

MY CHOICE

Charlotte de Gohan

There is no crime like hatred. Where there is no fire there is no smoke. There is no happiness like freedom.

There were a hundred things I wanted to do during my 12th year on Australia's Earth. Three important ones were:

Finish my education.

Stay single.

Travel the world.

In the year 1962 for a female to even think of doing all of that wasn't taken seriously. It was considered abnormal, a joke for a woman to want to stand on her own two feet. The majority of females I came into contact with then seemed to me to live for their own idea of happiness - find a man, have a dozen kids. There was nothing stopping me from having my own type of dream.

Growing up in the Blue Mountains, the Mid North Coast, Sydney and Melbourne whenever I told somebody of my plans they acted as if I'd told them something weird. 'Why leave Heaven on Earth?' They asked clearly astounded. 'You'll become the black sheep.' This only caused me to keep it to myself. My private top secret was launched. It made me stronger in my determination to do what I had to do. I wanted to be responsible for my own future. Nobody could tell me what was right or wrong for me. Of course at the same time I didn't know what I would find out there in the big world. My motto was, still is, to satisfy my curiosity give it a chance to happen or I'll never find out if I can feel satisfied. One thing I knew I couldn't possibly do was wait until I was old enough to be on a pension. It became imperative that I work towards my dream for it to become true much, much earlier.

Moving to a different town every couple of years I accepted without complaint. We were never in one place long enough for me to make real friends. Instead I studied and studied. By the time I was studying for my medical degree, I began to notice that there had to be more to life than being alone most of the time. But I worried about integrating. I was shy and too serious. As luck would have it about the same time it happened that there were people out there who wanted to know me. And through those new friends I discovered my thirst for more knowledge, for real down to earth, stable friendships with both sexes.

I was twenty-four. Instead of a husband and a dozen kids I had my medical degree. My formal education, plan one was complete. The fact remained that I still wanted to travel and stay single was now well defined in my mind. Staying single wasn't going to be a problem for me. I'd found out if I was selective I could make friends easily. My friends became important. I could bombard them with questions and usually got a satisfying explanation. At the same time though the distinct feeling that the world was patiently waiting for me to discover her wondrous sights refused to leave me. But where to go? Where to start my journey?

Five, not three wise men decided Switzerland would be the best country for me to get started in. But I didn't have the foggiest idea where Switzerland was or that the country in the middle of Europe was one of the smallest, that it had a reputation for being well organised, that the Swiss per head of population had won the most Nobel Prizes, that it was a true democracy, or that it had four official languages and none of them were English.

The Swiss Consulate in Sydney was my next step. 'It's impossible to work in Switzerland if you don't have a profession.' The first Swiss I had ever met answered my request.

I braced myself. 'Is medicine not a profession in your eyes?'

Surprise, surprise, his eyes glowed. 'It is indeed. Please follow me.'

I left with a bundle of forms to fill out.

Six months went by. I knew I'd be going to Zurich. I had a job in a local Hospital to go to. To find out as much as possible I bought a book titled 'Europe on 5 Dollars a Day' Reading about Zurich I learnt it was the largest city in Switzerland and the finance capital. The main street *Bahnhofstrasse* (Station Street) was one of the most exclusive shopping streets in the world. The restaurants, middle to first class were expensive, but it was still possible to eat cheaply, the local language was a dialect of Swiss German with French and Italian mixed in it and the people often said, *Merci* instead of *Danke* for thank you.

I needed to learn *Deutsch* (German), so I was told. I enrolled in the Berlitz Language School. The teacher came from Berlin. At the end of the first semester she asked who was going onto the second semester. I was the only person who didn't raise their hand. She asked me if I didn't like the course.

'I did.' I answered in an excited rush. 'But I'm leaving Australia next week.'

'Where are you going?'

'To Zurich, Switzerland.'

The teacher glared at me from narrowed eyes the colour of dark wood. 'But, *meine Liebe* (my dear) they don't speak German in Zurich!'

To put it mildly my plans and dreams collapsed in a sudden heap. Why was I learning German? What now? Where do I go now? Despite the fact that I'd had a happy childhood and a good education, again I was in a clinch. Stay put in Australia or leave. But deep down the truth was I'd come this far I refused to go back. I sought the advice from my five wise friends. They helped me stay with their original plan. Zurich here I come. But what would be waiting for me there?

At Zurich Airport I was surprised, yet reassured to be met by the Director of the Hospital. I have arrived my jet-lagged mind registered. The Director spoke reasonably understandable English and put me at ease by explaining my luggage I'd sent earlier had arrived. I'd live close to the Hospital, where I'd be working. It had 300 beds, specialised in Obstetrics, Gynaecology, General Surgery and Medicine.

My early impressions of Zurich were awe one minute, scared the next. Awe for having the guts to come this far. Scared knowing I was on my own, totally alone in a foreign country. For the first time I felt like a real stranger, not understanding the local language. It sounded double Dutch to my inexperienced ears. Everything, absolutely everything was new. Surprises lurked everywhere. The shops, the lake, the traffic driving on the right, the trams, the punctuality of the trains, the organization, the absolute cleanliness of the streets, the public gardens, parks and inside the buildings, the tasteful way people dressed. At the local supermarkets, *Migros* and *Coop* I was overwhelmed at the manifold of the international produce available. I discovered the small alleyways weaving through the old city. I wandered through these quaint cobble stoned streets and on purpose got myself lost. I made friends with other foreigners some of whom worked at the Hospital. Most of them had been here for a year or more and all definitely spoke better *Deutsch* (German) than I did. I realised fast it was going to be uphill all the way if I wanted to make something of myself here. The inhabitants of Zurich I discovered were friendly and willing to help in a reserved way. The ones who could were pleased to have the opportunity to speak English. But nobody knew where Australia was. Sure they'd heard of Kangaroos or Koala Bears. My new friends gave me the nickname *Die Exotin* (The exotic). I found out that the Swiss German language is very different to High German or written German. An example: When two Germans are having a conversation a Swiss German can understand everything. On the other hand if two Swiss were conversing a German wouldn't understand one word. Swiss German is not an official language and only written by some Swiss German authors, or sometimes one can read a joke. Children speak the local dialect until they start school. Then they have to learn High German, known as a foreign language to be able to write and read.

German lessons at the recommended language institute were similar to what I'd had in Sydney. Only nobody said that German isn't spoken in Zurich. Repetition was good for me. I learnt faster than I thought I would. This time I did three semesters. The class had more people than in Sydney and they came from a lot of different countries. I was the one and only Australian.

After the third semester was finished I wanted to take a break. By this time I was taking more interest in Swiss German. If I was going to stay I wanted to speak the local lingo. Not only that I was getting fed up with having to explain and fight for the right to leave work three evenings a week 30 minutes earlier. My so-called colleagues were trying to make life hard for me and I didn't like it at all. This meant, find another job. Luckily medical persons weren't having any problems finding jobs.

I started in an Orthopaedic Hospital. Here the atmosphere was completely different. I felt pleased to be part of the team. By now my Swiss German was shaping up.

During one of our breaks the topic was Swiss and foreigners not earning the same salary. I realised if I contacted the registration people in Berne I'd find out exactly what the situation was. That phone call resulted in me sending them my certificate and without any fuss I became registered in Switzerland. I could now work in any hospital in the country.

Living in the nurses' quarters was dirt-cheap. I was saving, travelling every free day, settling down in a good job and yes really enjoying life. Those were the days, the times to discover.

Travelling turned out to be so easy. The possibilities were different and exciting. Hop in a plane and in an hour I could be anywhere – London, Paris, Rome, Vienna, Madrid. Without really realising it I became hooked living here. Each time I left Zurich to travel, I didn't know until I returned that I was glad to be back. After the two years were up I was no longer sure if I would stay or return to Australia.

30 years as an expat Australian has taught me how important it is never to forget where I originally came from. Australia has always stayed my fundament, my extra special homeland. That's where I went through my basic training that has accompanied me on my search for my niche.

Today Zurich has played the part as *meine Stadt* (my town) for half my life. I really grew up here. At times it's amazing to believe just how far I have come since my early childhood riding my horse in the Blue Mountains. Today I can count on one hand the number of countries I haven't been to and the numbers are still minimising. I speak perfect Swiss German, French and reasonably good Italian. I also learnt to speak, read and write High German. Today I recognise Zurich as the city that allowed me to live my life as I saw fit. I was always accepted as a total person, not just a

single or a female. Some of my friends are single, a lot married though they have no children. Most of them are well travelled and speak other languages besides German, French and Italian. Switzerland as it is today is 704 years old. German, French, Italian and Rhaetian are the four languages. However, official documents and declarations on goods have to be provided in German, French and Italian only. The four languages are on the CHF bank notes. Since 1996 the inflation in Switzerland has stayed below 1%. In spite of the positives and negatives I did come far in this civilised country.

Surprises have never stopped amazing me. I did something I thought I would never ever do. I got married. My husband's family name is one of the three original documented names found in *Rapperswil* (a historical town) in the year 1276. From the beginning of married life I began to experience a brand new dimension of life.

The experiences with my husband have been different to what I was used to. I'm proud of myself for having taken that once unknown step. We discuss all subjects and converse in Swiss German and French. Not one day goes by without him giving me a compliment for something I did. He has always fungated as my impresario. He's a true friend and a great husband.

My husband had never been to Australia, so I organised a trip to Down Under last year. It was also to be a promotional tour for my first novel 'Terminal Baden' that was published in 2002. And it was my first visit back to my roots in 11 years. To say I was excited is an understatement. I still had my family and many friends there and naturally I wanted to see all of them. I arranged for us to stay in a Hotel in The Rocks, Sydney. The members of my family are scattered all over NSW. But it was possible for them to travel to The Rocks. They all came, fifteen of them. A wonderful day was spent by all. My husband was so impressed with what he saw, my family, friends that he met and what he experienced, that one day we might end up living Down Under.



Charlotte de Gohan has had short stories published in German. Her first novel in English, *TERMINAL BADEN*, a psychological thriller is now available in all good book shops. Charlotte spent her childhood in Australia. Her adult life is being experienced in Switzerland.