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The "Fifth Switzerland" at the family table

Families all over Switzerland offered free holidays to hundreds of Swiss residing abroad during the 1991 anniversary year. As part of the "Begegnung 91" scheme, the major women's organisations jointly launched the project "Visit Switzerland 1991" urging families to give Swiss Abroad hospitality for a few days. Many thousands accommodation nights were made available free of charge under this project.

The project spanned the period from the middle of March to the middle of October and the reaction was extremely positive. Many newspapers and periodicals carried reports about the project as well as publishing numerous portraits of Swiss residing abroad. In nearly all cases visitors and guest families alike

Many friendships were forged which will certainly outlast the 700th anniversary year. The contact office in Solothurn reported that the only negative aspect was that some guests changed their travel plans at the last moment or simply failed to turn up without notifying their cancellation.

Cost small – effect great

Swiss abroad interested in the scheme were sent a holiday address through the "Begegnung 91" office in Solothurn. Guests and hosts then made contact, introduced each other and settled any changes of date themselves. For emergency cases, 55 regional offices, run on an honorary basis, were opened, thus reducing administration to a minimum. Individual initiative – which is always essential for worthwhile encounters – was sought. The Secretariat for the Swiss Abroad



AKTION BEGEGNUNG 91
ACTION RENCONTRE 91
AZIONE D'INCONTRO 91
ACZIUN DA SENTUPADA 91

found making each other's acquaintance a thoroughly enjoyable experience. "This vacation will remain among the best we ever had" wrote the Gilli family from New York and a married couple from the former GDR said: "Thanks to the 'Begegnung 1991' project we were able at the age of 60 to see our father's homeland – which is after all ours as well – for the first time."



A Swiss family resident abroad makes friends with the host family in Switzerland. (Photo: Aktion Begegnung 91)

Unexpected reunions

This major project resulted in some unusual meetings and reunions. A Belgian-Swiss soprano was found holiday accommodation with a clergyman's family in Bettlach (Canton Solothurn). By co-incidence, both guest and host had known each other well while studying in Basle but had subsequently completely lost touch. Their reunion was celebrated with a modest church recital arranged by the singer.

In Hünibach (Canton Berne) a pensioner found her long-lost "holiday son" from the former GDR who had spent a summer with her more than 40 years before.

Also fortunate was Dolores Jaeggi from Argentina. As a law student she visited the Federal Court, was personally welcomed by two federal judges and was allowed to sit in on all the hearings. Her dearest wish now is to spend a semester studying in French-speaking Switzerland.

A Swiss woman living abroad and now aged over 80 visited with her hosts all the places where she was once well-known on the stage: as Susi Susa she was a star of witty cabaret programmes decades ago.

There was a spontaneous embrace between two women at the August 1 celebration in Wohlen, Canton Aargau. Rosa Caccia from Reconquista unexpectedly found herself opposite a compatriot who teaches at the same school in Argentina.

Commented the host: "The world really is a small place!"

And the Argentina-Swiss Rosemarie Jeangros de Ansaldo got on so well with her hostess in Chur right from the first moment that she exclaimed: "We already knew each other in a previous existence!"

and the Federal Department of Foreign Affairs gave indispensable background assistance.

"Mother Helvetia" also played host

Taking part in the project were not only Swiss living in every continent and host families in all 26 cantons but also "Mother Helvetia" herself. In August the Confederation received three Swiss families from the former GDR at the Lenk Educational and Sports Centre. Many visitors combined their stay with a "Day of encounter in the commune of origin", which was the second major project initiated by the women's organisations.

On request Solothurn also provided escorts for one day. For this service, volunteers came forward who were unable to offer

accommodation themselves but still wanted to make an active contribution to the 700th anniversary celebrations. In addition unsolicited donations totalling more than SFr. 40,000 were made for the "Begegnung 91" scheme.

Carrying on after 1991

The unanimously favourable reaction to this project indicates that it should be continued after the anniversary year is over. Although the "Begegnung 91" office is to be closed early in 1992, there are already people interested in a future organisational body. The aim is to make meetings in both directions, so that in future Swiss living abroad can participate both as guests and hosts.

Hans Ulrich Glarner