

Switzerland - as seen from Paris

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Objektyp: **Article**

Zeitschrift: **Swiss review : the magazine for the Swiss abroad**

Band (Jahr): **16 (1989)**

Heft 4

PDF erstellt am: **13.09.2024**

Persistenter Link: <https://doi.org/10.5169/seals-906449>

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Viewed from the outside

In this edition of "Forum", five authors from five different countries have committed to paper their thoughts about Switzerland. Their contributions all differ greatly from each other – both in terms of the content and the form they have used. Moreover, each of the pieces was written under completely different circumstances.

The selection of the authors was also not made by chance. It is obviously of great interest for us to know what a journalist – and therefore an "opinion-maker" – from the third world thinks about our country. Or what two editors-in-chief, one from an EEC country and the other from a neutral country keen to join the EEC, feel about Switzerland's attitude to the process of European integration. We are doubtless all curious to know as well just how Switzerland is depicted by a writer living in the country where approximately one quarter of all the Swiss living abroad have made their home. Also featured is a view of Switzerland as seen through the eyes of a foreign editor from an Eastern European country which is currently undergoing a far-reaching reform process.

The articles were written by the following authors: The Brazilian Gideon Rosa has made a name for himself in his home country as both a television and newspaper journalist. In addition to other positions, he works for "A Tarde", "Jornal de Bahia" and the television station "TV Manchete". The West German Jürgen Engert is editor-in-chief of the "Sender Freies Berlin", while the Austrian Peter M. Lingens used to work as an editor-in-chief, a publisher and a columnist of "Profil" in Vienna. Lionel Richard, a Frenchman, is an art critic and writer living and working in Paris. József Martin, who hails from Hungary, travelled around Switzerland at the invitation of the "Neue Zürcher Zeitung". He is the foreign editor of the Budapest daily paper "Magyar Nemzet". JM

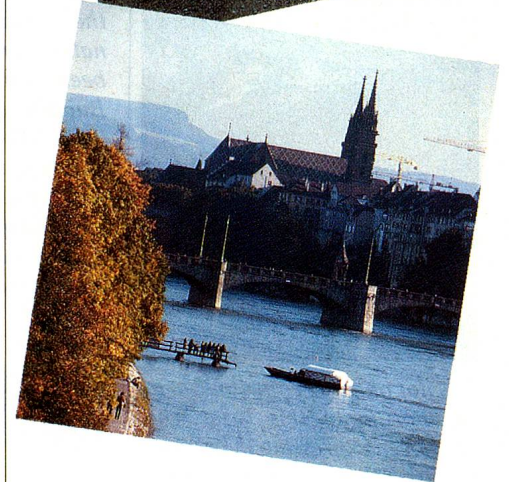
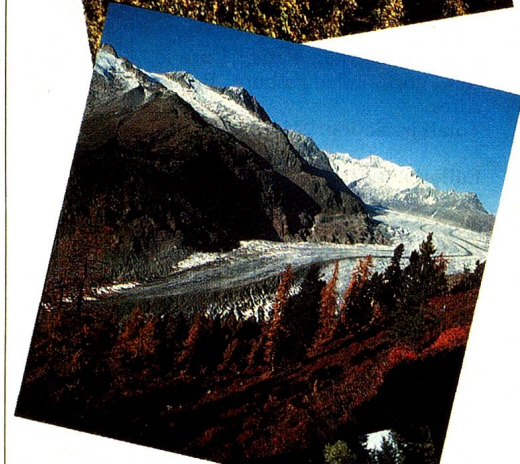
Switzerland – as seen from Paris

Chlichés are tough but resilient. Many channels of communication in our society stabilise and perpetuate them: picture post-cards, tourist publicity, articles in illustrated magazines. Thus in every corner of the world, Switzerland is seen in its most elementary and intrinsic form, in its geographical character, and in a clear-cut representation as the most famous "land of mountains". It seems almost impossible to imagine a symbolic visualisation of Switzerland without a backdrop of snow-clad peaks. The American writer Gertrude Stein had been so thoroughly inculcated with this false image so frequently seen in the USA that when at last she discovered with her own eyes what Helvetic scenery was really like, she was very disappointed not to find titanic mountains everywhere she went!

A land of soaring mountains must of course be ideal for winter sports: and that is, I believe, the idea of Switzerland held by most French men and women. And this involves of course a whole range of other misconceptions: the towns of Switzerland are seen as of negligible interest, there is no such thing as a Swiss proletariat, the mentality of the

Swiss population is essentially that of peasants. High mountain pastures, hazardous mountaineering, dairy farming, greenery and snow, chocolate...! The novels of Ramuz (such as *Aline, La grande peur dans la montagne*, and *Derborence*) – the only Swiss author known to some extent in France and appreciated as genuinely Swiss! – reinforce this image. And even more important, the daily newspapers in France hardly devote any space to what is happening in the Helvetic Confederation, except for references to international meetings held in Geneva or the occasional financial scandal: these seem to be the only links between Switzerland and the rest of the world. Apart from these happenings, nothing seems to come to pass here.

Switzerland is however a country of very varying aspects. This diversity is even its most outstanding feature, from the administrative and cultural standpoint. The myth of the noble dwellers in the high mountains, which appears to have grown up in the course of the 19th century has hardly any validity at all for more than a quarter of the population. Is this evidence of a lack of cu-



Well-known scenes from Switzerland: idyllic countryside, majestic mountains, folkloristic farming. (From top: Lavaux on the Lake of Geneva, the Aletsch region in the Valais, bringing the cattle down from the Alps near Appenzell, Basle with the Middle Bridge over the Rhine. (Photos: SNT0)



riosity on the part of the French public? An absence of interest among those who would otherwise be documenting the situation in the media? These possible reasons cannot be rejected out of hand. Knowledge about what is going on in other countries is not a strong focus of French concern. For that matter, too, statistics have shown that the average French man or woman is not very interested in foreign travel, is weak in geography and not very familiar with foreign languages.

One must ask oneself whether Switzerland – apart from its touristic installations and its bank safes and vaults – has anything to offer other nations. The country has four official languages and, in effect, four separate cultures. And the most talented representatives of three of these cultures turn to, or at all events keep a close watch on, the Federal Republic of Germany, France and Italy – to such an extent that for many of them, the Swiss “identity” is little more than a flight of fancy, to be stressed in publicity brochures, as an alibi for the alleged creative vitality of the Helvetic Confederation! Seen from France, the nuances of cultural pluralism as maintained by the Swiss Federal State are not easily perceptible. The only Swiss book publishers who are reasonably well in evidence in French bookshops are l’Age d’Homme, l’Aire and Zoé. Others are more or less unknown. The result of this is that for the unsophisticated browser, it is difficult to see any difference between Swiss writers such as Jean-Luc Benoziglio, Jacques Chessex, Claude Delarue, Yves Laplace and Robert Pinget on the one

hand and such French authors as Yves Berger, Michel Butor or Bernard Noël on the other: no wonder, they have the same publishers, they are all Parisians. Is this situation very different for writers from the German-speaking regions of Switzerland? Not at all: Dürrenmatt, Frisch, Hohl or Robert Walser are not seen as translated into French from a specifically Swiss original, but from the German language, just like Böll or Martin Walser. Who can see any difference? And how about Swiss authoress Alice Ceresa? Her writings are translated from Italian, just like those of Elsa Morante – and for that matter, she herself lives in Rome.

Switzerland’s cultural pluralism thus seems rather artificial when viewed from outside. In reality, Switzerland gives one the impression of not being really capable of shouldering the responsibility of taking on such a function. There is a marked lack of communication and interpretation between the cultures, as the infrastructures needed for so doing are inadequate. As far as literature is concerned, the most effective link between the cultures is provided by the official Pro Helvetia Foundation, but it can only impart a stimulus by means of subsidies. Logically, the ideal solution would be for works by a Swiss author to be published simultaneously, or as nearly as possible at the same time, in the official languages of the Confederation. In his capacity as a publisher, Bertil Galland attempted to plan his programme in this direction – but without success. At present, even such “classical” authors in the Swiss literary field as Charles-

Albert Cingria and Ramuz are scarcely available in German to readers in the German-speaking region, and conversely, the same applies as regards works by Robert Walser, Ludwig Hohl and Adrien Turel, which have for a long time past not been available in French.

An example of this astonishing “compartmentalisation” occurred in 1986 at the Lausanne exhibition devoted to “French-speaking Switzerland between the two wars”. A tremendously interesting expo, and a sumptuously produced catalogue! But one wondered – and still wonders – why the organisers did not take advantage of the opportunity to cover the entire Confederation? For something that became clear at this exhibition was that in all sectors, the French-speaking part of Switzerland has stood aloof from many modern trends, from cubism and constructivism in painting to surrealism in literature. Was this attitude the same as that taken in the German-speaking part of Switzerland? The question deserves to be studied. All the more so as there were “gangways” linking Zurich and Berne to Geneva and Lausanne: the “Allianz” group counted among its members not only the “German-Swiss” Max Bill, Richard Lohse and Max von Moos, but also Camille Graeser, citizen of Carouge.

In November 1968, on the basis of an initiative taken by a group of students, a meeting in Fribourg was arranged for a hundred or so writers, critics and publishers from all over Switzerland. In connection with this gathering, Henri Giordan expressed his as-



The visual angle is decisive, as one can see everything from at least two sides... The Matterhorn viewed from Italy (left) and from Switzerland. (Photos: Rolf A. Stähli)



tonishment in the "Journal de Genève" in the following words: "I must confess that I was quite alarmed to learn that a certain leading critic from the French-speaking region had not only never before met so-and-so, an important author writing in German, but had never even read any of his works!". And I fear that today, one could see a comment expressed in exactly the same terms. At all events, that is the impression one received at the 1986 expo in Lausanne.

The magazine "Passages/Passagen" published in French and German by the Pro Helvetia Foundation is evidently endeavouring to change this image of a conventional and conformist Switzerland, and ever since its first issue in 1985, it has been trying to convince its readers that on the contrary, Switzerland is a country in which the cultural scene is both dynamic and polemical. It seems that this is also a realisation which the Swiss Cultural Centre in Paris wants to promote. The road ahead appears likely to be a long and difficult one. For not only is it impossible to uproot clichés overnight – over the years, several of the positive aspects of the current image of Switzerland as seen in France have become debased, even "shopworn". Switzerland's reputation for cleanliness and orderliness has been somewhat tarnished by the alarming spread of AIDS – there must be a flaw somewhere. And as far as the country's perfect "direct democracy" is concerned, a system which generations of students have seen as a model, financial swindles and shady business transactions "à la Chaumet" have come to make it seem somewhat like an over-ripe fruit.

Many Swiss have chosen to live in Paris – the long list includes such names as Cendrars, Giacometti and Le Corbusier, so there must be a good reason for their doing so. And they all give the same reason: had they stayed on in Switzerland, they would have been stifled and even paralysed in their vitality and élan. Of course, not all artists and writers have left, or wish to leave. But those who have done so reinforce an image which embodies many other aspects – the image of a country bent on emasculation. Thus Claude Delarue did not hesitate to write in the "Journal de Genève" in 1983 that Switzerland frightened him, instilled a "metaphysical consternation" in him, and that the apparent spotlessness and sterility characteristic of the make-believe image of the country inspired in his sub-consciousness "a gnawing terror, a feeling of disquiet and uneasiness, of unbearable exhaustion."

Lionel Richard, Paris

Impressions of a Wealthy Country

For me, Zurich is the loveliest city in all Europe. Really and truly! I like to see the young couples – well-dressed and seemingly without a care in the world – strolling in fine weather along the lakeside promenade. I like the atmosphere of Switzerland's financial metropolis – even though the "locals" complain about the chaotic traffic conditions in the inner city. And the fact that after a long evening spent with friends, one can walk home at 2 o'clock in the morning without being molested is something that I appreciate. Anyone who has ever tried to do that in Rio de Janeiro will understand me! Swiss towns seem very peaceful, compared with London, Paris or Rome, not only because of the proverbial cleanliness. What lots of people take for granted in Switzerland – for instance, the clean water spouting from numerous fountains in the streets – seems a momentous discovery to visitors like me from the "Third World".

But when you walk along the streets of Swiss towns, you seldom see cheerful faces. The expressions of the passers-by seem to bear witness to sorrow and loneliness. And in this wealthy country, it is not only the older inhabitants who seem lonely, but younger people too. Even in serious high-class newspapers you will find column after column of advertisements which for us Bra-

zilians are very strange: contact ads which invite one to meet the man or woman of one's dreams. Pornographic magazines are prominently displayed in many kiosks and news-stands – but they do not appear to cause any embarrassment to passers-by or to the persons "browsing" through them.

There is evidently a widespread liking all over Switzerland for domestic pets such as cats and dogs – preferably those with a pedigree! The luxury treatment accorded to these darlings shocks anyone coming from a Third World country. The supermarkets have departments full of special offers for pet foods. And for these foods, the TV screens are filled with publicity, in which hyper-intelligent doggies and immaculate pussy-cats speak nicely of the brands that they like best. And that's not all: on every street, in every square, the nation's pets have to be taken for a stroll, with collars and in cold weather, warm jackets, but sometimes there has to be a halt, after which the owner has to collect the steaming excrement and deposit it in the special containers provided by the municipality in many towns! Every morning, afternoon and evening you will see hordes of dog-owners being taken for a stroll by their tail-wagging pooches, who are usually well-behaved and neither bark nor bite.

It is extraordinary to observe how many Swiss are good linguists. Everyone seems to speak English, and lots of people can converse in French, Italian and Spanish. In addition various regional dialects are spoken, as is also the Rhaeto-Romanic language of the Grisons, called Romansch (which although one of Switzerland's official national languages is struggling for survival, as it is in danger of being replaced by the Swiss-German dialect).

The situation as regards the use of German is rather strange. In the French and Italian speaking regions, the written languages are largely identical with the everyday spoken idiom. But in the German-language regions the dialect ("Schwyzerdütsch"), which is the principal spoken language in everyday use, is very different from the High German in which newspapers and books are printed. This does not mean that Germans and Austrians cannot make themselves understood by Swiss from the officially German-language part of the country, and vice versa. If necessary, the German-Swiss will make the effort to converse with Teutonic neighbours in High German (whereby they may sometimes detect a note of amused con-



Punctuality of the Swiss railways: an amazing phenomenon for many a foreign tourist! (Photo: Keystone)