

It's not all tower cranes! : Scots in Switzerland

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It's not all tower cranes!

Scots in Switzerland

Linda and Ian McKinley

Who?

Maybe we should start with some introductions. We were both born in the small town of Helensburgh, near Dumbarton, on the west coast of Scotland. Despite the close proximity of our births – exactly the same hospital about a year apart – we met only at university about 18 years later.

Although both our families lived in Dumbarton, with a population of only about 25000, we were separated by barriers of religion and social class which, at that time (1960s and 1970s), were about as effective as the Berlin Wall.

Being academically inclined, we both studied at Glasgow University – Linda for an M.A. in English and French followed by an LL.B. in Scottish law and Ian for a B.Sc. followed by a Ph.D. in Nuclear Geochemistry.

Marriage in 1980 was followed by a period working in Oxfordshire in England, when we were forced by circumstances to consider our future plans – move to another part of England or broaden our horizons!

Why Switzerland?

So, where does Switzerland come into all this? In 1981, Ian attended a conference in Knoxville, Tennessee, where first contact was made with a «Swiss» nuclear waste delegation – typically with members from Scotland (Charles McCombie), Liechtenstein (Jörg Hadermann) and Holland (Frits van Dorp). A great time was had – both technically and socially. Ian met Charles again a year later at a conference in Berlin, at which time the UK waste management programme was beginning to come under pressure and the Swiss programme was expanding. On Charles' invitation, Ian visited Switzerland for the first time in December 1982 and was sufficiently impressed (by salary levels, apart from anything else) to decide to make the move abroad. On the basis of somewhat blurry photographs of the Baden area (mainly of tower cranes topped with Christmas trees) and some very tempting Swiss chocolate, Linda was persuaded to join the adventure. Ian started work at EIR (Eidgenös-

sisches Institut für Reaktorforschung – now the Paul Scherrer Institut, PSI) in Spring 1983. From the beginning this definitely proved to be a good move – the entire UK high-level waste management programme was shut down shortly afterwards, for purely political reasons.

Although moving abroad had clear advantages, for someone who had mastered both Scottish and English law the outlook was not so positive. Linda was faced with a situation where both the language and the legal system were completely different. We also managed to misunderstand the work permit situation and what we originally thought would be a simple process turned out to be a two-year search for work. Getting to the point of passing interviews for a wide range of jobs but being unable to obtain a work permit is soul-destroying (even EU citizens had a rough time in those days). Linda had no alternative but to work through a series of intensive German courses and, based on her linguistic ability, was finally able to find a position as a technical translator with Nagra (National Cooperative for the Disposal of Radioactive Waste) in 1985.

Early impressions

We arrived in Switzerland at the end of April 1983 in a second-hand Porsche 924 – not because we were rich, but because this was the only left-hand-drive car we were able to find in Oxfordshire when we sold our right-hand-drive «Mini» in preparation for our big move. We rented out our 18th century townhouse (purchase price £ 24000!) and managed to squeeze all our belongings into the car – the 924 is bigger than it looks!

Linda was of course arriving for the first time, with ideas based on the aforesaid blurry photos of Baden, Swiss calendars and Toblerone adverts. It is not difficult to imagine how negative the first impressions were on crossing the border from France into Basel. Expecting scenery out of «Heidi» or «The Sound of Music», with the emphasis on Alps and cow-bells, the sprawling factories of the chemical industry came as a bit of a shock. However, as the rolling hills and picturesque towns of Canton Aargau came into view, the initial panic and disappointment subsided.

On arriving at EIR, our welcoming committee was very friendly – even if with very limited knowledge of English. As we settled into our little «Gasthaus» next to the EIR site – with a beautiful, secluded location on the banks of the Aare river – we had failed to realise that we were arriving at the beginning of the Easter holiday. Long before the days of an «open-all-hours» Migros at Baden railway station, our challenge started the next day – Good Friday – when we discovered that all shops were closed. We ended up driving to France for basic groceries. Although undoubtedly influenced by our current perspective, with the benefit of 20 years hind-

sight, the early days were a mixture of shock (the cost of a couple of toasted sandwiches the first time we ate out in a restaurant in Baden) and amazement at being able to survive at all in a German-speaking (or, even more curious, Swiss German-speaking) culture. A very pleasant evening was spent, for example, on our first visit to the Hirschen restaurant in Villigen, when we sat down in complete ignorance at the busy «Stammtisch». Despite this, the locals decided to ignore our faux pas and spent the evening supplying us with chocolate. It all seemed very quaint and pleasant – but where were the Indian restaurants, the take-aways, the pubs? Those were the things we missed!

For Ian, work dominated the waking hours. The excellent, interdisciplinary, multinational group of colleagues at EIR formed not only a focus for the working day, but also the core of our early social programme. Parties with drinking, talking and dancing into the early hours arose spontaneously on a regular basis (usually several times a week). Because of its proximity to the work-place, our guesthouse was a centre for these events for about 2 years. During that time, we cemented friendships that have lasted the course of 20 years, with people from a diverse range of nationalities and backgrounds – a very enriching experience. Perhaps this is one reason that we did not feel compelled – as many of our British colleagues did – to join the Baden-Brugg English-Speaking Club. Although there were many aspects of British culture that we missed, and with full admiration for the role played by such «ex-pat» clubs, we decided to focus our social interaction around meeting people from as many different cultures as possible – not difficult in the Baden area! As an interesting aside, the organisation known as the Federation of Anglo-Swiss Clubs, to which the Baden-Brugg English-Speaking Club belongs, was founded in 1932 in order to «Promote friendship and understanding between the Swiss and English speaking people».

Of course, to make contacts in Switzerland – particularly in those days – it was more or less essential to join some kind of club. With our restricted understanding of German, we took the easy way out and joined the Scottish country dancing club (where Ian, although already the proud owner of a kilt, actually learned to dance for the first time!). Not surprisingly, the Scots were in the minority – the Swiss, Canadians and Scandinavians were much more accomplished dancers and the Swiss pipe bands could hold their own in any international competition. The highlight of the club year was – and still is – the «Burns Supper» (celebrating Scotland's most famous poet Robbie Burns), featuring delicious haggis from Zürich, piped in by a Swiss piper.

The EIR-based social activity helped to get us through the early days of dis-orientation, home-sickness and (for Linda) the frustration of looking for a job.

Grumpelturnier at EIR. Ian's first and only attempt at playing football. Back row, second left and still smiling!



Fasnacht with friends. Great excuse to dress up and party!
On the right side Linda
(Photos from the collection of Ian and Linda McKinley, 1983 and 1989).



Through language lessons and associated activities, we gradually built up a range of social contacts completely independent of the scientific community. Again these were inherently cosmopolitan in nature, so that, when we all got together at big parties, it was like a meeting of the League of Nations.

The first decade

Over the first few years, the feeling of being on holiday gradually evolved into really being aware of Switzerland as «home». However, it is difficult to shake off that «holiday feeling», with the Alps only an hour's drive away and the rest of Europe on the doorstep. With our increasing ability to speak German – rapid in Linda's case, glacial in Ian's – we were able to interact more with local people. Even before this linguistic base was well established, however, it was clear that the stereotypical images of «the Swiss» were fairly appropriate on a national level (well organised, tidy, law-abiding ...) but, strangely, broke down to a large extent on a personal level.

Take the Swiss sense of humour – or the often supposed lack thereof. Our friend Marc is Swiss and claims himself that humour does not exist in Switzerland. When we remarked that we thought «Die Schweizermacher» was one of the best comedies we had ever seen, his reply was «Comedy? That was a documentary!» The sense of humour does certainly exist – but it is so dry that it can often be missed completely.

Also, the Swiss «early to bed, early to rise» lifestyle. True most of the year – except during a «Fest». These are celebrated with equal enthusiasm, whether they are major, nationally recognised events (e.g. national day on 1st August, 700 years of the Swiss Confederation) or somewhat more contrived (the village well being 100 years old). Everyone gets together on rickety benches along trestle tables and drinks beer, local wine and strange concoctions with coffee until the early hours of the morning.

On balance, the experience of getting to know the Swiss has been very positive. However, like everywhere else it is a real country rather than an alpine fairyland and there have also been bad experiences. We were tricked into buying a flight ticket from a (thankfully no longer existing) Baden travel agent, who claimed that we booked the ticket in fluent German – at a time when we could just about manage «ein grosses Bier bitte». We had, in fact, only enquired about costs. We had our car tyres slashed in the main Baden car park – causing incredible excitement on the part of the Baden police as nothing else seemed to be happening that evening. We had our car (loaded to capacity with cheap French wine and cheese) confiscated by the police on return from a holiday in France because the «Strassenverkehrsamt» at Schafisheim had given us the wrong number plates (all our fault, apparently, be-

cause we hadn't noticed that they had given us the wrong ones). But, in retrospect, these were all minor hiccups (although they didn't seem like it then). At the same time, we were leaving our house door open for weeks, leaving all kinds of valuables on ski slopes/in bars/in cabriolets and wandering all areas of the cities at all times of the night without a problem.

By 1987, we were both working for Nagra. Linda was there first and, again, it was our fellow Scot Charles McCombie who offered Ian a job, prompting a move from the peaceful environment of EIR/PSI to the big city of Baden and the Nagra headquarters.

The second decade

We planned to celebrate 20 years in Switzerland in March this year but, unfortunately, we didn't get round to it. Too busy! Work has expanded considerably, with one of the spin-offs of our thriving international consulting work being an increased presence of Japanese colleagues here in Switzerland. There has been an established Japanese community in the area for years, but, through our new contacts, we now have the possibility to learn the Japanese language and culture and to enjoy sushi right here in Baden.

Between us, we usually spend about 2½ to 3 months per year in Japan – even being there together sometimes. Work in Japan – with the associated social programme – tends to be so intensive, however, that we rarely get a chance for sight-seeing even if we are in the country at the same time.

Despite these tendencies to overwork and extensive travel, we still find the time to make use of the excellent sports facilities in the area in an (increasingly unsuccessful) attempt to keep fit. From the very beginning, the availability of these facilities was a matter of wonder to us – nearly every village had a swimming pool and the «bigger» towns usually had two – indoor and outdoor. We have also been members of a number of fitness clubs and can regularly be found attending strenuous aerobics sessions at our local club in Wettingen.

Of course, in Switzerland, you can't mention sport without thinking of the mountains. Although not making as much use of the facilities as we used to, the opportunities on our doorstep for skiing in winter and walking during the rest of the year are one of the great arguments for remaining in Switzerland.

As a working couple with no children, we have integrated relatively little into the local communities where we have lived (after the guesthouse, in Klingnau, Lengnau, Brugg and, now, Villigen) – we are probably known better in the restaurants and bars than anywhere else in the village! In fact, compared to many of our British friends, we have really only scratched the surface of society here and there

are many «Swiss» experiences that we have missed out on: buying a house, joining the «Feuerwehr», becoming Swiss citizens. Projects for the future perhaps?

What keeps us here?

We arrived in Switzerland on the basis of a 2-year contract and now, two decades later, we are still here. We still talk about the possibilities of leaving and trying another country. So why haven't we done it? Because after 20 years it's home? Because we enjoy our work? Because, despite the changes over the last 20 years, it's still a safe place to live? Because we still appreciate the beauty of the countryside we see everyday? Because we love fondue? Because Baden now has a beer-garden? It's a combination of all these and other things too numerous to mention. Basically, all we need to do is find somewhere with better work opportunities and a better standard of living. Given these criteria, we will probably still be here in another 20 years!