

Portrait : "Remain Swiss at heart, even abroad"

Autor(en): **Eckert, Heinz**

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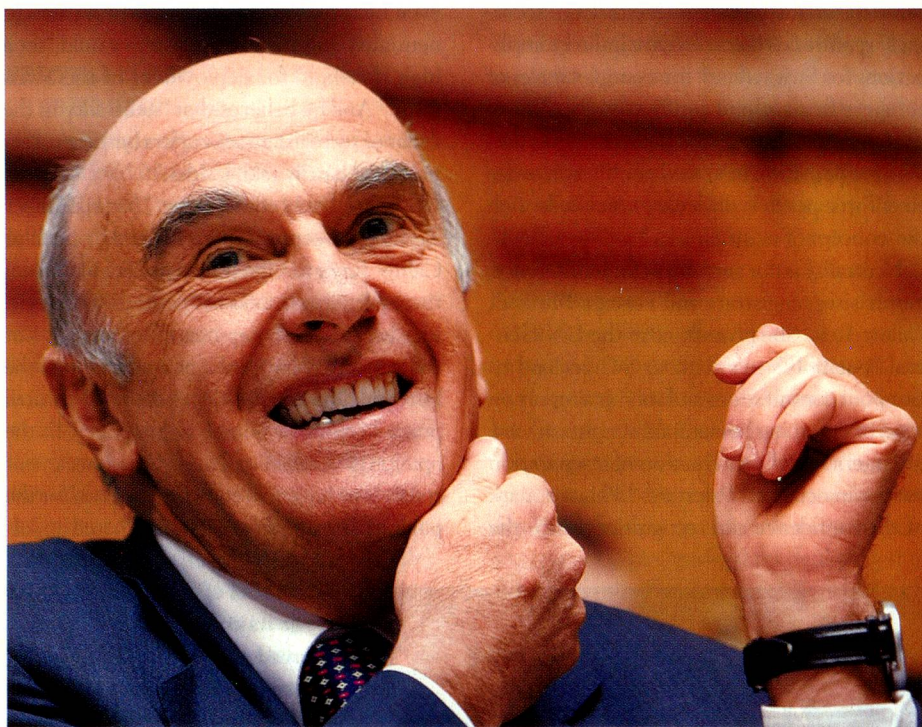
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"Remain Swiss at heart, even abroad"

Federal Councillor Hans Rudolf Merz has a special affinity with Swiss Abroad. The Minister of Finance explains why in an interview with the Swiss Review. By Heinz Eckert.



Federal Councillor Hans Rudolf Merz became a patriot abroad.

"Living abroad turned me into a patriot. It was only when I was far from home that I realised how pleasant, well-organised and safe life is in Switzerland," admitted Federal Councillor Hans Rudolf Merz, Head of the Federal Department of Finance, who lived for a number of years in various Latin American countries working as an industrial consultant. Among Switzerland's Federal Councillors, this makes Merz the one with the most experience of living abroad. In August he gave a speech to the Swiss Club in Munich on the referendum on free movement of persons, and at the beginning of September he honoured Swiss Abroad with an address to the Congress of Swiss Abroad in Interlaken. So does he have a special affinity with Swiss Abroad? "Naturally," says the Finance Minister. "Since I worked with Swiss Abroad for many years, I am familiar with their problems and know how important it is for them to receive comprehensive, competent, first-hand news about events back home. That's why, even if I am unable to travel around the

world and visit all Swiss Clubs, I decided at least to personally inform Swiss living in Munich about free movement of persons," commented Federal Councillor Merz on his visit to Bavaria.

The Swiss Review also plays an eminently important role as a source of information: "When I was appointed to the Federal Council, I received reactions from all over the world courtesy of the Swiss Review. It is highly regarded", recalls Merz.

Hans Rudolf Merz, born in Herisau in 1942, studied at the University of St. Gallen, where he obtained his doctorate in political science ("Dr. rer. publ."). After several years of teaching and travelling, he became a free-lance business consultant in 1977 and performed mandates on behalf of major customers primarily in Lebanon, South Africa, Latin America and Europe.

One of Merz's main tasks was to recruit and develop the upper management of construction material company Max Schmidheiny, as a

result of which he spent several months a year working abroad. Says Merz, "Time and again, whenever I needed to recruit Swiss-based engineering graduates from the Federal Institute of Technology for a management post abroad, I would notice what a high-calibre, well-rounded education these people had: far more so than their university counterparts abroad. That's why they were so sought after as executive staff around the world."

How did his view of Switzerland change when living abroad? "Only when I was abroad did it strike me how valuable the stability we have in Switzerland is, and how pleasant the Swiss virtues of punctuality and reliability are: after all, they make a defining contribution to our affluence," says Merz. While Merz admits there are countries with more pleasant climates, he believes Switzerland has the highest quality of life.

Patriotic feelings are often ridiculed, and patriotism sometimes has negative connotations. What does patriotism mean to the well-travelled Federal Councillor? "For me, patriotism means that I love my home country and value its institutions. My patriotism stems from rational reasons rather than sentimentality." Hence Merz's appeal to Swiss Abroad: "Remain Swiss at heart – even abroad."

Merz believes that Switzerland has no reason to hide its light under a bushel. On the contrary: its image abroad is intact, and "Made in Switzerland" continues to be an acknowledged seal of quality, says Merz, citing the country's professional education system that places the emphasis on vocational training and is unique throughout the world: "The level of education enjoyed by professionals here is the reason for the high quality of Swiss products, which are the envy of the world."

Federal Councillor Merz only lived abroad for an extended stretch once, when he worked for nine months in Chile. Otherwise he was always based in Switzerland and "commuted". In which countries would he like to live as a Swiss Abroad? Without hesitation the Finance Minister responds "Chile, South Africa or Venezuela." Asked why, Merz replies "Chile has a very pleasant climate and is the best-organised country in Latin America. Venezuela and South Africa are very beautiful countries and the opportunities there have by no means been exhausted." Moreover, all three countries offer a good choice of European culture which he would not like to do without.

Hans Rudolf Merz regrets that since his appointment to the Federal Council he has less contact with Swiss Abroad than before, and adds with a smile: "I have less free time than before and have to stay put here in the Houses of Parliament."