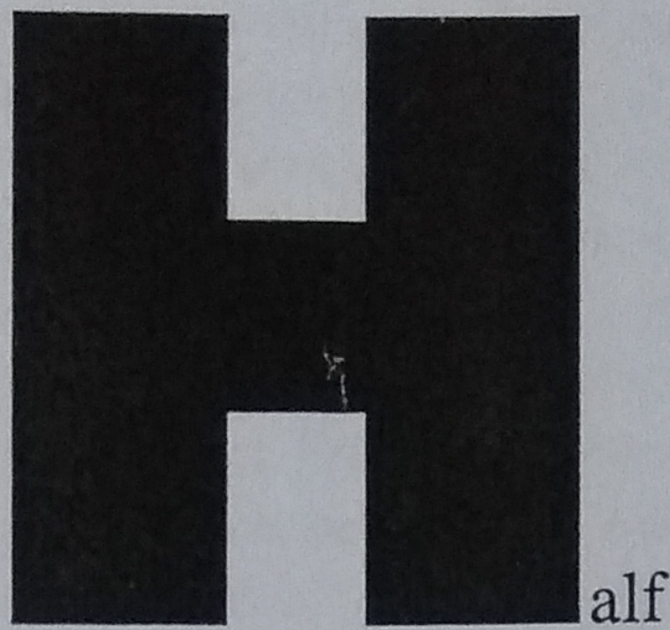

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a Century of Belgium

Having been born and brought up in Berlin, then lived successively in Leipzig (with a break for military service), Rostock, Cologne and the Belgian city of Leuven, I have now dwelt for over thirty years in Ghent, in the heart of Flanders. Strangely enough, this means that I have ended up exactly where I always wanted to be, ever since I was quite young. As early as the 1940s, during the war, I had been impressed by what happened in the Low Countries in the sixteenth century, and drawn parallels with the murderous conflict of which I was myself then an eye-witness. I was enthralled by Schiller's masterly history of the Dutch Revolt, by his *Don Carlos*, by Goethe's *Egmont* and Beethoven's overture to it; fascinated, too, by Emperor Charles v (himself born in Ghent) whom I saw as a tragic figure. So that even then I knew more about Flanders, and specifically about Ghent, than most of the city's inhabitants probably know today.

Even so: when I first arrived in Leuven in the spring of 1952, aged just twenty-four, I had no idea that I would be staying in this country, in Belgium, for the rest of my life. But it was not pure chance that brought me here; I had made a considered decision to come and work, and so also live, in this country. I came to Leuven because I had studied philosophy, because I found my work as a research assistant at Cologne University unsatisfying, because I was still wondering whether to start on a doctoral thesis, because I had become fascinated by the philosophy of Edmund Husserl and Leuven was where the papers of this German-Austrian-Jewish thinker were housed, because I liked the idea of spending some time helping to sort out his literary estate, and because I had just been invited to do exactly that by the founder of Leuven's Husserl Archive (Herman Leo van Breda, the man who rescued Husserl's manuscripts from the Nazis). Even more clearly, it was by my own choice that I spent the next fifteen years in Leuven doing this work (and gaining my doctorate). And in 1967 I chose even more decisively in favour of Belgium when I opted for a chair at the University of Ghent even though I also had offers of teaching posts in Germany, the Netherlands and America (as well as one in Wallonia). True, during my early years in Ghent I still assumed that sooner or later I should return to Germany. But when there seemed to be a real prospect of this, I suddenly realised: I just don't want to leave here. I had grown too attached to this country, its people (Flemings as well as Walloons), their languages (Dutch as well as French) and the way they lived, thought, and behaved. Why? Let me try to explain by recounting three anecdotes from my early years in Belgium.

In 1952 Belgium, like other European countries, had by no means come to terms with, let alone forgotten, the horrors of the war and the German occupation. Even at that time, though, I was to discover that the Belgians, Flemings and Walloons alike, are a magnanimous race. At that time, in other European countries subjected to Nazi occupation, you were – quite understandably – regarded with hostility or at least suspicion simply because you were German. But not in Belgium. The Belgians are individualists, but in their case individualism means not only having a sharp eye for their own interests but also, and equally, acknowledging the individuality of others. As a result, the Belgians did not automatically equate being German with being a Nazi; you were always given the chance to show for yourself where

you stood, what you were for or against. With a few rare exceptions, the fact that I happen to be German has never caused me any problems in this country. (Please note: I have never associated with those who collaborated with the German occupation). One of those rare incidents was particularly striking. I shall never forget it. For various (purely practical) reasons, the director of the Husserl Archive and another professor from the Leuven Institute of Philosophy wanted me to meet the housekeeper of a former president of the Institute who had recently died. When they introduced me as a colleague from Germany, the lady withdrew her already outstretched hand with the words 'Moi ' n'aime pas les boches' ('I don't like Huns'). I made a slight bow and left the house, but waited outside. A few minutes later the two professors also emerged, full of apologies for their 'blunder'. It turned out that the lady's father had been one of some hundred and fifty citizens of Leuven shot by the Germans in 1914 for their supposed involvement in a popular uprising against the invaders. In a strange and complex solidarity all of us, my Belgian friends as well as myself, had to accept this irrevocable historical fact. In any case, this experience made me resolve that under no circumstances would I exchange my German nationality for Belgian. Some years later the Institute of Criminology at Ghent University, with which I was then closely involved, was planning a trip to Poland, including a visit to Auschwitz. I couldn't go around there with them as a 'Belgian', could I? In this day and age, if you're a German there's no escaping the fact.

About the same time I had another experience which was in a way analogous – less morally and politically sensitive, but for me still significant. I had arrived in Belgium on a three-month visa, with no residence permit, no work permit, no health insurance, nothing. The one possible justification for my presence was that the Husserl Archive received a modest subsidy from UNESCO, and this could at a pinch be regarded as the source of my salary. So I had to report to the local authorities in Koorbeek-Lo, the suburb of Leuven where I was living at the time. At the town hall they told me 'The burgomaster is in his fields' and showed me how to get there. The burgomaster was busy ploughing, and signalled that he would be with me in a minute. I decided to tell him the truth. And in French quite as bad as mine he said, 'Tout celà est très bien, mon fils, mais on ne va pas raconter celà aux autorités, on n'aura que des ennuis' ('That's all well and good, my son, but don't go telling the authorities that, you'll have nothing but trouble'). And then my burgomaster proceeded to cook up a tale that would make my presence in the country reasonably acceptable to the 'authorities' – thus showing the same respect for the individual and his story as in the earlier incident.

These two stories come together, so to speak, in my third anecdote. 1968: the year of student protest. In Ghent this did not reach its peak until early '69. The students occupied my faculty building. I was on their side; not that I necessarily agreed with all their ideas, but I strongly believed that they had the right, and should have the opportunity, to express them. Alone among my colleagues, incidentally, I continued to teach, in my room, during the occupation – something the students appreciated. After a few days the building was forcibly cleared by the gendarmerie, and I was hauled over the coals by the university's governing body. (I had put my office at the students' disposal, and had other rooms opened for them, giving them access to duplicators and so on, thus preventing a deal of criminal damage.) Some of the Governors suspected me of having instigated the whole student revolt; after all, I did come from what was then Communist East Germany. However, the Rector invited me to justify my actions, and asked the other members of the Council to listen to my account without interrupting. I said that, in my view, as a teacher I had only done my duty to my pupils: letting them have their say and listening to them. 'According to you,' the rather conservative-minded Rector replied, 'we should really give you a vote of thanks.' And with that the matter was settled, with true Belgian magnanimity (though some friends among my colleagues had feared that as a foreigner I would be thrown out of the country for engaging in unacceptable political activity).

Generally speaking, the great majority of Belgians are reasonably well-disposed to the (peaceful) presence of foreigners and/or strangers in their

midst, except when they feel (usually wrongly) that they are being cheated in some way. Even then, though, their reactions are no more violent than in the well-known bickering between Flemings and Francophones. Belgium is actually a very 'European' country. In two ways: on the one hand I don't find Belgium particularly globally-minded; on the other, it is very much involved, particularly on a cultural level, with events in its neighbouring countries: in the Netherlands, Germany and especially, and this goes for the Flemings as well, in France (unlike larger countries, which sometimes seem to be interested only in what is going on within their own borders). It is typical of this attitude that Husserl's philosophical legacy – which brought me here in the first place – should have found a home in this country; but also that French twentieth-century thinkers, in particular, such as Maurice Merleau-Ponty, Emmanuel Levinas and Jacques Lacan made their names here. Where culture is concerned, Belgium is a quite exceptionally welcoming land. And is not this very quality, this openness to ideas from outside, a better hallmark of true culture than a desire to impose one's own culture on others? A cultured individual is someone who reads books, not someone who writes them; though one may hope that the latter will read before he writes.

There is no denying that this Belgian individualism (which also shows itself in the country's privileged relationship with its immediate neighbours) also has a less attractive side. Any form of public institution or authority is guaranteed to be regarded by the people with an often irritating indifference or even contempt. Even after nearly two centuries of independence, everything that smacks of 'authority' is still distrusted. Public works, such as the restoration of monuments from the country's rich cultural past, still proceed at a snail's pace. But many Belgian railway stations too are in a lamentable state. This reluctance to spend money on public works and institutions must have its roots in the fact that for centuries this country was ruled by foreign powers: the Burgundians, Charles v, Spain, Austria, France and the Northern Netherlands too; the 'authorities' were exploiters and oppressors, or were at least perceived as such. Anything they planned, the populace felt it had to sabotage; and this became an instinctive reaction. (An attitude which in Europe the Belgians probably share only with the Czechs and Slovaks and the peoples of former Yugoslavia, from Slovenia to Kosovo, with the proud Serbs as the one exception.) It has even been said that after 1944 Belgium was the first country to repair its war damage, simply because at the end of the war the government forbade any reconstruction work; the people then immediately understood that in their own interest they should defy the ban.

As this shows, the Belgians' attitude to authority had – and still has – its advantages; and I must conclude by confessing that my attachment to this country is partly due to my discovery that everyday life here is decidedly comfortable. Here in Ghent I live, as I never could in Germany or elsewhere, for a reasonable price, in a somewhat scruffy 'residence' with seven spacious rooms, on a street lined with old plane-trees that runs beside a watercourse, with a little garden at the back and a view over two ancient abbeys and a beguinage. (Note, too, that this is no up-market academic area; my neighbours are an electrician and a nurse.). My house is within easy walking distance of the town centre and the railway station; I can still do all my day-to-day shopping without needing a car. That's what I call freedom. At present, this is still a free country. Here I am still free to do what I want, what I feel I have to do.

RUDOLPH BOEHM
Translated by Tanis Guest.