

Mailbag

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Congratulations

My name is Tatiana Talenti, a Swiss citizen, and I have been living in the States for many years, with my husband who died almost 8 years ago. I am 80 years old, and I want to congratulate you for the "Swiss Review", which has become most interesting and informative and, yes, also fun.

Saw with pleasure your article on Neverland (US-Edition only), a splendid movie that I have recommended all my friends to rent. We had lived for more than ten years with our children in Plans-Mayens, Crans-sur-Sierre, with great joy.

TATIANA TALENTI, TROY,
MICHIGAN, USA

Artistic freedom

Swiss Review 1/05

I find it sad the way artistic freedom is discussed in Switzerland. Article 21 of our constitution states: "Artistic freedom is guaranteed." And Article 16 declares: "1) Freedom of opinion and information is guaranteed. 2) Every person has the right to form, express, and disseminate his or her opinions freely. 3) Every person has the right to receive information freely, to gather it from generally accessible sources, and to disseminate it." It should go without saying that these rights apply to every citizen and every artist, not only for so-called famous artists. I also believe that cultural promotion in a democratic state should be founded on a democratic and liberal concept of culture rather than a narrow one, to ensure that the entire spectrum of opinions is promoted equally.

In Germany I have heard a high-ranking politician comment that society needs critical art in order to remain alive. Switzerland's attitude is a far cry from this. Politicians urge in all seriousness that art must be reduced to advertising the virtues of Switzerland. Unfortunately, such discussions, as well as the level to which our political culture has sunk over the years, show

only too clearly that we have trampled to death the freedoms enshrined in the constitution.

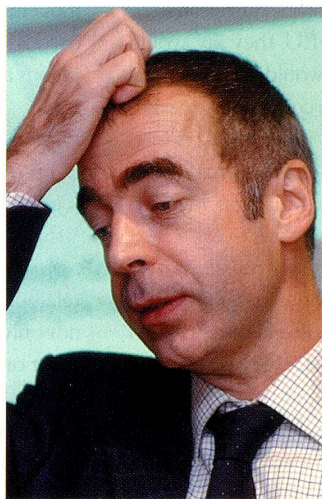
As with everything, democracy deteriorates unless it is properly maintained. It's time for Swiss to remember their democracy and their constitution!

PIA TROXLER, WRITER,
LEIPZIG, GERMANY

Subsidised art as an export hit?

Swiss Review 1/05

Reading Heinz Eckert's editorial, one wonders precisely how many francs and centimes flow into the federal purse through this cultural export hit whose praises



Pro Helvetia Director Pius Knüsel.

he sings. The Swiss export industry does not benefit from it in any way, shape or form. Your euphoric claims serve only to legitimise a case of fouling one's own nest.

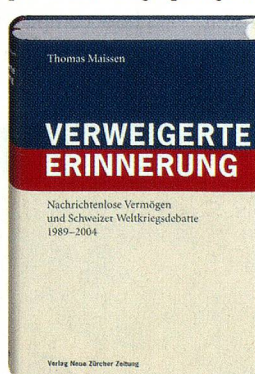
National pride? Talking about what Switzerland can be proud of, why was Swiss National Day not held abroad on 1 August for "reasons related to coordination"? None of our neighbouring countries has ever postponed the date of its national day! The era of "yodelling choir tours" to add light entertainment to the festival programme has been supplanted by exhibitions by "Swiss pseudo-artists": well-endowed with subsidies, most of them honour their country through chronic abstention from federal referenda.

ADOLF KURT LEEMANN,
CHONBURI, THAILAND

In the mid-1990s Switzerland experienced its most serious foreign policy crisis since the end of the Second World War. Our country became the target of harsh American and Jewish criticism due to its role during the war and its refusal to revise its own version of history. Attacks from other countries triggered an emotional crisis at home about Switzerland's wartime conduct. Now a book has been published that meticulously documents the chronology and background to the 1989–2004 Swiss debate on the World War years and has no qualms in criticising the Federal Council and banks. The author of this highly interesting 700-page work is Swiss historian Thomas Maissen, formerly an employee of the Neue Zürcher Zeitung and now Professor of Contemporary History at the University of Heidelberg.

Why was our country the target of such heated international criticism in the 1990s? The author points to the new world order following the end of the Cold War, to US efforts to establish universal human and people's rights, and to the declared objectives of Jewish organisations, e.g. the fight against anti-semitism and aid for Israel and the Jews. Under the new world view, Hitler's policy of genocide and the holocaust became a memorial for a new global community founded on human rights and the protection of minorities. Against this backdrop, Switzerland's neutrality was seen as a form of indifference towards evil. As Nobel laureate Elie Wiesel put it: "When human dignity is at stake, neutrality is a sin, not a virtue." The Swiss themselves took a completely different view of the war years. For them the most immediate concerns were the threat posed to Switzerland by the Third Reich, and the resistance of the people and the army. Economic cooperation with Germany was regarded as vital, and the refugee issue was sidelined.

Thus two completely opposing views of history collided: on the one hand, the genocide perpetrated on Jews as the moral foundation for a new world order; and on the other hand the patriotic view taken by a neutral Switzerland. Things came to a head when Jewish organisations demanded that Swiss banks release unclaimed assets held in the name of holocaust victims. Instead of acceding to this entirely reasonable request from Jewish organisations, "representative Swiss" in business and political circles showed a complete lack of sympathy. This attitude was prompted not by any refusal to acknowledge historical fact but by an unwillingness to eat humble pie.



"At this symbolic moral level, Switzerland was continually in denial," writes Maissen. Only when confidence in Swiss banks was threatened in the American financial sector did the bankers offer billions in compensation.

The Federal Council is also harshly criticised in this book. The author claims that the national government showed its weakness by dragging its feet, delegating responsibility to the Independent Commission chaired by Professor Bergier, and consistently acting in a tactical manner. Instead of a gesture of apology there were only suggestions of such an attitude: more in self-pity than in sympathy for those it had turned its back on.

ROLF RIBI

Thomas Maissen: "Verweigerte Erinnerung. Nachrichtenlose Vermögen und Schweizer Weltkriegsdebatte 1989–2004". Pub. Neue Zürcher Zeitung, Zurich 2005. 730 pages, CHF 68, EUR 47.