

German Swiss and French Swiss : clichés and realities

Autor(en): **Egger, Michel / Tschopp, Peter**

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Clichés and Realities

«Rösti rift», «dominated Western Switzerland» – hackneyed catch-phrases, that rather than having an objective value are slogans tinged with a bad after-taste. Michel Egger of the weekly magazine «Construire» has discussed this with Peter Tschopp, Dean of the Faculty of Economic and Social Sciences in Geneva, who emigrated to Western Switzerland when he was 20.

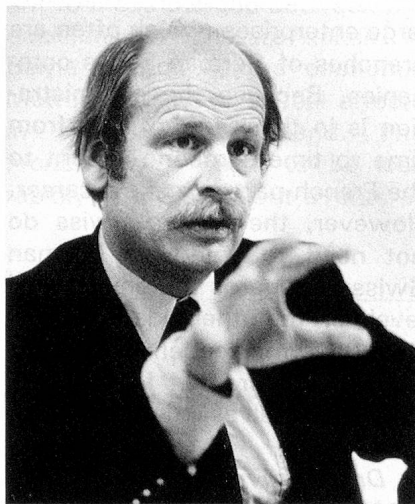
One says, Western Switzerland is choked by German Swiss Imperialism...

This is exaggerated. It seems to me that two elements have geared the discussion about dependence. On the one hand, the fate of the French Swiss industry had to lean more and more on German Swiss partners, on the other hand the organisational system of the Swiss Banks implies that decisions are made in Zurich and Basel. One ought not to forget the important traditional migration of the German Swiss to the «Romandie». Besides, the integration goes very quickly. Consequently, the first generation is bi-lingual, the second generation no longer. I believe, that the problem in reality lies elsewhere, probably in the «splendid isolation» which the «Romandie» nurtures. Many French Swiss living in German Switzerland feel they are living in exile, especially in Zurich. That is why I would not speak of domination but rather of non-communication. They take no notice of each other.

You acknowledge therefore that there is a rift between the two communities?

No. With these stories about rifts one must be careful. When one is sensitive to these problems, one realises that they do not only preoccupy the French Swiss but also all the German Swiss who, with regard to the center of the region around Zurich, live on the periphery, for instance the people

from Aargau. Geneva does not suffer because of Zurich. Perhaps politically a little, considering the predominance of Zurich at the level of political life and lobbies.



Peter Tschopp (Photo: Erling Mandelmann)

Geneva has found her own way to open herself to the world in a role as an international turn-table which allows her to turn her back on Zurich. The more the means of communication develop the more the distance between Zurich and Geneva seems to become. Once again comes across the idea of isolation which I prefer to the idea of a rift. When a Genevan goes to Zurich he goes because he must and he goes there with the only thought to be able to return home in the evening because he is convinced – actually unjustly – that there is nothing to do in Zurich in the evenings. But when he goes to Paris, then he always arranges

it so that he can spend the night there. In short: the real problem lies in the polarisation around certain metropolises. And when, as I believe, in approximately 100 years, Geneva will become the most powerful city in Switzerland, the people from Neuchâtel and the Valais will complain just as much against Geneva as they do today against Zurich.

How do you interpret the systematic reevaluation of the Swiss German and the breakthrough of the English language?

The revival of the dialect appertains to the cultural federalism that is so strong in our country, as well as the love for the old and the regional archaeology. The wave can especially be felt in schools and in the media. English does not make the matter any lighter. Also when bi-lingualism is possible, tri-lingualism exceeds the adaptability of the population. It is obvious that the predominance of English forces all persons with higher education to learn it. Even at the University we are regularly confronted with this problem. As the German Swiss understands too little French to be able to follow and vice versa the French Swiss too little German, the outcome is English.

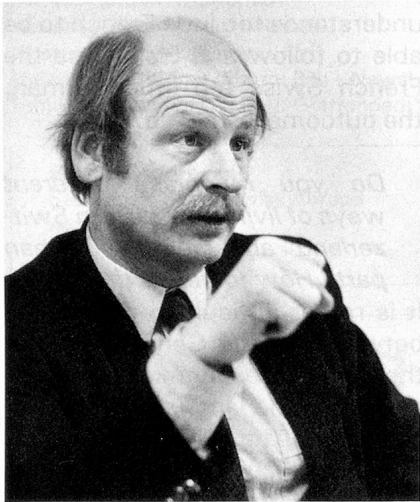
Do you recognise different ways of living in Western Switzerland and in the German part? How to depict them?

It is rather difficult to distinguish between them. Generally seen, the political, economic and social system in the language regions is the same. The difference lies rather in the cultural environment, in the way one tackles the everyday life and work. The French Swiss are certainly more individualistic. The social tie, which is doubtless just as important as it is in the German part, expresses itself in another way. The French Swiss does not want to be consid-

ered as somebody who could be moulded into a form. He always claims an individual handling which, every now and again, is more a semblance than reality. Even if the hierarchies are important, they are not made a fuss about in Western Switzerland. In Geneva for example, the manager of a large Bank wanted his office on the second floor and the one of his co-worker directly above him, an absolutely legitimate decision if one knows the structure of the building. This did not prevent his making every effort to obtain the permission from his superiors in Zurich. They could not understand that a manager would agree to be directly under the feet of his right-hand man. This individualism contributes to the fact that the French Swiss is less politically conscious than the German Swiss and that he does not let himself so easily be mobilised.

Does one also notice differences in the spirit of enterprise?

I would say that the German Swiss are more methodical and



systematic in their procedure. If they have found something, they are proud of it and they fight to the end. Whereas French Swiss enterprises are alive with ideas, which are however seldom brought to a conclusion. Here it is

not a question of dilettantism, it seems as if for the French Swiss it is only necessary to be sure of the quality of his ideas, as if he would be ashamed to exploit them. The proceeding seems to be less planned and the marketing is much less painstaking and aggressive than in the enterprises on the other side of the River Saane.

Does this serious character explain the fact that numerous German Swiss occupy superior posts in French Swiss enterprises?

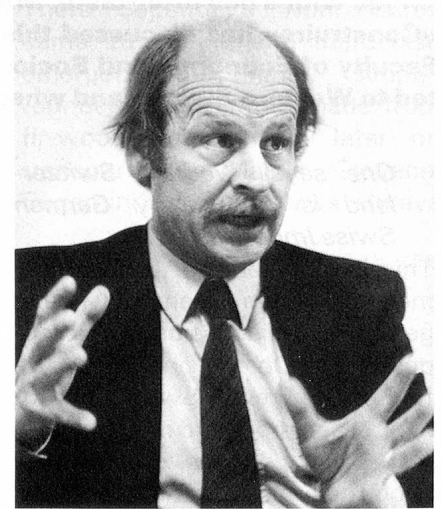
I believe that one must distinguish between the problems. This assessment is correct for relatively large enterprises, which often are branches of German Swiss companies. Because the administration is in the German part, from time to time someone is sent to the French part to make a career. However, the French Swiss do not need to envy the German Swiss as regards the educational level. On the other side however, they have the tendency to try to stand on their own feet and to make themselves independent.

Does the French Swiss identify himself less on the political level with the State than the German Swiss?

That is correct. The French Swiss is much more federalist than nationalist. In Geneva for instance the patriotic and folkloristic manifestations are very strong. I believe it is the only Swiss Canton where each year on the 1st of June the anniversary of the admission of Geneva into the Confederation is celebrated.

The municipality and the suburbs are also very important units, which have very strong individual existences. That means, it is natural that the French Swiss is touchy about manifestations of foreign power, because he justly considers himself as a minority. He reacts impetuously if one dic-

tates to him not to drive over 80 or 120 km per hour and to use the safety belt. This does not prevent him from respecting these norms. I am always astonished to notice that the number of drivers who



drive faster than 130 km per hour between Berne and Zurich is significantly higher than between Lausanne and Geneva.

French and German Swiss are more and more turning their backs on each other. What should one do to bring them closer to each other?

I believe that it is in the small and practical things, where in the long run the best results may be achieved. One has now published a whole series of articles, compilations and books. One writes, one makes statements, but this does not change anything and in the end will tire everyone. I think one should intensify the exchange between school-classes. Then the Radio and TV should exchange programs. Also the newspapers on their side should not any longer treat the program of the other language secretly.

Do you believe that German Switzerland has enough respect for the minorities?

Surely respect for minorities exist; on this the whole political

system of the Federation is built. However I believe that the manner to show this respect has to fit into the general social development. I have the impression that at times German Switzerland behaves stupidly and is lacking in respect against the minorities, without being conscious of it.

A typical example is the cancellation of the financial help of the Confederation to Cointrin, the airport at Geneva. It is much worse, as it does not only concern Geneva, but the whole of Western Switzerland. The missing tact shows as well in untranslatable expressions such as «Ordnungspolitische Postulate» in order to define the ideological foundations of our society.

The same goes for the large communities of interest. If one has such a power, one should dare, from time to time, to refrain from

self-justifying enquiries and try to get to know other opinions than those of their own members. In short, politeness is lacking if one steps on somebody's feet. The elephant sometimes does not realise where he puts his feet.

If the German Swiss Parliamentarians obviously don't listen to their French Swiss colleagues, who are on the Rostrum, is that also a lack of respect?

This upsets me less, because Politics has more to do with power relations than with respect. What seems more important to me is the gap between the decisions which are taken in Berne or Zurich, the economic Metropolis, and their real effects in Western Switzerland. The French Swiss seem to be less rapidly informed about events at

the federal level than the German Swiss. Of course, on the next day he finds all the news he wants in his newspaper. But, evidently, this is not enough to penetrate into his consciousness; if sometimes he realises the consequences of a decision only 6 months later, his reaction can be violent: «How could they dare?»

Why this delay?

I have the impression that the French Swiss reads his newspaper differently from a German Swiss. The French Swiss prefers the dream, the contemplation, he filters the flood of information more, whereas the German Swiss is more methodical and conscientious. He «studies» the newspaper, the Romand «skims over it», except when professional reasons require more attention. ●

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