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# The Swiss Observer

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## SWISS LETTERS TODAY

*The following is an abridged translation of an article by the poet Manfred Gsteiger published by the Pro Helvetia information services.*

On 20th May, 1970, 22 writers walked out of the Swiss Society of Authors and explained in a communiqué that they had done so in protest against the Society's President Maurice Zermatten, who had been co-author of the Civil Defence "Little Red Book", and who had helped to institute censorship in the Valais.

Whereas the great majority of the 400 members of the Swiss Author's Society are hardly known outside their own cantons, let alone their country, these 22 authors included Switzerland's principal literary representatives abroad, such as Max Frisch, Friedrich Durrenmatt, Peter Bichsel, Jörg Steiner, Jürg Federspiel, Walter Diggelmann and Otto F. Walter.

All the above names are German-Swiss, as no French-speaking writers of reknown were among the 22 "boycotters".

### Five main problems

This was an important event because it was symptomatic of the situation of Swiss letters today. Whatever the issue, the initiative of the 22 dissenting authors reflected five main problems underlying Swiss literary life today.

These are: 1) A generation gap conflict between the "elders" who form the vast majority of the Society of Authors' membership, and those who are now aged between thirty and forty. Some younger writers belong to the latter group, as do some of the more illustrious members of the previous generation (Frisch, Ludwig, Hohl). 2) A conflict between progressive writers of left-wing tendency, proponents of an "engaged" literature, and conservatives with a moderate liberal stand. 3) A conflict between the successful and less successful authors of the Society. 4) A conflict between those

who consider themselves as writers (even when they do not depend entirely on their writing for their living) and those for whom writing is a secondary activity, or even a hobby, and who know it. 5) A marked but regrettable division between the five linguistic regions (German, French, Italian and Retho-Romanic).

Although these considerations are rather general and contradicted by several individual examples, they nonetheless describe the overall situation of Swiss literature today. It is as a result of these political, social, professional and linguistic differences that a minority of "dissenters" have come into conflict with a majority of writers generally satisfied with the State and Society.

This opposition, which derives its strength from the high value of its proponents (something which many would like to see translated on the political front) nonetheless comes to terms with existing institutions, and has in fact become an institution itself. Despite their non-conformism, writers like Durrenmatt and Bichsel take an active part in the cultural policies of their Communes, Cantons, and the Confederation. They have no objection in representing Swiss literature abroad.

### A radical change

But the fact remains that there has been a radical change on the Swiss literary scene since the end of the war. Even in those days, our national writers lived and worked in harmony with State and Society. Dissenters and marginal authors existed, true enough, but never had a chance of winning success and recognition. One such author was the poet Alexander Xaver Gwerder, who committed suicide in 1952. The succeeding years were marked by a speeded up transformation process in the whole mentality of Swiss literature. A landmark of these developments was the "literary quar-

rel" which took place in Zurich during the years 1966 and 1967 between Dr. Emil Staiger, literature don and winner of the Literary Prize of Zurich, also a firm supporter of Goethean criteria, and the combined forces of literary criticism.

Another important development has been the disappearance of the opposition, which has been a constant of Swiss letters, between "homeland" and "abroad". On the one hand, foreign countries no longer exert the same fascinating appeal to Swiss writers, on the other, Switzerland itself no longer has this ambiguous character of being a fortress and a prison. Relations with the motherland and abroad are less emotionally charged as they traditionally were. Foreign countries are now open to the experience of every writer and constitute a virtual market for their work, providing they are sufficiently gifted and ambitious.

Switzerland, on the other hand, has become a place where the writer can live comfortably, whether he is for or against its institutions. No writer writes for Switzerland anymore. Swiss villages and Communes and their people are used by authors who belong to the world rather than to a particular area. They are examples of humanity. This explains why a volume of poems in Bernese dialect (Kurt Marti, *Rosa Lui*, 1967) had considerable success in West Germany.

### The Motherland and Abroad: both part of the Earth

Thus the distinction between homeland and the world has become blurred, or irrelevant. The Basler author Heinrich Wiesner described in his novel *Schauplätze* the problems of American and European youth by drawing from his own experience in Basle. Situating his novel *Ein Messer für den ehrliche Finder* in the Seeland, Jörg Steiner purported to describe the universal condition of the prisoner existing on the fringe of society.

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# COMMENT

## HOW TO INTEREST THE YOUNG IN POLITICAL PARTICIPATION

The problem of involving the young in politics has been given prominence in several articles appearing in the Swiss Press in the past months, the most recent instance being a full-page debate in the *Basler Nachrichten* on getting young people to join a party.

If democratic institutions are to be revived and polling attendances increased, then one should start by attracting more youths. A study of the type of person who regularly votes and those who never even return their voting envelopes has doubtless been made. It would show, I'm sure, that the 20-30 age group is poorly represented.

The most available way of instilling political interest in the coming generations is at school. This is done to some extent in primary school, where children get "Civic Education". However, the influence of school, without underrating it, is not powerful enough to turn a teenager into a responsible and politically aware citizen.

What is surprising, is that political awareness, according to most authorities, has never been so strong among the young. Yet they tend to keep away from the polls. Despite their political awareness, there is a conscious lack of interest in actively participating in the life of the community, a life governed by certain institutions.

Although little is done by the parties in the way of attracting new and younger members (with the possible exception of the *Freisinnig* Party) it is doubtful that if they did increase their effort, they would get better results. There is of course an important difficulty due to the voting age lower limit of 20, which diminishes the relevance of being an active party member under that age. But in the main, the majority of young people are somewhat wary of parties. According to a girl interviewed in the *Basler Nachrichten*, parties are "*eine undurchsichtige, unselbständige Gesellschaft . . . eine sture Ideologie oder überhaupt kein klares Konzept*". If this is what the majority of the young think, parties are obviously not given much chance. Another recurring objection among the young is that all decisions, every new law in Parliament, must go "through the parties". They would favour instead direct popular rule.

(PMB)

The masters of the past wrote in a simple style that carried the scent of the country's soil. Many young people today are fascinated by the more sophisticated style of fashionable writers and tend to reject what comes under the heading of "national literature". Such an attitude would cast away Meinrad Inglin's poetry, Max Rychner's critique and Urs Martin Strub's lyric work in one large basket. Although this is shortsighted, it may have contributed to the renewal of Swiss-German literature during the past twenty years.

## Development of French-Swiss literature

There is an important difference in the recent development of French-Swiss and German-Swiss letters. Whereas the works of German-speaking writers have become political and intellectual, those of French-speaking writers are marked by an almost Baroque love of language and the visible world. Most new works currently appearing in French-speaking Switzerland are poetical and have a touch of stylistic sophistry. Whereas German-Swiss writers keep their distance with Society and the State, the French-speaker turns with a close look to the native landscape. The most prominent examples are Maurice Chappaz and Jacques Chessex. On one side, there is critical interest for social problems, on the other contemplation. To the east, a break away from tradition, to the west, a conscious return to the masters, Ramuz, Ch. A. Cingria and Gustave Roud.

The many sidedness and tensions within Swiss letters contrast with the "reasonable norm" which seems to have been generally accepted in Swiss politics, despite a multitude of parties. This is probably the most important asset of Swiss literature.

# SWISS EVENTS

## FEDERAL

### Mr. Keller's mission to the sub continent

Mr. René Keller, Head of the Division for International Organisations at the Political Department and former Ambassador in London, returned from the Indian sub-continent in the middle of April from a two week mission, during which he had talks with Mrs. Indira Gandhi and President Zulfikar Ali Bhutto of Pakistan. (He did not go to Bangladesh as was erroneously reported in our March 24th issue).

The purpose of his mission was two-fold. First, he had to sanction Switzerland's role as intermediary between the two formerly conflicting states, which are about to resume negotiations. Secondly, his brief was to see how Switzerland could carry out her task of "protecting" the 93,000 Pakistani prisoners-of-war detained in India. On the first score, Mr. Keller's mission

seems to have been a complete success. At a press conference held on his return, he said that Switzerland's "good offices" were highly appreciated on both sides and that Switzerland enjoyed a considerable capital of goodwill in that part of the world. Berne will therefore continue for the time being to serve as a link and "letter box" between India and Pakistan. This function, although it may not appear glamorous, is nonetheless highly important and plays its part towards the resumption of normal relations between the two countries.

Regarding the problem of Pakistani prisoners, Mr. Keller was faced with India's refusal to the idea of "outside supervision". The only outside body presently allowed to have an eye on the conditions of detention of the Pakistani army is the International Committee of the Red Cross. It is understood that India has grudgingly admitted this and is not making things easy for the international body. Although India appears to have left a few doors half open, and may agree