return to Europe and applied to a master's program in euroculture, a joint-degree program organized by a network of universities across Europe where participating students study half of the program at one university and the other half in another country. Czerska applied to study in Poland and Italy.

"I wanted to improve my [Polish] language skills on the one hand and also to see what contemporary Poland was like for my generation," says Czerska, who as a child would go to weekly Polish lessons that included language classes, history and religion courses, which she now describes as

For years, Antonija Klotz (shown on the cover) felt displaced between Canada and Croatia. Today, she treasures her grandfather's scarf and the leather satchel that once contained his camera and personal items.



“ [The] strange thing about living in two places is that whenever you are ‘here,’ you carry within you a ‘there.’ ”

being “archaic.” (The choice to study in Italy was “purely hedonistic.”) “In terms of language, the language we use in Canada is much different than the language that is constantly developing [in Poland].”

After completing her MA and still not ready to return to Canada, she stayed on at the university, becoming the co-ordinator for the same program. Eight years after arriving, she continues to live in Krakow—now with her Welsh husband and two young sons, both of whom have three passports. “Even though I consider myself Polish, I am different, I suppose, than 100-per-cent Poles,” says Czerska, adding that although there are many benefits to living in Poland and being fully immersed in the culture, some things are much more difficult than they are in Canada. Even in a respected field, for example, it's difficult to make a good living unless you work more than one job, says Czerska, and it's often hard for young people to get full-time contracts from employers in Poland.

The family travels regularly from Poland to both the U.K. and Canada to ensure the children know a bit about each culture. “It's a very lucky position to be in, but at the same time, a little confusing or uprooted because we do have to mentally be in three places,” says Czerska. “[We have to] make sure that the boys know all those places, and they won't have it easy not having one defined identity among the three.”

## Neither Here Nor There

In his *T: New York Time Style Magazine* article, Thomas Beller writes about living between two cities: New Orleans during the school year and New York City during the summer and winter holidays. “The first notable, strange thing about living in two places is that whenever you are ‘here,’ you carry within you a ‘there,’” Beller writes.

That sentiment, albeit on a larger geographical scale, is often shared by those who grew up in Canada in a culturally diverse home and returned overseas every summer to visit relatives and to see what is affectionately, if not carelessly, called “the homeland.” “When I was here [in Calgary] I always felt more Italian,” says Irene Rasetti, who returned

to her parents' native Italy as a child every couple of years for extended visits with the family. "And when I was in Italy, I always felt more Canadian."

Born in Calgary, Rasetti, 38, grew up immersed in all things Italian. "Even if you're born and raised in Canada, the culture is so inbred in you: you're eating the food, speaking the language, following the traditions," says Rasetti who, after numerous trips back to Italy growing up, decided to relocate full time to Milan when she was 20. She spent the next eight years first studying fashion design then working in some of the top Italian design houses. It wasn't until she was 28 and worried about her aging parents that she returned to Calgary to be closer to them. "That sense of family is very much part of us and I wanted to stay [in Italy], but who would look after my parents?" she says.

Since returning to Canada, Rasetti has owned and sold a clothing boutique, had a son, bought a house and now lives with her partner near her mother (her father passed away last June). Although there are signs of the Canadian roots overgrowing the Italian ones, Rasetti hasn't let go of the idea of one day going back to Italy full time. "There's always that connection, it's something about it, there's a passion over there, a zest for life that I miss," she says. "There's something that calls me there."

When a family immigrates to Canada, more often than not it flocks to families from the same cultural background. This often results in an insular community that includes language schools and folkloric dance troupes for the kids, plus church-going and social activities for the adults and the entire family. "It's almost as if you belong to a secret organization where you have a different language, a different culture, a different upbringing," says Antonija Klotz, 36, who immigrated to Calgary from Croatia with her family when she was five years old. At eight, she returned to Croatia to live with her grandparents for a year, strengthening the country's emotional pull on her and creating a wider separation between "here" and "there," at least for some years afterward. "There was a constant displacement," says Klotz. "I felt that I was neither Canadian nor Croatian, and I had this patriotism neither here nor there."

In university Klotz returned to live in Croatia in hopes of identifying with her roots, but it was tough to succeed in her chosen career of photography. In post-war Croatia, the idea of paying someone to take photos was unheard of, says Klotz, so she returned to Canada. Eventually, she fell in love, got married and had three children in Calgary. Although she no longer feels as displaced as she did growing up, Klotz continues to be drawn to different cultures and is aware of her sensitivity towards multiculturalism and immigration—a common sentiment among those who grew up between cultures.

"There's an expanded world view so they often relate to others in the world...there's an amazing ability to observe instead of just jumping in," says Matchullis of immigrant children. "There's often that chameleon effect." But there are also divided loyalties, and sometimes it shows up in



In Chinese culture, jade pendants are worn for health and good fortune, says Andrew Mah. "I wore mine a bit reluctantly when I was young, not wanting to be different, but I now wear it with pride and affection."

TCKs and immigrant children as an unwillingness to commit to a life partner.

For Andrew Mah, who was born and raised in Calgary by Chinese immigrant parents, commitment wasn't the problem. Rather, as he got older, the more challenging it became to find a partner who fit both his western ideals—think actress Mary Stuart Masterson or any female character from a John Hughes movie, says Mah, only half-jokingly—and his appreciation for his eastern culture. "One of the cross-cultural challenges I had was the western idealized vision of someone I wanted to meet. But there are other issues as far as Chinese culture goes: the family ties are very strong and there is an implied corollary, where in western culture there is not—taking care of the previous generation, for example."

Growing up, Mah, 42, and his family celebrated western traditions and holidays such as Christmas and Thanksgiving and, like many Chinese residents, had both Chinese and Canadian names. But there were also powerful ancestral ties to Chinese culture in the home.

Mah was 20 years old the first time he travelled to China to visit his parents' villages with his mother, and that was when, finally, he began to understand his roots. "I always felt a displacement in terms of the things my parents did," says Mah, referring to his mother's fondness for bargaining—a peculiar activity in a Calgary grocery store but part of daily life in China. "When you see your mother in the environment she grew up in, things make a lot more sense."

After visiting China for the first time, Mah also realized there was a difference between what his physical appearance signified in Canada versus

in China. “As a visible minority, there are still times when someone will say, ‘Go back to where you came from.’ As multicultural as we get, it’s something to be a visible minority and to see that you’re judged by a standard,” he says. “But then in China, I look like I belong, but because I don’t speak the language, as soon as someone speaks to me I can’t reply, so I don’t belong in that sense.”

During a recent trip back, his third and one that lasted almost five months, Mah met his future wife. The couple plans to marry this fall and settle down in Calgary, but Mah wants to explore the idea of going back to China to live for a year or two once they have children.

## A Brave New World

One of the greatest challenges of being the child of immigrants is the difference between how you view the country where you were born or visited as a child, versus how your parents see it. Cursed/blessed with equal parts selective nostalgia, romanticism and the feeling of only being a visitor, a child of immigrants can never truly understand what it was like for their parents to leave their home country—not for a promotion, not for a lover and not for an extended adventure, but for a better life, for safety and financial reasons.

“When you go as a kid, you have no responsibilities,” says Matchullis, who has been on both sides, living abroad as a child and then as a parent with her own kids before settling down (for now) in Calgary. “But for a parent that has left, it’s for certain reasons and often it’s a tough choice and, sometimes, the parents will even talk about the place in a negative way so the kids will feel better about being where they are.”

Even though Mah was born in Calgary, he remembers his father telling him as a child that, although he may think he fits in, one wrong move and he, the young Mah, could be put on a boat back to China. The subtle threat was perhaps meant to create an emotional rift between there and here, so that Mah might better appreciate the sacrifice his parents made.

Rasetti too remembers asking her father about returning to Italy, to which he’d respond that the country was never good to him so why would he want to go back. He did speak about his days as a child, playing on the seaside, she says, and those were the memories he hung on to. “It’s a different culture, no one talks about anything,” says Rasetti. “Part of me thinks they don’t talk about it to convince themselves that they don’t miss it.”

Near the end of *The Namesake*, Jhumpa Lahiri’s story of an American immigrant family from Calcutta and the eldest son’s struggle to understand his family’s roots while growing up in the U.S.—a gift I received from a fellow child of immigrants—there is a poignant passage in which the son, Gogol,

begins to understand what his parents felt after coming to America.

“He wonders how his parents had done it, leaving their respective families behind, seeing them so seldom, dwelling unconnected, in a perpetual state of expectations, of longing...Gogol knows now that his parents had lived their lives in America in spite of what was missing, with a stamina he fears he does not possess himself,” writes Lahiri. Earlier in the book, there’s another familiar scene where the matriarch of the family is looking through her address book only to find page after page filled exclusively with the ever-changing addresses of her grown son and daughter, whom she refers as to “vagabonds.”

Perhaps it’s the new generation’s stamina for continuously looking for its place in the world. As I myself moved from city to city, apartment to basement suite, back to the main floor of a house in the same city or yet another one, my mother used to say the same thing as she added my new contact information each time to her address book, although she would playfully suggest that no matter where I moved, I would still be there, insinuating that perhaps I was trying to run away from myself.

I took the innuendo to heart, and when, years later, I came across a poem about a similar state of mind—packing up your suitcases only to, again, find yourself at the next destination—I cut it out and pasted it in my scrapbook. I wanted to transcribe it for you here, word for word, to end on a poetic note, but I can’t find the scrapbook. You see, it’s in storage somewhere, along with all the other belongings I couldn’t take to England with me on my latest move. **S**

Malwina Gudowska’s family brought this hat with them when they fled Poland. It reminds the writer of her grandfather, who worked for a fur company.

