

20 Years Ago

Adrian Kosmaczewski

2011-02-20

Exactly 20 years ago, on Wednesday February 20th, 1991, my mother and I arrived to Geneva, Switzerland, from Buenos Aires, Argentina.

It was a rainy, gloomy day, just like today. Our KLM flight from Amsterdam landed in Geneva airport at around 5pm. We left our bags in the lockers at the airport's train station, and then took the first train to Geneva. I knew, from reading tourist guides, that there was a tourist office in Geneva's main train station, so we decided to go there first, get a hotel, and then bring the bags later from the Airport.

You might wonder why we were looking for a hotel, when actually the idea was to come and live in this city; good question. The thing is that we knew nobody in here, and even better, nobody knew we were here. When I say nobody, I mean not even my mother's brother, or a couple of cousins, both in the French- and German-speaking parts of Switzerland. Our phone calls from Argentina to Switzerland to tell someone about us coming were a failure, mainly because, well, the phone numbers we had were no longer valid. My mother had not been here since 1964, and even worse, she had lost most contact with the family here after my grandmother died in 1985. In my case I was here for the first time.

So, given that we were all by ourselves, our priority was to find a place in this city, our new home. First a hotel, then to get a job and rent an apartment. We finally booked a room in the "Hotel Adris", a rather awful but cheap hotel in Rue Gevray (it does not exist anymore), in the Pícuquis neighborhood in downtown Geneva, 7 blocks away from the station, and just 150 meters away from the lake.

Little did we know that we would live in and around Pícuquis for the next 3 years and a half.

When I look back, I really think we were dead crazy. The only thing that guaranteed us not being sent home by the police was our Swiss passports, because, frankly, at that time I didn't even speak French fluently - and my mother had forgotten hers in almost 30 years of not speaking it every day. We were quite lost, as a matter of fact.

I remember our first evening in Switzerland. We were very tired after almost

24 hours of flying (EZE -> AMS -> GVA), but even so, after leaving the bags in the room we decided to tour around, just as the night was coming up.

We finally ended up having a pizza in a nearby restaurant. It was “La Grappe d’Or”, and it is still there. We had a pizza, we talked about what we had seen so far, and we planned the next steps.

Needless to say, my life changed completely that day.

Things went quite fast the following days. We spent Thursday and Friday going to real-estate offices looking for an apartment, but the thing was that they wouldn’t rent us one because my mother did not have job, and on the other hand, she couldn’t get a job without an address.

Our first weekend in Geneva was a rather stressful one. We were effectively stuck in a quite awful situation, without any solution in sight. Most of the so called “family members” of my mother didn’t even bother returning our phone calls, or were just telling us to go back to Argentina. What you just read. The only person that was really worried about us, and ended up coming to Geneva in March to meet us, was her cousin Hella from Schaffhausen, and until my mother’s death, she and her family have been the only ones with whom we have kept contact. They are our Swiss family, without any doubt.

Finally, on Monday morning my mother broke down in tears in front of a woman in the offices of Pilet & Renaud, a real estate agency in the Place du Cirque. We didn’t have much money, and we could not stay much longer in a hotel, so finding an apartment was top priority for us. This woman, whose name I don’t remember, was touched by our story, and told us to go to the “Hospice Général”, a help institution in Geneva, which has an office for Swiss people returning from abroad.

I never understood why the Swiss consulate in Buenos Aires never told us about that office in the first place. Anyway.

On Monday afternoon we got help from the Hospice Général, in the form of a warrant. With it, we rented our first apartment on Tuesday, and we moved in on Wednesday, exactly one week after we arrived. We didn’t have furniture, and our only clothes were in those bags, but the first step was taken. We were living in Geneva. Our first address was Rue Charles-Cusin 10, 1201 Genève. We rented a small studio on the first floor, right above the kebab shop in the corner of Rue de Monthoux.

I remember that we celebrated this by having dinner in the “Auberge de Savièse”, not far from the apartment. The following steps were a job, and also a school; I had to finish my secondary school.

My mother and I managed, against all odds, and without any other help, to build a life from scratch and fulfill all of those steps, and many others, in only a couple of months.

Exactly 20 years ago.