

# THERE IS NO PLACE LIKE HOME

An existential view on perceptions of home by foreigners living in Western Europe

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The present article deals with the topic of home, more precisely the conditions necessary for the establishment of home in a foreign country – as reported by foreigners residing in Western Europe. It further provides insights into the topic by a psychotherapist whose clients live abroad. The research sample included 19 respondents – foreigners residing in Belgium, Ireland, Scotland and Austria. Using the incomplete sentence technique, respondents answered questions on their perceptions of home. Responses were processed using qualitative analysis and categorized based on the fundamental existential motivations by Alfred Längle.

**KEYWORDS:** perception of home, existential psychotherapy, fundamental existential motivations by Alfred Längle, third culture kid, qualitative content analysis

ZUHAUSE IST ES EINFACH AM SCHÖNSTEN

Eine existentielle Betrachtung der Wahrnehmungen von Zuhause durch in Westeuropa lebenden Ausländern

Der vorliegende Artikel beschäftigt sich mit der Thematik von Zuhause, genauer gesagt die nötigen Bedingungen für die Einrichtung eines Zuhauses in einem fremden Land – wie von Ausländern berichtet welche in Westeuropa wohnhaft sind. Ferner gibt er Einblick in die Thematik durch eine Psychotherapeutin, deren Klienten im Ausland leben. Die Stichprobenauswahl beinhaltet 19 Umfrageteilnehmer – Ausländer welche in Belgien, Irland, Schottland und Österreich residieren. Unter Einsatz der incomplete sentence technique, beantworteten die Teilnehmer Fragen zu deren Auffassungen von Zuhause. Die Rückmeldungen wurden verarbeitet mit der Qualitätsanalyse sowie aufgrund der Existentiellen Grundmotivationen von Alfred Längle kategorisiert.

**SCHLÜSSELWÖRTER:** Wahrnehmung von Zuhause, existentielle Psychotherapie, Existentielle Grundmotivationen von Alfred Längle, Drittkultur-Kind, Qualitative Inhaltsanalyse

## Introduction

In present-day Europe, an ever increasing number of people relocate to reside in countries other than their homeland. The numbers of individuals and entire families who relocated, temporarily or permanently, to other countries, or have experienced life in multiple countries, continues to rise.

The author of the present article has a first-hand experience living abroad, including living in Austria, the Czech Republic and Belgium.

The present article deals with the notion of how an individual's perception of home changes and evolves when the individual lives abroad. Life situations of individuals who leave home and reside abroad may differ significantly. The present article will not discuss cases when individuals – voluntarily or under duress – leave their homeland for political, humanitarian or other urgent reasons. Instead, the article focuses on Europeans residing in a European country other than their own. These individuals voluntarily leave home for other reasons – some because of their enticing work opportunities or those of their life partner or spouse, some because of the desire to experience something new, or simply because they did not feel well or comfortable in their home coun-

try. They may have had an impression that they would feel and simply “do better” elsewhere. For some of them, physical distance sometimes served as a way of imposing a boundary in complicated family relationships.

Such individuals started to build their new home in a country or a place where they were not born and where they did not spend a greater part of their lives. Sometimes, their efforts quickly met with success, in other cases, their projects would not work out as planned or simply failed. As a result, these individuals may have multiple homes – or no home at all.

## Experiencing home when living abroad

The present article describes situations of individuals who left their country in order to find a home in another. Similar phenomena do not exclusively concern the notion of crossing a border; they are also applicable to individuals who simply moved from one city to another within a country, and the like.

Throughout her four year stay in Belgium, the author worked as clinical psychologist and psychotherapist. Her clients included exclusively foreigners – especially Slo-

vaks and Czechs, but also Poles, Latvians, Croats, Romanians, Italians, Germans or Britons. All were EU citizens for whom Belgium was not a primary / legacy home.

Some clients raised the issue of home only secondarily, having sought a therapist for work-related or relationships issues. It only became apparent during their therapy to what extent they miss home, or how much or, indeed, how little home they felt in Belgium.

Other clients raised the issue of home directly – mentioning what they missed in Belgium, what they did not like about the local culture, life, services, the isolation which they felt, or simply that they could not stand the weather in Belgium – typically more rain and less sun than in many other countries.

Gradually, the author could observe that individuals who felt at home in Belgium would exhibit certain specific traits and commonalities. They would typically create a comfortable physical home – either chose to purchase real estate or invested more in terms of rent. They would consider their relationships with their colleagues as fulfilling and rewarding, had friends in Brussels (Belgium), most had spouses and children. They would feel accepted, appreciated and recognized at work. On the most part, they would consider their lives in Belgium as good and were comfortable with the idea of continuing to live this way in the future as well.

On the other hand, individuals who missed home intensely and who did not consider Belgium their home would not typically exhibit the above traits. They would often tend to spend less on rent, in order to save. They felt lonely, had fewer friends and most of them lived without a spouse. They would also often miss recognition by peers and acceptance of their personality. At work, many felt overlooked by their colleagues and thought that they were not being treated fairly. Frequently, they would complain that the management would promote their own fellow nationals, or promote men over women, etc.

For these individuals, the thought of spending more years of their lives in Belgium was unpleasant and disconcerting. They would attach themselves to their country of origin, to things they considered better at home. They would consider their stay in Belgium to be something to be suffered through. They typically abandoned any hope that their situation in Belgium could improve and they would ever start to feel at home.

Some ended up returning to their countries of origin, but most of them stayed. Sometimes their objective was to work for 10 years in order to qualify for retirement benefits guaranteed by the EU Commission; in other situations, they were concerned that that they would not be able to find well paid work at home, or that their income in their

home country would not be enough to sustain the living standard which they achieved and enjoyed in Belgium.

Sometimes, a feeling of embarrassment for an alleged failure would surface. One of my clients noted: *People back home think that I have a superb life here. I do not want to go back home because they could see that I am alone, without a partner, I have no children and I have a job which does not bring me satisfaction. When I come home for holidays, it is easier to maintain the impression that I lead a wonderful life and have a superb career in Belgium.*

Worth mentioning was the group of men and women who came to Belgium because their spouse / partner got a job while they did not find any for themselves. In material terms, they lacked nothing; however, the lack of recognition, the feeling of having no purpose was significant in these individuals. Staying *au foyer* was more of an issue for men than women.

The group of those who not only lived and worked, but also raised their children in Belgium faced certain complications. If their children were born into a union with a native Belgian or a permanent resident of Belgium, their children could only leave for the country of the parent when based on the official approval by their Belgian spouse / partner. For example, if a relationship broke up and the spouse / partner did not grant the parent – usually the mother – the approval for return, such a mother would have to remain in Belgium until her children came of age. Also notable was the group of those who came to Belgium with small children or with children born during their stay in Belgium. Sometimes the family would take the decision to return to their country, i.e. at the end of contract, when career prospects would appear in the country of origin, or when the need to care for the elderly parents back home became more pressing. While for parents the situation would be rather straight forward, children would face difficulties. After all, they were to leave the country which they considered home, leaving their friends and social background. The older the children were, the greater was their resistance to such change. Often, the decision to return would be triggered by considerations of schooling, either start of primary or secondary school.

### Third country kid

Third culture kids (TCKs) are people who were raised in a culture other than their parents' or the culture of their nationality, and also live in a different environment during a significant part of their child development years. They typically are exposed to a greater volume and vari-

ety of cultural influences than those who grow up in one particular cultural setting. The term was coined by John and Ruth Useem in the 1950s when describing children of British diplomats serving in India.

TCKs are subject to various cultural influences, and move between cultures before they have built their own identity. The first culture of TCKs is that of the country of their parents (country of nationality), their second is that of the country in which they grow up, and the third mixes elements of the two (Useem et Useem 1967). In case parents are of different cultures, the situation is even more complex.

TCKs have different standards of interpersonal relations, work habits, lifestyles and life perspectives (Useem et al. 1963).

TCKs phenomenon also relates to the language spoken with the family. Is it their mother tongue, mother tongue of their partner, or the language of the country in which they live?

Regarding the time necessary to create a home in a new country, many clients often reported that the first year was the most complicated. People tend to miss their homeland, the things they are familiar with, relationships, their mother tongue while they have not yet created new relationships or gotten accustomed to the realities of their new country. During the second and third year, clients claimed to have started to feel home. Naturally, these timeframes are only estimations and highly subjective, depending on the individual in question.

Feeling home in a place is related both to the physical location, as well as the relationships and the experiences which the individual experiences at a given location. The feeling in question is closely linked to experiencing identity.

This experience is taken into account, f. e. in case of diplomatic postings, which are usually three to four years long. Before being re-posted abroad, diplomats are routinely required to spend some time in their home country. The rationale behind these measures (cap on the duration of posting, subsequent stay in the home country) is to prevent a situation in which a diplomat's loyalty to his home country becomes affected through his extended stay abroad.

TCKs phenomenon is routinely found in children of diplomats who – by the time they will have grown up – will have moved multiple times and lived in multiple countries. Frequent moves, creation of new home, adapting to new school, finding new mates will have an impact on their identity, the feeling of home, and also their ability to create and maintain close relationships.

## Home as objective living conditions vs. home as our own creation

An individual's ability to create and live a good and rewarding life in a new country not only depends on the objective living conditions prevailing in a given country, but also on the individual's maturity, motivation and attitude. An individual more likely to succeed will set about working towards creating favorable conditions through his own effort, instead of expecting that things will be done for him.

Furthermore, the individual's ability to create a good and rewarding home in a new country will depend on his personality, his ability to build good relations with others, his degree of education, language competence, the objective living conditions prevailing in the new country, his motivations concerning the stay in the new country, i.e. whether it was his own decision or more a response to someone else's decision, his ability to prepare for departure and various other factors.

The age of the individual is an important variable. In general, one could postulate that the younger the individual, the easier it will be for him to adapt. In this regard, time spent at a university could be considered an important milestone. Individuals who change country during their university studies, or shortly after graduation are more likely to integrate in the new country and create a fully-fledged home in that country.

The issue of home, or of being homesick or missing home, tends to surface in therapies on a number of levels. These would typically concern the conditions for a good and rewarding life, as defined by the leading representative of Existential Psychotherapy, Afried Längle (1999) and his theory of fundamental existential motivations of humans. As an illustration, the following text includes various statements by clients of the author.

1. The need for a safe space, support, reliance.

*I do not have a good place (apartment), I do not like the building where I live, I do not like the traffic jams in the morning, constant rain, garbage in the street, the cold house I live in is impossible to heat to a reasonable temperature. I fly all the time between Bratislava and Brussels, last week, there was a terror attack at the airport recently, I feel anxious.*

2. The need to experience the value of life and proximity in relationships.

*People are different here, I miss friends and family, it is difficult to communicate here. I am trying to meet new people but these are very superficial relationships. I am often sad, I feel lonely. → In other words:*

It was better home, people back home are more friendly, more kind, I would enjoy life more.

3. The need to be seen and appreciated for what the individual is.

*I feel that they do not like me here. Locals do not like me because I work for the European Commission and earn more than them. My boss is a macho, with many compatriots around him, and he is condescending towards women. As a woman from Eastern Europe, I have no chance to be promoted.* → In other words: it was better back home, I was recognized and appreciated more.

4. The need to feel meaning in the way I live, where I live, to feel that *it is good to live this way.*

*I have a fancy house here and I am earning good money, my job is a piece of cake. We can travel a lot. It is comfortable to come home and spend holidays in Prague while using a Belgian credit card. It is easy to get used to this. But what is the meaning of this all? I am asking myself if I am wasting my time here. Parents are increasingly fragile; they want to be with their grandchildren. I feel I do not belong, I do not want to spend my retirement here and I do not want my children to consider themselves Belgians.* → In other words: I felt better at home, I felt I belonged there, I felt it is right to live in my own country.

### Research sample

For this article, we approached 30 respondents who have passed a considerable period of time in Belgium, Ireland, Scotland, and Austria. Some were former clients of the author, others foreigners contacted informally. In total, 30 short questionnaires were sent out. Using the incomplete sentences technique, we posed questions about where they feel at home and how they define home.

We received 19 filled in questionnaires. Respondents were Czech, Slovak, Polish, Hungarian, Irish, English and Lithuanian. These individuals lived out of their home country between 10 to 25 years; average time spent abroad was 15 years. Tables 1 and 2 include division of respondents by gender, age and nationality.

Table 1  
Respondents by gender and age:

	Total	%	Age group	Average
Women	11	57,9	35-53	42
Men	8	42,1	34-52	40
<b>Total</b>	<b>19</b>	<b>100</b>	<b>34-53</b>	<b>41</b>

Table 2  
Respondents by nationality:

	n	%
Slovak	5	26,3
Czech	6	31,6
Polish	2	10,5
Hungarian	2	10,5
Irish	2	10,5
Lithuanian	2	10,5
<b>Total</b>	<b>19</b>	<b>100</b>

Of the total of 19 respondents, 17 lived with a child or children; 15 lived with their spouses. Four respondents lived without partner; two female respondents lived without partner but with a child.

### Findings

#### Conditions necessary for feeling home

Applying qualitative analysis, we identified the following conditions related to the establishment of home. The conditions were based on Alfred Längle's Theory of fundamental existential motivations (Längle 1997).

1. The need for a safe space, support, reliance

*I feel at home where I am welcome ... when I can relax after a difficult day... when I have enough space and light...* (woman, 35 years, Slovak, has lived for 10 years in Belgium, childless, lives with her spouse / partner)

*Indeed, home is the arms in which you can cry, as they say...* (woman, 42 years, Slovak, has lived for 12 years in Belgium, lives with her spouse / partner and children)

2. The need of a feeling for the value of life and closeness in relationships

*The home is where my son is. And where I understand jokes and people can stop by for a chat* (woman, 54 years old, Irish, has lived for 25 years in Belgium, lives with her spouse / partner and a child)

*Home is my small world, when I close the door, there is warmth and love. It is where my children and my husband is...*

(woman, 42 years of age, Slovak, has lived 12 years in Belgium, lives with her husband and children)

3. Need to be seen / appreciated for what one is

*Home is where you... have a value, where they are interested in you the way you are ... where you can do things and people do not mind ... where you can laugh and love*  
(woman, 37 years of age, Slovak, has lived for 10 years in Scotland, lives with her spouse / partner and children)

*I feel home when I feel there is enough understanding, not only myself being personally understood, but also the language and culture ... without much explanation*  
(woman, 35 years of age, Slovak, has lived for 10 years in Belgium, childless, lives with her spouse / partner)

4. Need to recognize the meaningful

*Home is where my family is, good salary and a chance to make my dreams come true*  
(woman, 27 years, Lithuanian, has lived for 11 abroad, childless, no spouse / partner)

*Home where we choose it to be...*  
(woman, 35 years, Slovak, has lived for 10 abroad, currently in Austria, lives with her spouse / partner and a child)

To conclude, one could say that those who have a good home in themselves, who at least have their basic needs fulfilled, will find it easier to create a good home in the world out there. In this regard, one could talk about the ability to make one self at home, the ability to create a feeling of home in multiple locations. Most individuals have a legacy home at a given place; additionally, they may have another location, or a location where they made themselves a home and where they feel at home. Legacy home, a city, or a country where we spent our childhood and youth has an irreplaceable meaning for our identities. The contrast between the legacy home and places where one feels at home are well described in the following citations:

*Home is where I have family, roots, friends, where my mother tongue is spoken ... the place where I am interested in politics, culture and society ... a country I care about; at the same time, home is also where me and my son are established and where we feel well*

(woman, 45 years, Czech, has lived for 10 years in Belgium with her child)

*Gradually, I come to terms with the fact that there are two places I call home ... in Slovakia but also to an extent in Belgium ... through my heart, I am still in Slovakia; in Belgium, I live in my bubble*  
(woman, 42 years, Slovak, has lived in Belgium for 12 years with spouse / partner and children)

*Home is here, sometimes there as well, sometimes nowhere ... home is a fluid concept for me, more about the people than a physical location ... I carry my home in myself, where I feel well, where I can erect that proverbial tent and live...*  
(woman, 37 years, Slovak, has lived for 10 years in Scotland with spouse / partner and children)

*I feel home in Ireland but also in Belgium ... wherever I am familiar with the smell of things ... in terms of geography, there is a division but all of this melts into city life of Brussels and a life in the country in Ireland where animals have been my companions since childhood“*  
(woman, 54 years, Irish, has lived for 25 in Belgium with spouse / partner and child)

## Conclusion

There exists a deeply felt human need to belong somewhere, to know where one feels at home, but also where one comes from. The objective of this article is not to provide an exhaustive list of various possible situations of experiencing home by individuals of different nationalities living outside their country of origin. Instead, the present article should be read as a brief probe into the subject, supplemented with the firsthand experience of the author and her conviction that the ability and possibility to experience home is an important element of happiness and fulfillment in life.

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