

# Impressions of a wealthy country

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tonishment in the "Journal de Genève" in the following words: "I must confess that I was quite alarmed to learn that a certain leading critic from the French-speaking region had not only never before met so-and-so, an important author writing in German, but had never even read any of his works!". And I fear that today, one could see a comment expressed in exactly the same terms. At all events, that is the impression one received at the 1986 expo in Lausanne.

The magazine "Passages/Passagen" published in French and German by the Pro Helvetia Foundation is evidently endeavouring to change this image of a conventional and conformist Switzerland, and ever since its first issue in 1985, it has been trying to convince its readers that on the contrary, Switzerland is a country in which the cultural scene is both dynamic and polemical. It seems that this is also a realisation which the Swiss Cultural Centre in Paris wants to promote. The road ahead appears likely to be a long and difficult one. For not only is it impossible to uproot clichés overnight – over the years, several of the positive aspects of the current image of Switzerland as seen in France have become debased, even "shopworn". Switzerland's reputation for cleanliness and orderliness has been somewhat tarnished by the alarming spread of AIDS – there must be a flaw somewhere. And as far as the country's perfect "direct democracy" is concerned, a system which generations of students have seen as a model, financial swindles and shady business transactions "à la Chaumet" have come to make it seem somewhat like an over-ripe fruit.

Many Swiss have chosen to live in Paris – the long list includes such names as Cendrars, Giacometti and Le Corbusier, so there must be a good reason for their doing so. And they all give the same reason: had they stayed on in Switzerland, they would have been stifled and even paralysed in their vitality and élan. Of course, not all artists and writers have left, or wish to leave. But those who have done so reinforce an image which embodies many other aspects – the image of a country bent on emasculation. Thus Claude Delarue did not hesitate to write in the "Journal de Genève" in 1983 that Switzerland frightened him, instilled a "metaphysical consternation" in him, and that the apparent spotlessness and sterility characteristic of the make-believe image of the country inspired in his sub-consciousness "a gnawing terror, a feeling of disquiet and uneasiness, of unbearable exhaustion."

Lionel Richard, Paris

## Impressions of a Wealthy Country

For me, Zurich is the loveliest city in all Europe. Really and truly! I like to see the young couples – well-dressed and seemingly without a care in the world – strolling in fine weather along the lakeside promenade. I like the atmosphere of Switzerland's financial metropolis – even though the "locals" complain about the chaotic traffic conditions in the inner city. And the fact that after a long evening spent with friends, one can walk home at 2 o'clock in the morning without being molested is something that I appreciate. Anyone who has ever tried to do that in Rio de Janeiro will understand me! Swiss towns seem very peaceful, compared with London, Paris or Rome, not only because of the proverbial cleanliness. What lots of people take for granted in Switzerland – for instance, the clean water spouting from numerous fountains in the streets – seems a momentous discovery to visitors like me from the "Third World".

But when you walk along the streets of Swiss towns, you seldom see cheerful faces. The expressions of the passers-by seem to bear witness to sorrow and loneliness. And in this wealthy country, it is not only the older inhabitants who seem lonely, but younger people too. Even in serious high-class newspapers you will find column after column of advertisements which for us Bra-

zilians are very strange: contact ads which invite one to meet the man or woman of one's dreams. Pornographic magazines are prominently displayed in many kiosks and news-stands – but they do not appear to cause any embarrassment to passers-by or to the persons "browsing" through them.

There is evidently a widespread liking all over Switzerland for domestic pets such as cats and dogs – preferably those with a pedigree! The luxury treatment accorded to these darlings shocks anyone coming from a Third World country. The supermarkets have departments full of special offers for pet foods. And for these foods, the TV screens are filled with publicity, in which hyper-intelligent doggies and immaculate pussy-cats speak nicely of the brands that they like best. And that's not all: on every street, in every square, the nation's pets have to be taken for a stroll, with collars and in cold weather, warm jackets, but sometimes there has to be a halt, after which the owner has to collect the steaming excrement and deposit it in the special containers provided by the municipality in many towns! Every morning, afternoon and evening you will see hordes of dog-owners being taken for a stroll by their tail-wagging pooches, who are usually well-behaved and neither bark nor bite.

It is extraordinary to observe how many Swiss are good linguists. Everyone seems to speak English, and lots of people can converse in French, Italian and Spanish. In addition various regional dialects are spoken, as is also the Rhaeto-Romanic language of the Grisons, called Romansch (which although one of Switzerland's official national languages is struggling for survival, as it is in danger of being replaced by the Swiss-German dialect).

The situation as regards the use of German is rather strange. In the French and Italian speaking regions, the written languages are largely identical with the everyday spoken idiom. But in the German-language regions the dialect ("Schwyzerdütsch"), which is the principal *spoken* language in everyday use, is very different from the High German in which newspapers and books are *printed*. This does not mean that Germans and Austrians cannot make themselves understood by Swiss from the officially German-language part of the country, and vice versa. If necessary, the German-Swiss will make the effort to converse with Teutonic neighbours in High German (whereby they may sometimes detect a note of amused con-



*Punctuality of the Swiss railways: an amazing phenomenon for many a foreign tourist! (Photo: Keystone)*





descension on the part of those neighbours). But whereas most Swiss can understand High German, the Germans and Austrians can seldom make any headway with the numerous Swiss dialects.

Although the Germans may occasionally look with envy at the strength of the Swiss franc, even at home, that strength is for us Brazilians something quite incredible and inconceivable. Soon after my arrival in Zurich, I found that an average Swiss can have the tank of his motor-car filled for the equivalent of not more than three hours' wages. In Brazil the officially established minimum wage is equivalent to about Sfr. 65.-. A Brazilian automobile enthusiast would have to pay about half of that sum for the luxury of saying "fill her up"! No wonder that he is speechless. Now if we bear in mind that a member of the middle class earns about two or three times the official minimum wage (if he is lucky!), it is crystal clear that the Swiss are far better off. And the Swiss do not have to cope with a dreadful rate of inflation. In the half-year that I spent in Switzerland, only one item of foodstuffs increased significantly in price: milk. It became five centimes per litre dearer! "Scandalous" was the comment heard almost everywhere. How would a Swiss react if the litre costing Sfr. 1.75 today were to cost Sfr. 2.- in a couple of days time?

A propos money: there seems to be plenty of it in Switzerland. How much exactly, nobody knows. One reason is that although the Swiss have money, they are reluctant to display it. The majority of the inhabitants believe that the present stability and prosperity of Switzerland stem from their tireless dedication to hard work. They tend to forget the many thousands of millions of dollars that flow in from other countries - especially from countries of the Third World!

From time to time, students and other youngsters protest against what they see as an inadequate policy with regard to the environment, or as an unduly restrictive policy for treatment of refugees, whereby persons who have lived in the country for almost twenty years can be expelled. As a sign of their discontent, some young people recently burnt their passports in public: at first sight, a courageous demonstration, although of merely symbolic character - as whenever they felt the urge to go abroad, they would only have to apply for a new passport, without needing to fear reprisals!

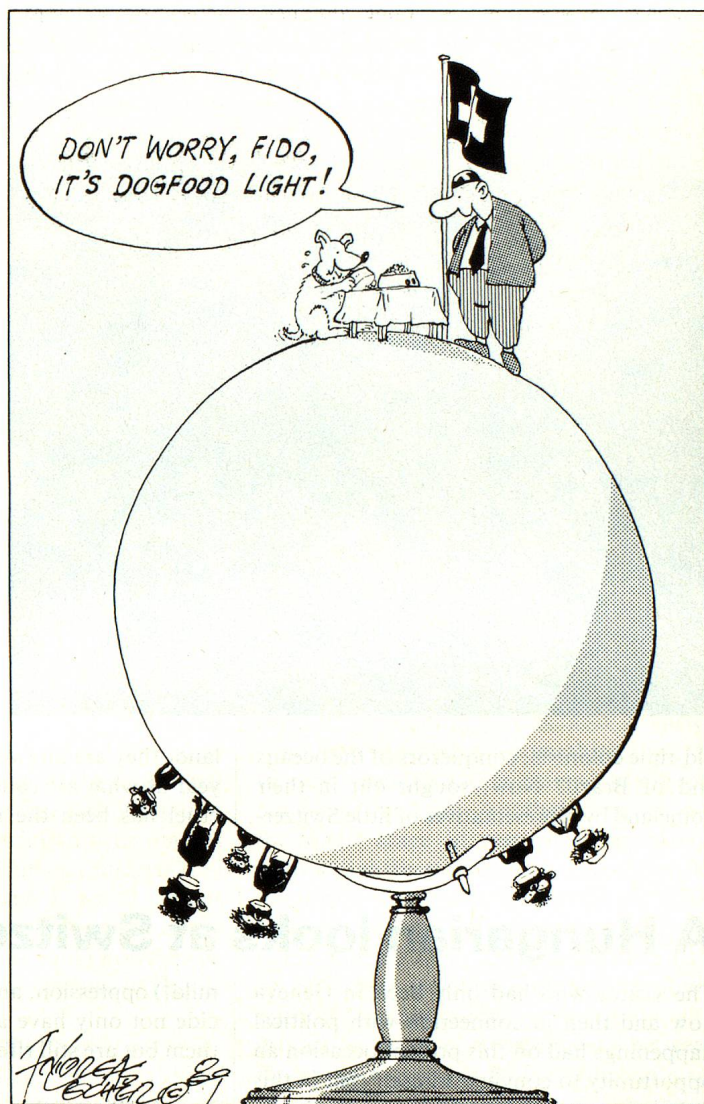
In spite of having a high standard of living and no financial problems to jeopardise their existence, most Swiss seem to be dissatisfied. One must try to understand them. It rains a lot, the skies are overcast and the

winters cold. That is when the Swiss begin to dream of the tropics. They become melancholy and take refuge in their offices, where they seem to throw themselves into their work with incredible enthusiasm - though on closer examination, this élan is nothing but an expression of self-imposed stress! In other words, as so many Swiss have no essential problems in their lives, they create their own challenges in their daily work. One can see this in plenty of retail stores: even if these are empty, the sales staff have strained expressions on their faces, as though the stressful Christmas rush has started!

Those who wish to escape from this at times trying atmosphere go on journeys. The younger generation in particular enjoy working every year only for a few months, in order to fly off with the cash they have saved from their wages. They go often to Third World countries where they live like princes and then come back to tranquil

Switzerland to report on how shocked they have been by the "extreme poverty" they have seen. They do not appear to feel in any way responsible for such poverty: they often put the blame on the native populations for being too lazy to work, for having too many children and for preferring fiestas to regular "gainful employment".

You are mistaken if you think that these globe-trotting youngsters earn their money by working hard at low-grade work. Not at all - they leave the humble and dirty jobs to the foreigners - collecting the garbage or washing up the dishes, and so on. In the post-war "boom" years, the Swiss first of all brought in Italians, and soon afterwards Spaniards. Nowadays Portuguese "guest workers" are very well-liked: I heard a comment that "they are worth their weight in gold, they don't kick over the traces". For us Brazilians it comes as a shock to stand face to face with descendants of our former oppressors. Whatever happened to those







*For a Brazilian visitor, Gideon Rosa, it is Europe's loveliest city: Zurich. (Photo Swissair)*

old-time colonists, conquerors of the oceans and of Brazil? Now, sought out in their homeland by representatives of little Switzer-

land, they are allowed in for nine months a year as what are called "saisonniers" (how cruel has been the vengeance of the Bra-

zilian gods!). Regardless of whether they sweep the streets or mend the roads or clean up in the restaurants, the Portuguese are always liked. One eloquent detail in the process of contemporary "slavery" in Switzerland is that the guest worker is always supervised by a Swiss superior.

One type of public service which functions admirably is that of transport. The Intercity trains and the municipal trams operate with amazing punctuality. If the railway timetable says 7.03, the train leaves at three minutes after seven. I don't exaggerate! And the trams which at frequent intervals – usually of from 5 to 12 minutes – swiftly transport tens of thousands of passengers across big towns every day! Even so, one reads and hears complaints about the service: greater frequency, more seats are needed, and if bus or tram is one minute late, this provokes cross looks at one's watch. Punctuality is still an essential feature of life in Switzerland (even if a big slice of its former near-monopoly of the watch industry has been taken by the Japanese competition).

*Gideon Rosa, Salvador de Bahia*

## A Hungarian looks at Switzerland

The visitor who had only been in Geneva now and then in connection with political happenings had on this present occasion an opportunity to convince himself that in this little country – little by Hungarian standards, with an area only half of that of Hungary – the citizens feel entirely at home and behave accordingly as the proud owners of the country. Among the saddest features of life in Eastern Europe today is the fact that the governmental systems which are called "Socialism" have weakened and sometimes even killed outright any feelings on the part of the population that they "own" their country, and also that these systems have in a few decades done immeasurable damage to traditional values, large and small, which have been sacrificed and allowed to decay. And a visitor from Hungary is puzzled to understand the basis for such feelings of the Swiss who are at home in a society of such varieties, where there is no uniformity in respect of language or religion.

The co-existence of several national languages in Switzerland is a startling experience for the visitor from the Eastern region of Central Europe, who knows all too well that in his country linguistic and ethnic discrimination, many forms of mild (or less

mild!) oppression, and overt or hidden genocide not only have a long tradition behind them but are still rife today.

### A nation better than its repute

From the standpoint of a visitor from Eastern Europe, the articles in provincial Swiss newspapers claiming to provide evidence of "everyday racism" seem grossly exaggerated. Some 20,000 refugees from Transylvania, most of them Hungarians, are at present living in Hungary and one hears the nervous question asked from time to time: "But what will happen if even greater numbers arrive here?" This question admittedly crops up mainly in connection with the economic crisis currently afflicting our country. But when I look at the official Swiss statistics I wonder what would happen in many other countries if they had a sixth of their populations consisting of foreigners. This high percentage of foreigners living in Switzerland is impressive, and is related to the "linguistic" peace reigning between the various language-speaking regions. I realise of course that this high proportion of foreigners is inseparable from the economic situation. Switzerland is one of the world's wealthiest countries, with a per capita share

of the GNP amounting to 25,000 US dollars a year, or about ten times as much as in Hungary. In view of the tolerance displayed in connection with the various languages spoken, and the Swiss willingness to accept foreigners I have not been thinking of material background, but rather have been asking myself if the Swiss reality is not a lot better than the opinion that the Swiss hold about themselves and whether the whole question of "Foreigners versus suspicious Swiss" is not just a fabrication?

### That famous "direct democracy"

The mentality of a Central European from the East has some difficulty in penetrating into the concept of what is perhaps the most important factor of Swiss solidarity, fellowship and "togetherness": direct democracy, an outstanding system of local autonomy. Only through learning about the democratic perception and defence of local interests which is evident in everyday life can one understand why the Swiss inhabitants of the Western and Southern cantons have no passionate regard for the French or Italian way of life, just as little as those from the German-speaking regions feel affinity with other countries that share the same lan-