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No medals for reading

Although the level of Swiss education is considered high in international terms, the results of recent reading and comprehension tests on 9–14 year olds from about 30 countries were surprising: Switzerland did not win a medal but simply came in with a good average.

In the story, practical and document categories, 9-year olds from Switzerland took 13th, 12th and 6th places – partly due to the many foreigners. 14-year olds improved the score, coming in at 8, 10 and 5.

Finland and Sweden were before Switzerland everywhere, while France, New Zealand and the USA were ahead in five tests – the latter a surprising result in view of America's education problems. France's good performance is

because French language is given priority in schools: children are proud of their reading, writing and reasoning powers. But some countries with demanding education systems, e.g. Germany (west and east) and Holland, came well behind Switzerland.

A close-up view of the document reading tests showed that 61% of 14-year olds were satisfactory, with 33% very satisfactory – making up twice the number of pupils in schools leading to higher education. However, 18% of those emerging from primary schools were unsatisfactory. And documents are precisely the type of reading with which they will be faced most often in daily life. ■

Federal Councillor Villiger and the children of Swiss Abroad

The head of the Federal Military Department, Kaspar Villiger, finally had something to laugh about. After a question-and-answer session in Berne, 25 Swiss Abroad children aged 12 to 16 forced the minister to join them in an

energetic folk dance. They also asked him why he became a federal councillor. "I ask myself that two or three times a month", he answered with a smile. He never dreamt of such a post, he told them. It was just like the man in Kafka's "Metamorphosis" who woke up one morning to find he had turned into an insect. In exactly the same way Mr. Villiger found himself overnight inside the skin of a federal councillor. ■

Federal Councillor Kaspar Villiger (left) in a folk dance with young Swiss Abroad.



Diary

Folklore – Public festivals

November 11, 1992
Sursee, Lucerne: "Gansabhauet", ancient custom and popular festival
 November 23, 1992
Berne: "Zibelemärit", traditional onion market with public festivities
 December 11–13, 1992
Geneva: "Escalade", historical festival with parade
 December 31, 1992
Stein, Aargau: "Silvesterklausen", ancient New Year's custom

Fairs – Markets

November 13–22, 1992
Berne: MOWO, Bernese autumn home and leisure fair
 November 28–29, 1992
Zürich: Züspa, International Minerals Fair
 December 10–13, 1992
Züspa: Collectors' Exchange and Christmas Antiques Market

Sport

December 26, 1992
St. Moritz, Grisons: International Christmas Ski-Jumping (European Cup)
 December 26–31, 1992
Davos, Grisons: Ice hockey: International Spengler Cup

Democratic Union of the Centre International

With the Swiss Abroad now about to vote, Switzerland's political parties are courting them. After the Radical Democrats, the Democratic Union of the Centre has set up a new section. The Christian Democrats are to follow, and the Social Democrats are thinking of it. The aim is to represent the interests of nearly half a million Swiss Abroad. The Democratic Union wants to maintain the Pension and Disability Scheme for Swiss Abroad. Its international section is also open to citizens in Switzerland sympathetic to their compatriots abroad. ■

Point of view

"It is dangerous when historical consciousness and historical truth, and with them national consciousness and national reality, diverge so much that we can talk about ourselves only in terms of myths".
 (Herbert Lüthy, historian)

200 years ago: storming the Tuileries

In summer hardly anyone in Lucerne can avoid being asked the question: "Where's the lion?"

From ancient days the lion and the eagle have been the most noble animal symbols in art: they are out of time. Bertel Thorvaldsen's Lion of Lucerne, one of the world's most famous sculptures chiselled out of living stone, commemorates a bloody event in the French Revolution. It is perhaps typical of our troubled times that today its pathos affects the onlooker more than ever.

On August 10, 1792, 800 men of the Swiss Guard defended the Tuileries

Palace in Paris – which Louis XVI had already left – against 30,000 revolutionaries in a struggle devoid of sense. In spite of the king's order to retreat to barracks they were massacred man by man.

Fifty or a hundred years ago commemorative speakers usually insisted on the ideas of sacrifice and duty in this famous tragedy. But on the occasion of this year's second centenary an oecumenical service was held – devoted not only to the heroic Swiss Guards but also to those who died fighting them. ■

The first Swiss astronaut



Claude Nicollier, the first Swiss astronaut, in a 25-foot deep pool.

The remarkable career of 48-year old Swiss astronaut Claude Nicollier has peaked with his participation in the latest American "Atlantis" space mission. This came about through the astronaut's talent, ability and persistence, as well as by extraordinary patience, for Nicollier's path into space was beset with obstacles of every kind. He had to wait 14 years for his opportunity.

This latest "Atlantis" flight – described by NASA as the most complicated mission in the history of the space shuttle – cost about one billion Swiss francs. The experimental launch of a satellite fixed to a thin cable 20 kilometres long to provide solar energy in space had to be aborted, but the "Eureca" research satellite was successfully launched into an orbit where it will remain until 1993. ■

New president of the Coordinating Commission

Since March 1, 1992, the Coordinating Commission for the Presence of Switzerland Abroad has had a new president in the person of the former state secretary in the Department for Foreign Affairs, Klaus Jacobi. The job of the commission is to coordinate the activities of the various bodies responsible for Switzerland's presence abroad, including several federal offices, the Swiss National Tourist Office, Pro Helvetia, the Swiss Trade Promotion Office and Swiss Radio International. The commission is also responsible for Switzerland's participation in world exhibitions and other international events involving several administrative departments, as well as for providing general information about Switzerland. ■

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Photos: Keystone

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