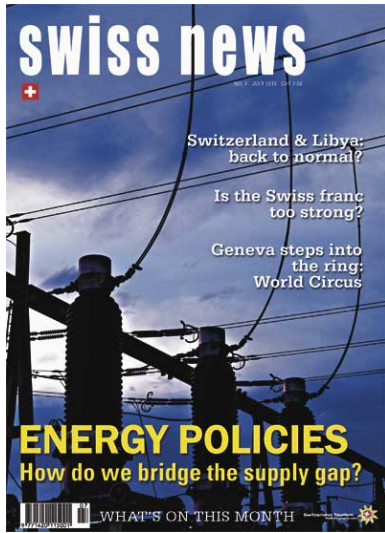


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## Hello, Heritage

*Sometimes you have to leave your comfort zone to discover what's important in life ... or even, who you are. For Chantal, it took moving to the land of stilettos and thousand-franc clothing ensembles to discover who she really was: an American.*

By Chantal Panozzo | Americans are obsessed with their heritage. “I’m 100 per cent Polish, what are you?” they’ll say with a Chicago accent, some not even realizing where Poland is on a map.

At college, in the heart of the Midwest, I studied to be a singer. According to my American opera star professor, my Italian heritage was all that mattered and my last name was to be flaunted. She worked with me to de-Americanize my offensive pronunciation of it and after my first year of study, I could say my name like an Italian native. When someone heard me talking and said, “you’re Italian, aren’t you?” I answered with an enthusiastic, “yes.”

So after moving to Switzerland, I couldn’t

wait to discover my European roots. My Italian heritage was easy; the town wasn’t far from Milan. And even when I walked into a “Panozzo” furniture store in the little town of Tresche’ Conca, and still couldn’t communicate with somebody who was supposedly a relative, I didn’t care – I felt a rush anyhow. Because like any good born- and raised-American, I preferred to measure who I was in percentages: take the one-quarter Italian and the one-quarter Polish and mix well with the one-fifth English, 12.5 per cent Danish, 10.5 per cent Swedish and seven per cent German. The result? Me.

While I could easily pass for a European with my name alone, there was, unfortunately, still the rest of me. My language options were English or English; I thought all cheese was bright orange; and I wore things like sweatpants – in public.

Despite living in conservative, elegant Switzerland, I didn’t do anything to alter my casual clothing style. Zurich’s main shopping street gleamed with Versace, Burberry and Chanel. And I walked right down it in last year’s Old Navy.

It took a few months, but one day, I saw my reflection in the window of Burberry and actually compared it to what the mannequins were wearing. Crap, I thought. Then I looked up. Passing me on the street were skinny, stylish women sporting wool wraps, pencil skirts and tall leather boots. They moved as if they weren’t walking on cobblestones in heels – confident and fast.

I tried not to notice that my Old Navy long-sleeved shirt had seen better days – like before it had ever been washed. If I really want to be European, I thought, I’ll have to wear designer clothing. And at that moment, it was obvious that my style

needed to change. Because, with one glance at my Nike-clad feet in a sea of stilettos, my true heritage had suddenly revealed itself: American.

I stepped into Globus, one of the larger department stores on Bahnhofstrasse. Like many Americans, I preferred large Swiss department stores to small boutiques because then I didn't have to talk to anyone. Until I moved to Europe, I was so used to shopping at places like Target and yes, Old Navy, that a store the size of a closet just made me cringe. I preferred being watched by security cameras than actual people.

I took the escalator up to the women's department, where I fingered various exotic fabrics. Silk. Lace. Wool. As I tried on a lace wrap, I glanced at the price tag. Six hundred francs? No way! I wanted to look European. But not that badly. I left the clothes on the rack in the dressing room and avoided the one roaming saleslady like the plague.

Designer ambitions in the dust, I decided to check out H&M but the question was, which H&M? There were at least four of them on this street alone. I chose the biggest one. Here, I found the prices more to my liking and the cotton and polyester clothes more to my style. I bought a black skirt and shawl figuring they'd look fine for my next trip to the grocery store, so long as I just didn't wear or wash them before then.

So the next time I went to Migros, I was dressed to impress. After dropping my baggy American clothes into the *Kleidersammlung* (clothes donation box), I dragged my orange IKEA cart filled with plastic bottles down the streets of Baden in bag lady fashion, but without my typical bag lady style.

In Switzerland, I had to redefine myself as a whole. I couldn't be 25 per cent Italian. The Swiss didn't understand. They'd just scratch their heads in confusion when I'd explain the pieces and parts of who I was.

"But you were born in the States. You're American," they would say after hearing me spit out my statistics in English.

The next day, as I wandered through Zurich's old town in the first pair of black boots I had ever owned that were actually made of real leather, I realized the Swiss were right about me. Even though I finally looked European in my black skirt and -uncomfortable shoes, in reality I was anything but. Embracing this conclusion, the next time I introduced myself, I pronounced my last name as I had originally learnt it – the American way. Technically, it was completely wrong. But it never felt so right.