

We Borrowed Grandchildren for Swiss Vacation

Zoya B. Schmuter

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English philosopher Francis Bacon said: “Travel, in the younger sort, is a part of education; in the elder, a part of experience.” The couple in this memoir offers their travel experience to enrich the education of their grandchildren, by taking them along to visit a beloved landscape.

The author and her husband grew up in Russia, where all their movements abroad were heavily supervised by the KGB. When they emigrated to the United States in 1975, they found themselves newly free to travel, and, as Schmuter puts it, “Travel abroad became a necessity and a priority in our life, as was true for many former Russians.”

As soon as Jake and Monica were old enough (ages eleven and eight, respectively), their grandparents took them to the mountains of Switzerland, where Schmuter and her husband had fallen in love with the scenery years previously. Through a company that organizes “Untours” (travel packages that combine group experiences and independent free time), they rented an apartment in Lungern, an hour from Lucerne, and proceeded to explore the little town and surrounding hiking trails.

Adventures like a bus tour through the mountain passes, a boat ride to the tourist town of East Interlaken, a gondola trip to the summit of Schonbuel, the discovery of Spitz castle, torrential rains, and typical childhood escapades like boredom and tonsillitis are chronicled in detail. The inclement weather turns treacherous, leading to an evacuation and precipitous return voyage.

Schmuter, a medical doctor and forensic pathologist, worked as a medical examiner and expert court witness. Her previous books include a memoir, *From Russia with Luck*, and *Tales of a Forensic Pathologist*, which explains the development of the New York City Office of Chief Medical Examiner.

Unfortunately, most of this little travelogue reads like court testimony. Schmuter carefully lists a lot of detail, like the contents of the Swiss apartment’s cupboards and which seats they each occupied on the plane, and she catalogues the exact times of their day trips, and the ingredients of every meal. However, her descriptions of their experiences (even the flood and evacuation) are written so matter-of-factly that they provide no sense of excitement or adventure. So much praise is given to the travel company that some chapters read like advertisements, and the cliffhanger ending is out of character with the thoroughness of the rest of the book.

The author clearly adores her grandchildren, but this memoir leaves the reader with no idea of their personalities or emotions, other than that they like shopping malls and dislike American fast food. It seems that her experience in the medical examiner’s office had too much of an influence on her education: she tells a story as though it were a witness transcript.

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