

Today's Advent Devotional is provided by Peter Covington

Shoeni Marroni-Part 1
(Part 2 tomorrow)

The first time I lived overseas was when I was seventeen years old living in Switzerland as an exchange student. Exchange students do a great deal of changing and exchanging among cultures, but I didn't realize the power this had to change me until Christmas.

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e town I lived near, right on the language border in Switzerland, had two names, one German and one French. It was called Biel/Bienne, and lay in the Northwest of the country, at the tip of a lake of the same name. I lived with a family on the German-speaking side of the lake. Biel/Bienne spoke both languages, and seemed to divide itself by trade. Meat cutters were German speakers, while bakers and vegetable dealers spoke French.

As Christmas approached, I mailed small presents home, but for the most part I had no idea what was going on. The family I lived with had a Christmas tree, but kept it in the garden shed outside to pull it out in "surprise" on Christmas eve.

As Christmas day approached, realizing the people and events that I would be missing, and I felt terribly alone. Then I received a hand-made Christmas card from Carole, another American exchange student in Switzerland. I was thrilled to be remembered kindly and the next day I received two more cards from other students. I joy, feeling like I had people who understood me and cared for me and took the time to send cards (this was before cell phones and internet). My loneliness had been broken and I wanted to shout from the roof tops. I decided to send Christmas cards to students I knew and liked. I wanted to repeat the sounding joy.

The cards had to go out that same day, since we were already very close to Christmas, and I bundled up warmly, preparing to write the cards in the city and mail them immediately. All the card shops in town spoke French, so I chose a shop closest to the post office, bought a set of holiday cards, took out my pen and looked for a place to write. The only place I saw available was a concrete bench near the edge of a park. I know now it is not a good idea to sit on cold concrete on a winter day! The little warmth in my body was sucked into the bench almost immediately, and I began to shiver. Check back tomorrow for Part 2

