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Editorial

Language barriers



Next year the Confederation will be celebrating the 700th anniversary of its foundation. An irrepressible desire for freedom led our forefathers to form alliances which have held firm up to the present day and which could be described as an expression of a deeply-rooted concept of solidarity. In the course of our country's history, which has not been without its stresses and strains, this sense of solidarity of which we are so proud has grown stronger.

Mercenaries, craftsmen and merchants all institutionalized, so to speak, contacts with other cultures. As the Confederation grew, the Romance-language element became an integral part of our political system.

Although French enjoys great prestige, there is still a latent tension in relationships with the Alemannic language region. Overshadowed by the German and French speaking Swiss are the people of Ticino, whose language is not always given the necessary attention that it merits north of the Gotthard.

Beside the three official and national languages, German, French, and Italian, the Rhaeto-Romansch tongue, our fourth national language, has difficulty in holding its own. Happily this linguistic treasure from the Roman era has survived. From the fusion of the Rhaetian tongue with the colloquial Latin of the colonisers emerged a Rhaetian-type Vulgar Latin which, through phonetic changes, gradually developed into the present-day Rhaeto-Romansch.

The Swiss are proud of the fact that the different language groups respect each other. But the mutual penetration that is so much to be desired seems to belong to the realms of Utopia. In actual fact Italian is subordinate to the other languages, a situation which already seems to be almost regarded as the natural order of things, at least in the German-speaking part of Switzerland. French succeeds in holding its own but the excessive use of dialects in German-speaking Switzerland in recent decades has widened the rift between German and French speakers, because as a result many of the latter lack the motivation to learn German. A little more tact towards our compatriots would help to lower the existing barriers.

The harsh reality of economic life, which is dominated by German-speaking Switzerland, shows that little heed is paid to structures which have grown naturally. Pessimists therefore like to predict that one day English will become a common means of communication for our young people. It is true that a great many people have a knowledge of the "fifth national language" but if we cultivate our heritage carefully we need have no fears for the present about the preservation of our four existing national languages.

Finally, I should like to introduce myself, as successor to my namesake Jürg Müller, who has joined the Swiss Telegraphic Agency. My duties include collaborating on the "Schweizer Revue" and further information work. I look forward to maintaining friendly contacts with you.

S. Müller

Stephan Müller, Auslandschweizer-Sekretariat

Swiss Review



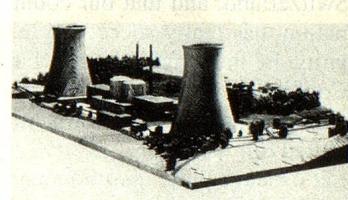
This is how the four languages can appear. (Photos: Ruedi Becker)

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