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Reflections on the Place of Origin

Something very Swiss

Anyone who has to fill in an official Swiss form inevitably comes up against the «place of origin». Many people who have been living abroad for a long time often no longer know exactly what that means and easily confuse it with «birthplace». The place of origin is, in fact, a Swiss speciality which exists nowhere else.

The «Meeting '91 Campaign» (a major force in the celebrations to mark the Confederation's 700th anniversary) would like, among other things, to encourage our compatriots abroad to visit their place of origin in the jubilee year 1991. For many Swiss who have been living abroad for more than a generation the concept of the «place of origin» as a place to which one is specifically linked, namely, a Swiss commune, is meaningless, for in the meantime they have often be-



By
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come citizens of their country of residence as well and generally feel that they are Swiss rather than that they are attached to a particular locality. On their papers, however, it says «citizen of...», for example Unterägeri.

Commune, Canton, Confederation

The place of origin is a Swiss peculiarity which does not exist anywhere else. It is bound up with the three-tier structure of Swiss citizenship, which means that every Swiss citizen is at the same time the citizen of a canton and of a commune. This commune is called the place of origin. Its practical significance today consists in the fact that the family registers are maintained at the place of origin and not, as in many other countries,

at the birthplace or even the place of residence. When a foreigner is naturalized he gets the citizenship of the commune in which he lives. In the Canton of Zug, for example, the citizens are responsible for this matter and decide by a majority resolution whether a foreigner can become a citizen and thus a Swiss. The Swiss concept of the state is expressed in this act of conferring citizenship of a commune through the communal assembly. The communes possess pronounced autonomy. They, together with the cantons, form the bulwark of federalism with which the latter resists the central power of the state in important questions. Matters which can be solved at the lower levels of the cantons and the communes are not to be decided and dictated about at national level. The Swiss way of thinking on this subject derives from the idea of home in the narrower, local sense. The political activity of most federal politicians, too, begins in the commune or the canton. Here the citizen exercises his primary political rights. He decides at the communal assembly on important affairs which concern his place of residence.

Abandoning the notion of support

The old notion of the «place of origin» has been changed by the mobility of the population, it has lost force and meaning. It is also no longer linked to the notion of support. Formerly, in the event of sickness or impoverishment, a citizen had to go back to his commune of origin, which was obliged to take responsibility for him financially and provide him with all the

necessities of life. That is why there are still so-called citizens' homes all over Switzerland, although their role has changed in the meantime. The communes of residence of persons needing support are now responsible for welfare assistance, and since 1973 the Confederation has been responsible for the Swiss abroad.

Dynamic concept of home

In that way the material bond with the so-called commune of origin has been severed or at least greatly stretched. A new interpretation of home has developed. «Home» has become a



Moghegno TI

dynamic concept involving experiences, things that have happened to one, which are linked to a place or a landscape. People have become what they are through history. Therefore, if one wants to understand a person's thoughts, feelings, hopes, decisions etc. one must know what his experiences have been. So it must not be forgotten that what has been experienced in one place and relates to one place gives one's own life story consistency and continuity. That place is one's home.

Thus, «home» is a concept which at the same time also defines a person's identity. That does not mean that he identifies with his place of origin, for it may also cause him suffering. The old concept of «place of origin» which declared it to be the place of assistance in case of need made difficulties for many people and stamped that place of origin as an accursed place. The impoverished person had to confess to his fellow-citizens

Meeting '91 Campaign

«The year 1991 should be an occasion for every Swiss citizen to visit his or her commune of origin, which he or she often does not even know.» That appeal comes from the Federation of Swiss Women's Organizations in connection with the Confederation's 700th birthday. In fact, that Federation has called upon all the communes, via the cantonal governments, to fix a day in 1991 on which they would be prepared to welcome their fellow-citizens from other communes in Switzerland and from abroad. About a hundred communes have already reacted positively and already fixed the date. Thus, for example, Moghegno TI has set the date for 10 August, Vouvry VS has chosen the last weekend in August and Dörflingen SH has decided on 27 October.

It is up to them, of course, what form this project will take. Small communes with modest means, in particular, will hardly be able to manage without a financial contribution from the participants. Those who would like to know more about this matter should contact their communes of origin direct. *MZ*

that his life was a failure in the material sense. He then had to put up with being devalued as a person and being treated with



Vouvry VS (Photo: Alice Zuber)

contempt. To be sent to the poor-house was felt to be a disgrace. Those who lived there were ostracized.

Identification with home is



bound up with feeling comfortable, with being accepted, with the respect and esteem in which one is held by one's fellow-citizens.

The dynamic concept of «home» teaches us that home can be anywhere. It would be academic to try to tie a person to his place of citizenship, his place of origin. That is why, in the area of support, the place of origin concept has been replaced by the place of residence concept. This leads to the neutralization of support and checks the disintegration of the identity.

When we realize that this separation is still very new from the point of view of federal law (the cantons previously had a trial run by means of an inter-cantonal agreement) we are able to grasp that Switzerland is strongly stamped, in her history, with a regional concept of home. This way of thinking is still alive and remains a constant inspiration of federal reasoning processes. It was expressed in the ballot on UN membership, for example, and will again animate, very powerfully, the discussions about Europe 1992.

Conservative in the good sense
However much one may regret this way of thinking in specific cases, its fruitfulness and originality should not be underestimated. The federal way of thinking is a concept which produces an interesting tension



Dörfingen SH

between the central state and the constituent states. The fruitfulness consists in the cultural and everyday activity and discussion in the villages. That is the basis on which original political models are also often developed and translated into reality. A citizen's pride in his place of origin is also expressed in special efforts to foster ties with the place of origin by observing old customs and investigating its history. At a time of rapid social change and of a tendency for all ideas to become similar, the fostering of ties with one's place of origin is a valuable activity, creating traditions, and a conservative reaction in the good sense. Therefore, the initiative in favour of inviting the Swiss abroad to their villages of origin in the year 1991 is very positive, perhaps even more so for the local inhabitants than for their guests, for it will give them the opportunity to see their place of residence commended, criticized and observed from the outside with other eyes.

Emigrants and Returning Emigrants - 1987 Statistics

Big excess of emigrants

According to the Federal Office for Industry, Crafts and Labour, 10,668 Swiss liable to military service emigrated in the year 1987, while 6,044 returned home. The number (4,624) by which those emigrating exceeded those returning was the

highest since the Second World War. These statistics are based on figures from the Federal Office of Adjutancy. They include only men and women liable to military service (the latter being members of the Women's Auxiliary, Army Service and/or Red

Cross nurses) and therefore give only a limited picture, especially with respect to gainfully occupied men. For 1987, the immigration and emigration figures which are based on the communes' registers of inhabitants and include everybody show a slight excess of people returning (28,794 returning as against 28,540 emigrating).

Since the Second World War a total of 386,558 Swiss liable to military service have emigrated and 288,796 have returned to Switzerland after a stay abroad of at least six months.

In 1987 North and South America accounted for more Swiss emigrants than Europe (3,397 as against 2,952). The most popular destination was the USA

(1,852), followed by the Federal Republic of Germany (572). Emigration to Africa was very much down. Emigration to Asia as a whole decreased slightly, while the flow of emigrants to Saudi Arabia declined sharply and that to Japan, by contrast, was somewhat greater. Migration between Switzerland and Oceania (especially Australia) sharply increased again after emigration between 1982 and 1984 had been almost halved. As before, South Africa accounted for the greatest excess of people returning over those emigrating, followed by the rest of Africa, France and Belgium. In general, the quota of those returning from the EC countries was greater than of those from North and South America. *MZ*

Why can't I have my son's address?

«Fifteen years ago I was divorced from my wife, a German. Our child went to live with his mother. Sadly, apart from a scanty correspondence and a few visits from my son, not much remains of our relationship, although I have paid my maintenance contributions regularly. In the meantime, my

QUESTION AND ANSWER

son is studying in another city, I have had two cards from him but don't know his address. Well, I approached the Swiss Consulate General in Düsseldorf asking them to let me have my son's address. The reply I received was that my son was indeed registered at the Consulate General but that, for reasons of data protection, they were not allowed to give his address. However, they had sent him a copy of my letter. That answer was a severe blow. Have we now reached the point where a father can no longer obtain his child's address?»

The «Beobachter» understands your attitude. However, our inquiries to the Federal Department of Justice and Police, Data Protection Section, in Berne show that the Consul General's answer was correct, even exemplary according to the Administration's internal guide-lines. As your son is 27 years old and independent, it must be left to him whether he wants to make contact with you. It was in order for the Consulate to forward a copy of your letter to your son, and it is to be hoped that he will soon get in touch with you.

(From «Der Beobachter»)
N.B. An address can be disclosed without the consent of the person concerned in exceptional cases, namely, when that person is trying to evade a legal obligation, provided, of course, that this is supported by an enforceable judgment, an enforceable order or an acknowledgement confirmed by the signature of the person concerned. *MZ*

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