

# SOS Détresse

## Growing up in several cultures Childhood in the host country

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*I don't know where I was born*

*Nobody knows who I am*

*I don't know where I'm from*

*Nobody knows where I'm going.*

*I'm a branch on a split tree*

*Which doesn't know where it has fallen.*

*Where are my roots?*

*From what trunk am I a branch?*

### ***Columbian folk song***

Migration doesn't only have a major impact in the life of the migrant parents. It is also important in the life of the children born or arrived at a young age in the host country.

## **Imagine this impressive experience through the eyes of a child...**

The day we left our country remains etched in our memory. This experience was made more difficult if we felt ourselves alone in our regret, if we couldn't express our sadness with our parents who were already suffering. Also, if the departure was unexpected and we weren't sufficiently prepared or if the length of stay was provisional, uncertain. Perhaps the parents repeated that we would go back in a few years. If faced with the deceptions and the harshness of life, the idea of a future

return is reassuring for the parents and helps them stand their exile, the children will have difficulty imagining themselves and constructing their lives in the host country.

It is possible that we can recall the hard times and the sadness of our parents... The early days after migration were filled with emotion for everyone and we were inevitably sensitive to the stress of our parents who were living a difficult time of adaptation in the new country. We had to adapt to a new school, make new friends and perhaps we had trouble identifying at first with the other children at school who didn't act like us. Whether we were born here or there, we eventually noticed some differences with the other children which gave us an uneasy feeling. Perhaps we were ashamed that our parents were different, had an accent, or a less important job than others. Perhaps money was tight or lodging was not ideal. Working hard and a great deal, above extra tasks in the house, the parents may not have much time and may feel overtaken by events. Life in the host country wasn't always easy.

We all have our own experiences and memories attached to our parents' migration. This experience certainly had an impact in our life, with aspects both positive and negative. In any case, it is a project which has given us and our family new chances and opportunities.

## **Am I more from here or from there?**

Growing up between two cultures, we can feel that we belong to one or the other as well as to both at the same time. We can feel more at home here or there. Sometimes, we can also have the impression of being neither one nor the other. Here we don't feel quite like the others but there we also feel ourselves as foreigners. Of course, we don't have to make a choice between the two cultures, our identity and our membership defines itself in relationship to different aspects of nationality.

Without noticing, we have learned to reconcile the two cultures. Many keep the original culture in family life speaking their mother tongue and celebrating holidays linked to family culture at the same time speaking the language of the host country in public and participating completely in the life of the society.

For many, the attachment to the parents' country is major even if they have not lived there. If we went there on a regular basis in our childhood, if we have family or friends, we are that much more attached. We have learned to associate this country with vacations, with sun and festivities, with the joy and good humor of our parents. It is a place where we feel equal to others. Others have not had the possibility of visiting their forefathers' country but the interest and attachment has developed through the stories and images transmitted by the parents.

The interest for the parents' culture can express itself in a discreet way or show up later. In this way, it can translate itself at an adult age by a voluntary learning of the language which has not been transmitted or by a trip to the original country of the parents.

In acknowledging the contribution of the two cultures, we can take the best part of each and benefit from belonging to both.

## **Dual membership ...**

From birth, the interactions that we have with the world contribute to forming our intimate universe, our personality, our identity. The social and cultural world in which we have grown up, more precisely our family with its culture, exercises an influence on us. It is reflected in the way we act and think, in the values and the standards we keep...

But, if we are children born or arrived early in the new society, we have grown in different cultural environments. It is in this specific situation, being in contact with two or several different cultures, that we have constructed our personality. Without noticing, we go from one world to another: the world of the family with the parents' cultural universe and the world of school and communication media where the host country's culture dominates.

Of course each family has its own way of functioning, internal rules, different ways of interacting with the outside. When the two cultures diverge greatly from one another, there can be a major gap between the family world and that of the outside. The children must of course be accepted and act as part of the group in which they live above all the peer group. At the same they must feel part of their parents' cultural world. It is in this way that they can reconcile both worlds and feel the most integrated.

## **... considered as a blessing**

Dual membership is an advantage. Growing up between two cultures has the advantage of possessing two reference models, of speaking another language, of possessing two ways of thinking... We have the choice of referring or not to two cultures in everyday life. Having this possibility is an advantage in a society which is becoming more and more diversified.

If it is true that migration can bring certain obstacles and tensions at different levels, it also presents numerous chances for fulfillment, learning and development for all the family members.