Nigg, Heinz (Hrsg.) (1999) Da und fort. Leben in zwei Welten. Interviews, Berichte und Dokumente zur Immigration und Binnenwanderung in der Schweiz. Zürich: Limmat Verlag

Vendramina Z.

"I would be just as much a stranger in my homeland"

Vendramina Z., f., born in Treviso in Italy in 1938, in Switzerland since 1955

How did you live in Italy?

I come from a little farming village, at that time the street wasn't even tarred, nearly everyone farmed. My father worked for the electricity. We were a fairly big family: father, mother, my grandfather was still alive, and there were three sisters and three brothers. We had a three-storey house and a beautiful big garden. My mother got everything out of that garden. Behind the house she had rabbit hutches and a pig.

Nearby was the *filanda* factory. *filanda*, silkworms, are tiny creatures that you can hardly see. You buy them keep them in the warm in farmers' houses and see to it that they eat particular leaves, which you have to cut up fine. As a child I always used to go to the farmers to help them with this. When the silkworms had emerged, the farmers brought them to the factory. We three sisters would later work in this silkworm factory. You had to work all day with boiling hot water, in the evening you had white hands. We travelled the two kilometres to the factory by bicycle. Summer and winter we wore *holzzoccoli* (clogs).

My grandfather was a very important person for me. He was a little stooped man with a walking stick, very intelligent. They always used to call my grandfather if someone was dying or if someone needed to have an injection or if someone had to "share" - earlier you didn't go straight to a lawyer but looked for an amicable arrangement. My grandfather lived behind our house in a little house; he had many different fruit trees and hens. He used to go with a basket of eggs to the shop to sell them. He always had the money in his purse. Shortly before he died he told my big sister that he had one last wish; he wanted her to warm the iron and iron the thousand-notes, he had quite a lot of egg-money.

Did you have to help around the house as a child?

Not so much, because I was the youngest of six. My hobby was always sewing. I always wanted to be a tailor. I helped my mother sewing or washing or in the garden.

Which schools did you attend?

There was a tiny school in our little village that you could attend until the sixth class. I didn't like going to school. I used to make a big fuss every morning. My mother had a hard time with me. I went until the fourth class, and then the teacher came to our house and said to my mother that it made no sense, because I didn't learn, I didn't want to learn, and that was it. In those days money was scarce. So my father said: "Okay, then she can go to the *filanda* factory, there she'll earn money". So I only went until fourth class.

So at thirteen or fourteen I started work in the *filanda*, and stayed there until I was sixteen. You had to have good eyes, it was a fine, interesting work, but you sweated the whole day. When the siren went at half past five the day's work was done and you went home to the garden. My mother used to make gigantic bowl of salad and you got a boiled egg. My mother was a very good cook. On Saturday she used to kill a chicken and that was our Sunday dinner.

What role did religion play?

We were Catholics and used to go every Sunday morning two and a half kilometres on foot to the church, because our little village didn't have a priest. One time I had put on a bit of lipstick and I should have taken communion. You had to kneel, and then the priest came and gave, and gave, and gave, and passed me by. I asked myself what was wrong. I waited until he did the round again, and he passed me by again. At home I told my mother that it was probably because of my red lips that he had reacted like that. In those days the church was very strict. We had to wear long sleeves, long dresses and wear a headdress. You went to church every Sunday, every two or three weeks to confession on a Saturday and took the Lord's supper on the Sunday.

What values did your parents pass on to you?

I didn't get much from my father; he went out in the mornings and came home in the evening and then said very little. There was the war at that time, so he had other worries. My mother was there for us more often. She said to us: "I'll give you this on your way: be decent, be honest, and never buy anything you can't pay for straight away". She also said: "we're poor, but we're all well brought up, and I don't want you to do anything stupid".

What experience did you have of the war?

Suddenly a lorryload of Germans arrived and said they wanted to burn down the house. My mother told my brother to take me and my sister Maria to an aunt a couple of villages away, in case the house was burnt down. We stayed a week with this aunt. When we came back to the house it was still standing. But then something was always going on. One time six young men had to stand opposite our house, and they were all shot. My mother had called us into the house so that we wouldn't see it. But we heard the bang. We cried and were really frightened. My mother was worried that one of our brothers was among the dead and she went to look. I heard her screaming. When she came back she said she couldn't work it out. The men had been shot down and then, when they'd been lying on the ground, they'd been shot again in the head, so that some of them were unrecognisable. She sent my brother out to look. Our little brother wasn't among them.

The fears which I had then have stayed. I didn't want to sleep alone after that, because the memories came at night. No-one could take the fears away. There was no-one there who could have given me a bit of love, because my mother had too much to do. I had a couple of good friends that I could tell my fears to.

You have four daughters. Did they want to know what it was like in the war?

I told them everything. But I believe that they couldn't understand a lot of it, because they'd never lived through it. This story too, for instance. When I was a girl of about fifteen, I had an admirer who always used to come over on his bicycle on Sunday afternoons. I didn't like that, so one time I ran away to the next village with my friend, and the admirer and his friend followed us there. In the village we hid ourselves in the church. After a while we came out again, and they were still there. There was a little shop next door where you could buy ice creams and fruit. We went in, and the two boys followed. My admirer asked me if he could offer me a banana. I had no idea what a banana was. At home we had grapes, damson, and figs. When I told my children, who always got a banana at teatime, they said: "those were very different days".

Why did you leave your village?

Two brothers from Conegliano were looking for people to make ice cream in Germany. Gelaterias were a big thing at that time. These two brothers came to our house and asked my mother if I could go with them. My father said: "yes, if you promise to look after her". I was only sixteen years old. So I went in 1955 and came to a family in Mannheim. I stayed there for nine months and helped in the gelateria and the household. I worked and worked and worked. Until April I worked in the household and in April I went down and worked in the gelateria, and in October they took me back home in the car - without a

single mark. I just got board and lodging. When I was at home they gave me a little bit of money, but really just a little. I bought fabric for my mother and myself with it to make beautiful clothes: mine was for the New Year's ball, because my hobby was dancing.

In December my sister and her husband came home to us. They invited me to go to their place in Switzerland and look after their children. So I rode in my sister and brother-in-law's car to Switzerland. We stopped in St Gallen and ate something there. I didn't understand a word in this restaurant, and I asked myself what I would get to eat. I got a huge plate of potato salad and bratwurst. When I saw the bratwurst I burst into tears, I didn't know it. But I was hungry and ate it. Then we drove to Buchs in the canton of Zurich, and there were my sister's mother-in-law, her husband and the grandfather. In some way I've always had something to do with older people, I could always get on with old people, and I was happy to come by the grandfather. He often said to me: "you're a good girl". My sister had a big market garden and a restaurant. Because I was young and had good legs, I often had to go to the cellar to get cider from the barrel. I was easily finished with the children. In Germany I had learned High German, but here I had to start again with Swiss German. But I was a member of this family and so I learned the language quickly. In the evening I'd go to bed and learn: *Treppe, Stäge, gradini*. I always wrote the words out in High German, Swiss German and Italian. In the mornings I used to wake up early and think over what I had learned the day before. And I always asked: "what's that called, what does that cost, how do you say that, and how do you do that". That was how I learned German. I was young then, and it went quickly.

What was life like for an Italian in this rural community, Buchs?

All the people I knew were older than I was. And I thought I was bringing in a bit of fresh air, I was cheerful young woman. I sang a lot. There was a pond opposite the house with a little hill. I used to sit on the hill and sing in Italian. People liked that. And I always used to go to the village with the canister to fetch the milk. I used to say "grüezi, buon giorno", and just always used to chat. But I was accepted by everybody, and I had my friends, some Austrian girls. On Saturday evenings we'd go on the train to the next village, Ottelfingen, to dance. We'd come back home on foot after midnight. That was our fun.

How did you stay in contact with your relatives at home?

Twice a year I used to go home on the train. My mother was always sad. She always used to say: "I thought that at least the youngest would stay at home".

Hast du mit deiner Arbeit etwas verdient?

My sister's mother-in-law thought that I should have some wages. Of course, they had it easy with me, they needed no permit because I belonged to the family. After that I got 230 francs a month. I always put my money in the bank, because I didn't need much unless I was going to Italy. I used to get a lot of tips too, because I was a young girl and quick and everyone liked me.

Sometimes I used to say that I'd go back to Italy. I had my friends there, my acquaintances - I just wanted to go home. Once I was in Italy, they phoned me from Switzerland and told me I had to come back as fast as I could, because something had happened. So I came back, and worked again at this and that: I was familiar with a lot of different things by now. When I wanted to go back to Italy again, my brother-in-law hid my passport. So I stayed a bit longer and a bit longer and a bit longer. And in 1960, in the restaurant, I met my future husband, from whom I'm now divorced.

What was the period of the Schwarzenbach initiative like for you?

I only heard about it. I didn't take any interest in it. What bothered me was when sometimes they'd call us *Tschinggen* (an obsolete term of abuse for Italians). That used to make me feel very ashamed. Because I always felt I was a bit inferior to them. However, I thought that this would also pass. They were perhaps people who had never been away, who didn't understand that a piece of bread in another country has to be earned first. I said to myself, everything I have I have earned with my own two hands.

What do you feel you are today?

If I went back to Italy - it's been a couple of years since I did - I used to say: I'm going home again. And when I was there and was getting ready to come back, I used to say: I'll be home in a couple of days. I wasn't at home here or there. But since I had my children I feel that I'm at home in Switzerland. Down there I'd be just as much a stranger. There's no-one there any more. If I'm there I have to rummage through my memories: here's the little lane, that's where we used to fetch grass for the rabbits, there was a little stream. It doesn't exist any more.

Nigg, Heinz (1999) Here and away. Living in two worlds. Zurich: www.migrant.ch
Translation: Simon Milligan