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What the "others" think of Switzerland

The concern of the man in the street

Switzerland is celebrating an important birthday. That is why, for the time being at any rate, it is in the news – in Switzerland and in other countries too, where conferences are being held in honour of the "birthday child", and special newspaper supplements dedicated to it. Although historical aspects are receiving some attention, the anniversary is being used more as an opportunity for looking at Switzerland as a whole. Despite some recent changes in the country, the images produced on this occasion will certainly not be new.

The literature which people can use to this purpose is rich... very rich perhaps in the case of Switzerland. Naturally every country has books which examine the nature of the country in question. But although it is hard to make comparisons, it would appear that this kind of literature is particularly comprehensive for Switzerland. Because of Switzerland's unusual former position, foreign writers began to examine this apparently exceptional country at a very early stage. They were followed by Swiss writers trying to come to terms with the Swiss situation. These were not just (and certainly not mainly) the works of self-satisfied Swiss. These writers were critical. They subjected their land to harsh judgements. They did not present ideals for their own sake or simply because they might be good or at least well-meaning. They believed that the "Idea of Switzerland" committed us to these ideals – a belief to be encountered in few other countries.

The foreigner's view

People often criticise this rather strong inclination to examine one's own collective identity as being a withdrawn form of preoccupation with oneself. Yet a considerable part of this examination is linked to the question of what the others – people living in other countries – think about us, rather than any direct questioning of oneself. We saw this approach in the official anniversary opening celebrations, which included appearances by a foreign man and a foreign woman.

A well known publisher has marked the anniversary year by publishing a book entitled "Umgang mit der Schweiz" (Coping with Switzerland). It features the experiences of non-Swiss ranging from Bakunin to Dostoevsky, Twain and Zweig with Switzerland. This is not the first time that an anthology of this kind has been published. The editor of a collection published in 1976, author and minister Kurt Marti, cleverly remarked in the preface that it was the man in the street in par-

ticular, who worried about what "the others" might think of him. These people had particularly good reason to pay attention to their reputation because they were especially dependent on others. This was the reason why small Switzerland was so interested in its image outside the country. Marti, however, noted that people invited to Switzerland were not particularly taken with the country and that they tended to reproduce the well-known stereotypes – Tell, freedom, hotels, cheese, asylum, banks, illegal money, Zurich, the alps, Ticino.

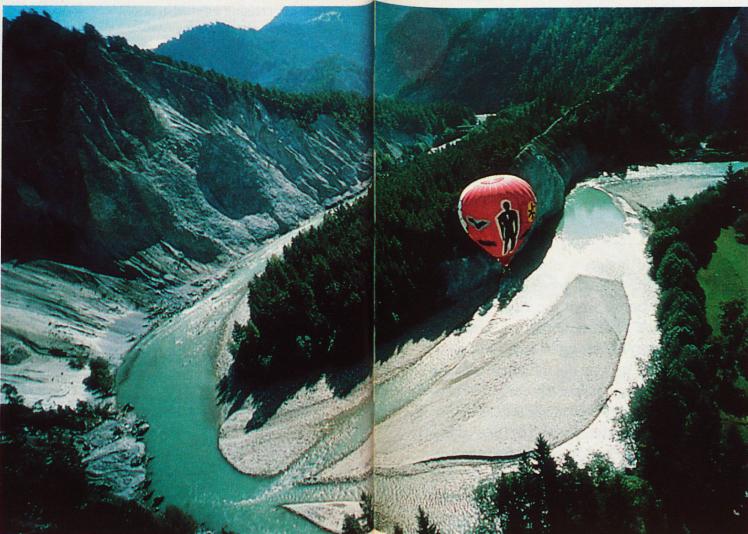
Originally, foreigners' impressions of Switzerland were stronger than those held by the Swiss themselves. This applied particularly when it came to the images of unspoiled alpine society and of a free democratic state in which ancient republican virtues persisted. Local people received these images as a pre-fabricated identity, in a way.

Favourable images

These favourable images still persist. Apart from scenic beauty, they relate to affluence, quality of work, stability, peace and order, the willingness to defend oneself. A particularly strong image is the exemplary way in which various cultures live together, and the political maturity of a people who do not misuse their voting rights to achieve short-term benefits – by reducing taxes, for example, or shortening the working week. In July 1975, for example, the "New China" agency praised Swiss defence ideals, in June 1981 the Belgrade newspaper "Nin" cited Switzerland as a pattern for multicultural states, the Frenchman André Siegfried (1947) celebrated this small democratic state as a "lost paradise", and the American Jonathan Steinberg (1976) locates Switzerland's "Swissness" in its small-sized cell structure, describing the country as a model for Europe.

The dominant element in the favourable (or favourably intended) image of the country is tourist Switzerland, as we see in the special

issues of "National Geographic" dated January 1986 and "Geo" dated February 1987. This is the main image propagated by Switzerland abroad, and this is the image foreigners want to receive. The main attraction of the Swiss exhibition in the "World Showcase" planned by Walt Disney in Florida is to be a 60 metre Matterhorn. Switzerland has been invited to invest Sfr. 17 million in this



"Switzerland is a small, steep country" – much more up- and down- than sideways... (Ernest Hemingway). Photo: Swissair.

highly publicity-effective venture. A similar exhibition pavilion has been planned for Japan too, where the traditional stereotype of alpine Switzerland is particularly popular.

Negative images

To some extent the negative images relate to the same phenomena as the favourable ones. The strongly-fixed idea that the Swiss are a money-grabbing people is linked to mercenary services and tourism. It was around 1970 that the image of the gnome – an ugly, dull, yet intent and insatiable dwarf – emerged from this idea. The gnome image probably arose because the Swiss banks had begun to penetrate a market which had previously been dominated by the English-speaking peoples. It is unlikely that it resulted from scandals which did not become public until later. The image of the gnome is part of the imagery of the underworld, the dark powers which people like to hold responsible for much of the evil in this world. The idea that Swiss banks were deciding sterling's fate was clearly being spread by the British Labour government as far back as the early sixties.

Switzerland's image abroad was further influenced during the seventies by the "foreign infiltration" initiative. Apart from xenophobia,



its xenophobia, because it was unintellectual, mean and so on.

Bizarre and stereotype images

These foreign images are little different from the image which many Swiss have of their own country. In addition to the favourable and unfavourable images there is another image of a comical Switzerland, oscillating between fascination and boredom. Ernest Hemingway wrote the following words: "Switzerland is a small, steep country – much more up- and down- than sideways – and it is completely covered with large brown hotels built according to a kind of cuckoo clock architecture. Hotels have been planted everywhere in the country where there is enough room sideways, and all the hotels look as though they have been made by the same man with the same fretsaw." And Orson Welles came to the rather negative conclusion that "Italy experienced a thirty year Borgia regime with war, terror, murder and bloodshed, and yet during this time it produced Michelangelo, Leonardo da Vinci and the Renaissance. In Switzerland people love one another like brothers and have experienced 500 years of democracy and peace – and what have they produced? The cuckoo clock". Although the cuckoo clock is to be found in Swiss souvenir shops alongside Bavarian beermugs, it comes from Southern Bavaria rather than from Switzerland. Nevertheless this is an irrelevant detail here, since the important point is that Switzerland is petty and fails to use its opportunities.

When are these stereotypes actually mentioned? The foreign media do not generally pass on more than brief news about the small country of Switzerland, and this – in line with the laws of the media world – mainly where there are negative items to report. For these media special occasions like a state visit, the opening of a new airline route or elections are required before they will report on Switzerland in any more length. The Swiss media public is more likely to hear about foreign ideas about Switzerland through the reports of Swiss foreign correspondents. It is part of the job of these journalists to write articles for series published on the theme of "How foreign-

ers see Switzerland and the Swiss". These articles show that the images formed by other countries are generally strongly influenced by their own problems.

It could well be that this kind of reporting is particularly strong in Switzerland, as Kurt Marti noted. Other nations (like France, Italy or England) have a stronger internal base, while Austria and (former) West Germany in particular are keener to know what others think. It is questionable whether the size of a country determines this kind of attitude – in Luxembourg or Belgium, for example, it is possible that this question is accorded less importance. We probably have to explain this phenomenon by looking at the deep rooted idea of the special role, and the need to know the extent to which this special role still applies.

Self image

After all, Switzerland still appears to be a rewarding topic for foreign reporters, for special reports and supplements continue to be devoted to the country. Often a certain element of malicious joy may be noted in the comments of foreigners, that even in "perfect Switzerland" things do not always go right. However we should exercise some reservation in qualifying these reports as foreign images of Switzerland, for it is often Swiss people who provide the information and even write these reports. This applied to the "Spiegel" image published in summer 1971, as well as the series published by "Le Monde" in spring 1971. In both cases the Swiss press reacted to the unfavourable presentation of the Swiss with a outcry of indignation. In the meantime they have become accustomed to their ideal image being placed in perspective. The "Canard" dossier published in March 1990 mercilessly developed the image of a Switzerland it saw as partly ugly and partly ridiculous. This special issue was registered by the Swiss media without any special indignation.

Foreign images have one thing in common with the image the Swiss have of themselves – they start off with an ideal image (the Swiss paragon). Then they contrast the ideal with a "realistic image" which tends to move in the direction of unfavourable exaggeration (making Switzerland into a whipping boy). In a second phase they admit that reality is not quite as negative and the favourable image not quite so unjustified as they had previously made out. All in all, we note a toning down both in the former high standing of the country and in the debate about Switzerland.

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