

Foreigners in Switzerland : prosperity as well as problems

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Objektyp: **Article**

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

Band (Jahr): **20 (1993)**

Heft 4

PDF erstellt am: **31.05.2024**

Persistenter Link: <https://doi.org/10.5169/seals-907426>

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Prosperity as well as probl

"I think that foreigners are treated in the same way everywhere. They are liked best when they come to a country on holiday. People who don't like foreigners are actually afraid of them. There is nothing wrong with worrying about your job and the prospect of losing your livelihood. But it would be wrong to think that a reduction in population would automatically lead to more jobs. Experience shows the opposite is the case. What the economy needs is mobility and dynamism".* This is what Vittorino Pozza, an Italian who has lived for 32 years in Renan in the Bernese Jura, thinks; and he hits the nail on the head about the relationship of Switzerland to its foreign residents.

Statistics show that the number of foreigners permanently resident in Switzerland in April 1993 was 1,228,294 – or 17.8% of the total population. This means that after Luxemburg Switzerland is the European country with the highest proportion of foreign

residents. 67% of these are nationals of European Community (EC) and European Free Trade Area (EFTA) countries. 18% are from ex-Yugoslavia, and

Pierre-André Tschanz

6% are from Turkey. If we add to the above figure people with annual residence permits, seasonal workers, asylum-seekers, cross-frontier workers and foreign officials with their families, the number of foreigners in Switzerland rises to almost 1.5 million.

A big economic factor

It cannot be disputed that this high proportion of foreign residents has led to a number of political, psychological, social and economic problems. But it has also been a source of economic, cultural and moral enrichment.

Although there are no official figures available about the proportion of our GNP for which foreigners are responsible, there is no doubt at all that Switzerland would never have been able to reach its very high rate of GNP per head – 37,790 dollars, which makes it the richest country in the world – without the help of foreigners. The only study existing on this subject dates from 1975, and this puts the contribution made by foreign workers to our GNP at 33.3% (Ram Dayal, 'Role of Foreign Workers in the Swiss Economy'). There are whole economic branches which would

simply collapse if it were not for foreign workers. 45% of those employed in heavy industry and precision mechanics are foreigners. In building, the figure is 36% – but this does not include the seasonal workers, who play a very important part here. And what would happen to Swiss hotels and restaurants without foreign workers?

Foreigners and women workers have been the first to feel the consequences of the present recession. In June 1993, the general unemployment rate was 4.4% – but it was 7.7% for foreigners as against 3.5% for Swiss workers.

Stabilisation policy

For at least twenty years, the Swiss government has been trying to stabilise the number of foreign workers – and this has not been without its problems. The economic boom of the 1960s led to a strong increase in immigration. This was accompanied by more Swiss supporting xenophobic movements. In 1970, Swiss voters barely rejected a popular initiative (the Schwarzenbach initiative) whose object was to force a reduction of the number of foreigners in Switzerland by one third. A few years later, the oil crisis and recession came along to help the government's attempts to stabilise the number of foreigners in the country. It is estimated that about 300,000 foreign workers have fallen victim to the drop in manufacturing production. Switzerland has been accused of "exporting" its unemployment problem. During the last decade, new economic needs and the migratory streams of the last few years have led to a renewed increase in the number of foreign residents in Switzerland.

* From 'Intervalles', no. 34, the cultural magazine for the Bernese Jura and Bienne.



Without foreigners whole economic branches would collapse.

Racism, xenophobia's twin brother, has raised its ugly head in Switzerland too. Our picture: a desecrated cemetery. (Photos: RDZ)

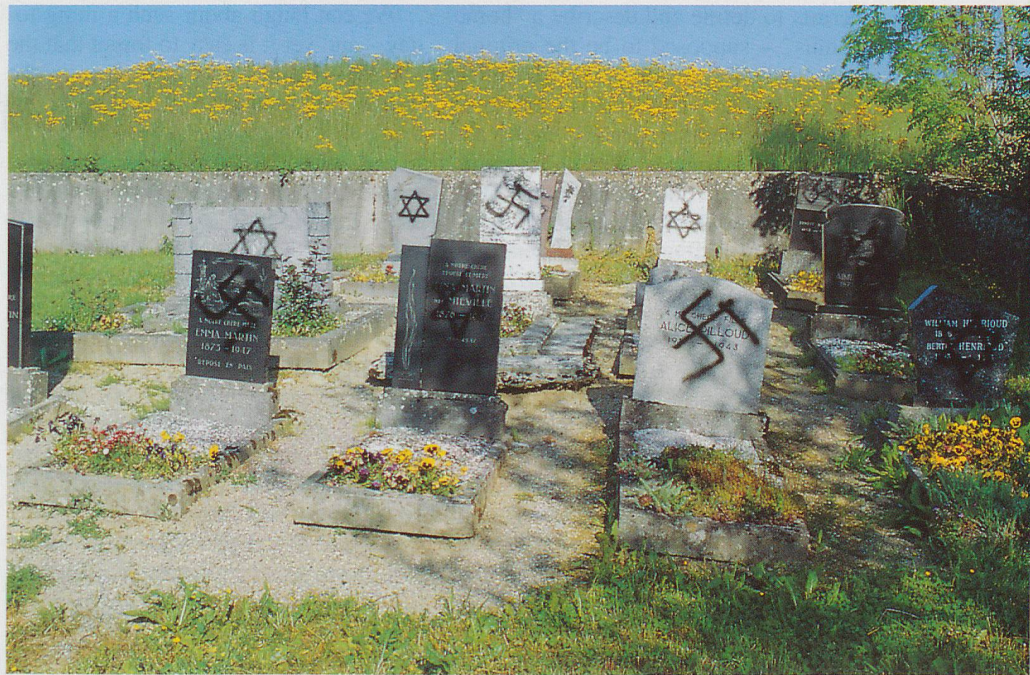
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The three-circle model

If Switzerland had become a member of the European Economic Area (EEA), the situation of most foreigners in the country would have changed greatly. All nationals of west European countries would have obtained full freedom of movement and establishment throughout the EEA. Voting analysts are united in thinking that fear of free movement of persons played an important role in last December's rejection of EEA entry by Swiss voters.

The No vote has led to Switzerland maintaining its laws on foreign residents. But even if it does not join the European Economic Area, changes are bound to come. The government's present policy on foreigners is based on the so-called 'three-circle model'. The first circle is liberalisation of immigration policy for nationals of west European countries and abolition of the seasonal worker status; the second circle is easier entry for people from Switzerland's traditional labour recruitment countries, such as ex-Yugoslavia, Turkey, the United States and Canada; and the third circle is work permits for nationals of other countries only in exceptional circumstances.

But the statistics already noted do not really clarify the situation of foreigners in Switzerland. More figures are required, as well as more information about the economic role of foreigners in Switzerland and official policies on the subject. One-third of foreigners permanently resident (between 300,000 and 400,000 – no precise figures are available) were born and schooled here – these being second and third generation foreign residents. In addition, there are over 100,000 first generation foreigners in Switzerland (again there are no official figures) who have lived here for several decades. Vittorino Pozzo from Renan is one of these. In spite of their foreign passports, many of them are even more Swiss in their feelings and thoughts than many Swiss. ■



On "Racial Theory"

An error with fatal consequences

Racism is a phenomenon of modern European history. As a scientific discipline it leads nowhere; as an ideology it is catastrophic.

Xenophobia and racism have hit the headlines in Switzerland as elsewhere in the last few years. If the Federal Council and parliament had their way, Switzerland would sign the 1965 UN convention declaring war on racism. But in the debate on tightening the law to implement this convention, political right-wingers have used hair-splitting arguments about freedom of opinion against this intention. One Auto Party member of parliament even said that the proposed new law was aimed "against the white race". This shows that belief in racial doctrine – although long unmasked as a myth – is still widespread.

The theory of "races" goes back to the time of the Enlightenment in Europe. Disciples of the Swedish court doctor and botanist, Carl von Linné, who in 1735 published a book called "The Complete System of Nature", tried to extend his classification of species to humankind and arrange them in a sys-

tem. Their original criteria were colour of skin and shape of head, but in the course of time they worked out ever finer measures of distinction – until they had to admit that the differences within a "race" were often greater than those between "races". The logic of this so-called scientific research finally led to the conclusion that racial doctrine could be upheld only if each human being was regarded as a "race" of his own.

In spite of this, the idea of arranging people in "racial" categories could not be expunged. The terrible thing was that the original and basically harmless physical and facial distinctions were compounded in the nineteenth century with moral and social values. This meant that other "races" were defined as inferior, which justified taking them under domination or even annihilating them. It is perhaps not surprising that Europeans declared themselves to be the highest products of creation. In this way "racial theory" was used to justify colonial conquest by European powers. But of course by far the worst consequences were seen in Nazi Germany where racialist madness cost the lives of millions of Jews and others.

Switzerland was not spared by the currents of "racial theory". In the 1930s, attempts were made by examining army