

**Zeitschrift:** Swiss review : the magazine for the Swiss abroad

**Herausgeber:** Organisation of the Swiss Abroad

**Band:** 24 (1997)

**Heft:** 5

**Artikel:** Switzerland's image abroad: interview with Wolfgang K. A. Disch : "Switzerland transmits the wrong signals"

**Autor:** Lenzin, René / Disch, Wolfgang K.A. / Schibli, Peter

**DOI:** <https://doi.org/10.5169/seals-906493>

#### **Nutzungsbedingungen**

Die ETH-Bibliothek ist die Anbieterin der digitalisierten Zeitschriften auf E-Periodica. Sie besitzt keine Urheberrechte an den Zeitschriften und ist nicht verantwortlich für deren Inhalte. Die Rechte liegen in der Regel bei den Herausgebern beziehungsweise den externen Rechteinhabern. Das Veröffentlichen von Bildern in Print- und Online-Publikationen sowie auf Social Media-Kanälen oder Webseiten ist nur mit vorheriger Genehmigung der Rechteinhaber erlaubt. [Mehr erfahren](#)

#### **Conditions d'utilisation**

L'ETH Library est le fournisseur des revues numérisées. Elle ne détient aucun droit d'auteur sur les revues et n'est pas responsable de leur contenu. En règle générale, les droits sont détenus par les éditeurs ou les détenteurs de droits externes. La reproduction d'images dans des publications imprimées ou en ligne ainsi que sur des canaux de médias sociaux ou des sites web n'est autorisée qu'avec l'accord préalable des détenteurs des droits. [En savoir plus](#)

#### **Terms of use**

The ETH Library is the provider of the digitised journals. It does not own any copyrights to the journals and is not responsible for their content. The rights usually lie with the publishers or the external rights holders. Publishing images in print and online publications, as well as on social media channels or websites, is only permitted with the prior consent of the rights holders. [Find out more](#)

**Download PDF:** 22.01.2026

**ETH-Bibliothek Zürich, E-Periodica, <https://www.e-periodica.ch>**

Switzerland's image abroad: interview with Wolfgang K. A. Disch

# "Switzerland transmits the wrong image"

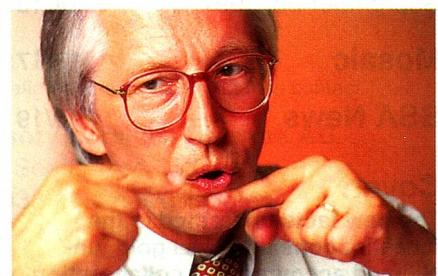
**Refugees turned away and bankers hungry for gold have replaced the Matterhorn and the Toblerone as Switzerland's visiting cards. Or so at least it seems. This forum is about Switzerland's image abroad and our own image of ourselves.**

**W**hether they are stationed in Europe, America, Africa, Asia or Australia, reports by Swiss media correspondents contain the same ingredient: Switzerland has an image problem. Not everywhere to the same extent, and most often in what is published rather than in public opinion. But it is nevertheless there. The way in which the role of our country during the Second World War is portrayed, with all the distortion and bias it contains, results in headlines which Switzerland, accustomed as it is to success, finds hard to bear – and to which it has not so far been able to find any really appropriate answers.

How is an image created? And then how can an image be changed? Are we making out our image to be worse than it really is? We put these questions to Wolfgang K. A. Disch, a german specialist in brand names, marketing and communication.

**Mr. Disch, you yourself say you love Switzerland. Has your affection been put a little under strain in recent times?**  
Affection does not suffer from the controversies which have been taking place. My affection is based on people and not on organisations. But it is a good thing for these matters to be

worked upon, so that they should not be – either consciously or unconsciously – swept under the carpet. If this is not done, there will occur what Parkinson described as a vacuum, created by lack of communication, which in the shortest possible time will be filled with false representation, rumour, gossip and poison. The more information I obtain about a period which I did not consciously experience, the more stable is my affection for Switzerland.



## Contradictory opinions



Holidayland Switzerland is described as "a country of contradictions" in the 1997 Fodor travel guide. It is true that after the

latest allegations about Nazi gold the image of the Confederation in the United States is contradictory. But the main thing that strikes one is the discrepancy between published opinion and public opinion. As far as the averagely well-informed man in the street is concerned the image has been damaged less than the media make it appear.

"Switzerland is not the irreproachable land of Heidi", a Jewish architect said to me recently; "but to describe it as Hitler's willing banker is just as misleading". My neighbour on the left flies every year to Zurich for her holidays, and she says she will continue to do so. And my neighbour on the right, a Jewish lawyer, "would not dream" of withdrawing his account from one of Switzerland's big banks.

But although the Holocaust "revelations" leave a large proportion of the US rather cold, why is there such an incre-

dible fuss throughout the North American media? There are three possible explanations. The first is that the main points at issue – unclaimed property, Nazi gold, neutrality and refugee policy – are ideal media subjects in the United States. They contain all the elements necessary for a scandal story, i.e. amazement, riches, war, myths and the special interests represented by an active lobby – the World Jewish Congress.

The second is the fact that Switzerland was largely unscathed by the Second World War and is therefore a good target for attack. Neutrality – which means standing aside – is extremely suspect behaviour in the eyes of Americans, whose tendency is always to take sides. The third is the fact that both the banks and the Swiss government made the front on which they could be attacked longer than it might have been by underestimating the political dimensions of the affair, and this led them to take the wrong attitude at the outset.

But in so far as there is any image crisis at all amongst the American people, it has not displaced the famous clichés about Switzerland as a holidayland or a paradise full of chocolate and cheese. My conversations with friends

and acquaintances suggest rather that the original idea that Senator D'Amato's attacks were unfair continues to dominate. And those who even before all this thought badly about "Switzerland as a special case" will not have altered their opinions because of the recent accusations.

**Peter Schibli, Washington, United States correspondent of 'Basler Zeitung'.**

## Mockery, but not contempt



"First I want my bike back". That is an old witticism still told by Dutch barkeepers when a German orders a beer in his own language. It is a reminder of the time of occupation during the Second World War, when the Germans confiscated all the bicycles – something which the Dutch have still not forgiven them for.

It seems unlikely that Switzerland will now become involved in such troubled waters. Of course there are reports in the Dutch media about the unclaimed property issue, but in

# ng signals"

## What in your eyes characterises our country?

There are pictures which go around in one's head. We must distinguish between the signals which Switzerland transmits and those that people actually receive. For instance, Switzerland transmits to me signals which are well known, such as the Matterhorn, cheese, milk, chocolate. But in fact for me Switzerland is something quite different: an incredibly successful tennis player, a writer like Peter Bichsel, a Hayek who brought the Swatch to the whole world. These are representatives of the new Switzerland. For me it is people who make up Switzerland, not monuments, posters or image campaigns.

**But do you think, for example, that Martina Hingis is seen abroad as**

most cases they are limited to what is put out by the agencies. And in our daily rounds we do hear the odd remark like "You're really in the soup with your gold".

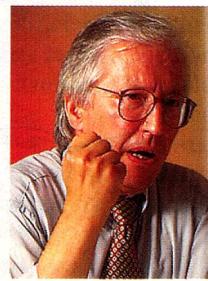
The Netherlands are demanding a large amount of gold back from Switzerland - 75,000 kilograms to be precise. But it does not occur to anyone to give up their much-loved holidays in the mountains. The people of the lowlands will continue to travel to the Swiss Alps with their caravans. But they can now turn their mockery onto Swiss people. "First I want my gold back". That is the latest version of the old anti-German joke recently heard from an Amsterdam barkeeper.

*Elisabeth Gugger, Amsterdam, who works mainly for Swiss-German radio.*

## Talk about Switzerland

*There have been many harsh words about our country in the foreign media. Is Switzerland's reputation overseas really in ruins?*

*Foreign correspondents report.*



## Wolfgang K. A. Disch

*Born in 1937, he is founder, publisher and editor-in-chief of 'Marketing Journal' in Hamburg. His favourite subject is the brand name, his favourite country is Switzerland. He is honorary member of the Swiss Marketing Club, and in 1989 he was awarded the marketing prize of the Swiss Society for Marketing.*

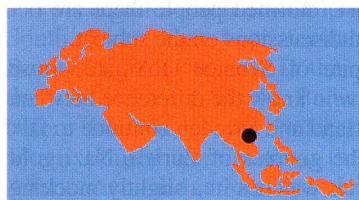
## Swiss or simply as a 16-year old tennis wunderkind?

We must make a distinction between Europe and overseas. In America it would be the wunderkind who is feted and not Switzerland, but that has to do with the Americans and not the subject in itself. This is where marketing is needed. Martina Hingis has to be marketed as a Swiss girl. That is not simply a matter of course. There exist other similar ambassadors, for example Michel Jordi with his ethnic line 'Spirit of Switzerland'. That is the sort of potential which exists in Switzerland and which is not sufficiently exploited.

## Is it in fact possible to influence the image of a country abroad by taking action? If so, how?

An image of something is always there. There is nothing which does not have an image. The question is only: what does it look like? It is possible to work on an image. But not by carrying out image campaigns, by putting up posters, by publishing brochures. All these things which are published are simply alternatives to real communication. For me the instruments should be in the first place people. I would let them act consciously as ambassadors in this sense when they are abroad. I would promote strongly someone like François Loeb,

## Still stable, beautiful and rich



Swiss people living in Hong Kong, the rest of China and other Asian countries are usually well informed. Because the Swiss communities are mostly small, they tend to keep together and so Swiss newspapers get handed round. Many Swiss are horrified by all the negative headlines, and think that the villains of the press have played everything up. The fact is that Swiss entrepreneurs and businesspeople who work in Asia now show considerable distrust of Swiss journalists.

And the Asians themselves? In contrast to the upheaval in the United States, Switzerland's reputation in Asia has hardly been harmed at all. This is no wonder, since Switzerland's image is linked to the big and successful Swiss companies. People's view of a country which produces high-quality watches, the Swatch and the very best chocolate

is not likely to suffer because it has reliable and discreet banks.

There are virtually never headlines about Switzerland in the Asian press, not even when it comes to its difficulties with its past and the Nazi gold. The fact is that Switzerland is seen in Asia as the almost idyllic land of Heidi: democratic, politically stable, beautiful and colossally rich.

*Peter Achten, Hong Kong, who reports on China and the rest of Asia (excluding Japan) for Swiss radio, TV and newspapers.*

## Little notice taken of the storm



Australians are becoming less interested in Europe and more interested in Asia. Australians never knew very much about what went on in Switzerland, and this is likely to remain the case. The country is very much occupied with coming to terms with its own past. The problem here is the treatment of the aborigines. The main issue is whether the original

who is well-known far beyond Berne as a dynamic entrepreneur who is at the same time a committed politician. I would publicise things like Swissair, Crossair, Swatch, Migros, Möwenpick and present them as things which are made in Switzerland and say to people: "That is today's Switzerland".

### What you are proposing would not be that expensive?

That's the whole point. Whenever you talk about an image campaign, it means advertisements. But what I am saying is this: you must send people out and make sure before they go that they are in a position to communicate something about Switzerland.

### About 550,000 Swiss citizens live abroad. What role do they play for Switzerland's image?

They are predestined to be ambassadors because they live in the field. It is like a company which has external employees. So it is precisely these ambassadors who must be made to be involved in information work as intensively as possible. It is not enough for them to be told what to do through the media. Institutions here like the Organisation for the Swiss Abroad must be active in this area. They must show Swiss



abroad what are the changes which have been made, give them something they can talk about, something which is constructive. Not always this damned complaining, lamenting and creating problems. Switzerland must give its ambassadors instruments with which they can work.

**For a considerable time now Switzerland has been going through a crisis of identity, to which the painful confrontation with its own past has now been joined. Is it possible that, taking the two things together, our own image of Switzerland is in fact worse than the actual reputation of our country?**

inhabitants of the country should receive compensation for what was done to them. Senator D'Amato's claims on Switzerland are simply not an issue. If the Australian government had its way, the mistakes of the past would simply belong to history and that would be that.

Stolen gold? Even people who read the dailies regularly can hardly keep up on this. There have even been articles reporting favourably on Switzerland's conduct during the Second World War. Television and radio have shown a minimum of interest. The Swiss embassy in Canberra has not been obliged to get out its heavy artillery. And even the Jewish community – which is very influential here – has so far had little to say on the subject.

In Australia Switzerland and bank accounts are considered as synonymous. In addition, quite a lot of Australians profit from bank secrecy. Mutual economic relations are blooming. A few frowns may be seen in financial circles, but the local branches of Swiss banks are doing well. In any case Switzerland is too expensive as a holiday destination for most Australians. It is only homesick Swiss who lament loudly about the destruction of the patriotic picture of the homeland.

Yes, that is the case. It started around 1989. Since then things have got steadily worse. The Swiss have a negative attitude which pervades everything. That will have to change. Headlines like "Switzerland is broke" or "Switzerland has no paint left on it" are messages which are quite readily accepted. The day will come when the Swiss will really start to believe that their country is broke. I have been asked the question why people in Switzerland have become so negative. Perhaps it has to be looked at from the point of view of history. For many succeeding decades everybody lived without any sign of a crash. When something quite small goes wrong for those who have always done well, they immediately feel dreadful pain. Every little piece of bad news – take for instance the discussions about the future of the state pension scheme – makes them afraid. It is from this that a negative atmosphere grows.

### What is the role of the media for our image? Or, in other words, is the present 'campaign' against Switzerland above all a media event?

Throughout the information society the media plays a dominant role. People learn a very large proportion of what they know from the media, and they

and its involvement with the gold stolen by the Nazis rarely gets a mention.

In spite of Senator D'Amato, those people who know the difference between Switzerland and Sweden continue to talk about the gnomes of Zurich, Nazi gold and Swiss watches in a slightly mocking way perhaps, but without anything much worse. It may be that transmission of the controversial BBC TV programme, 'Nazi Gold and Jewish Money', will make people talk a little, but it will not cause an earthquake.

*Peter Gerdes, Sydney, Australia correspondent of 'Neue Zürcher Zeitung'.* ■

## Virtuous as ever



The things that most Brazilians know about politics abroad generally come from the 'Jornal Nacional', the daily newscast from the Globo television station. The level of information is not high, since less than 10% of the programme is given over to foreign news. Switzerland

and its involvement with the gold stolen by the Nazis rarely gets a mention.

The picture of Switzerland in the minds of the much smaller amount of people who read the papers may have got a bit scratched in recent times. The big newspapers have devoted whole pages to reports about the role of the Swiss National Bank during the Second World War. They usually get these from the press in the United States, but in spite of that they do not succeed in rousing much indignation.

In addition, the whole group of subjects surrounding the Nazi gold affair – Hitler's conquering armies, the annihilation of the Jews, the death camps – is very far from South American reality. Anti-Semitism existed in Brazil only in the far-off 1930s, and even then it was a very marginal phenomenon. Brazilians tend to compare Switzerland's gold transactions during and after the war with the rampant corruption in their own country: it's the same everywhere.

This means that there are no signs that the strongly idealised and ideal-arousing image that most of Brazil's population have of Switzerland has

give great credibility to it. As a media maker myself I would like to make a critical remark at this point. Today there is something too easy-going, too quick and too immature about the media. What I reproach journalists for is that they pass on information irresponsibly, i.e. without sufficient research and – what is more important – without considering what effect their articles will have. Everything that a journalist disseminates – in whatever medium he works – has an effect on the brand name Switzerland.



**Is it not a little too simple to blame the media as the bearer of the tidings? Is it not the case that 'readership or viewing-figures journalism' also reflects social development, the competitive spirit, globalisation?**

That is quite right. We cannot blame the media; we are all to blame. Every single

Swiss citizen, every Swiss businessman, every Swiss politician – whether he likes it or not – has an influence on the reputation of Switzerland. It would be wrong to make the media into the whipping boy. But it is nevertheless true that their influence on the information society is so dominating that a greater sense of responsibility is needed.

**Would I be right in summing up your views like this: the positive side exists, what we have to do is to see it and communicate it?**

I can certainly subscribe to that in full. The resources are there. Switzerland damages itself. There is too much moaning and lamenting. People who do not see the positive side cannot transmit it to the outside world. It must once again be made clear to people how much good there is in Switzerland. Multilingualism is always represented as something negative. But in terms of globalisation it is in fact something positive. The word 'island' has an immediate negative effect. It would be better to extract something positive from the way things are. We should 'positivise' everywhere, and give the result to those who act as our ambassadors.

**Interview: René Lenzin**

**Photos: Jean-Jacques Ruchti**

changed very much. Switzerland is most often seen as symbolic of the first world, with its prosperity, regard for the people and efficient public services – virtues which are mostly lacking in the everyday life of Brazil.

**Luc Banderet, São Paulo, Brazil correspondent of Swiss-German radio.**

## Important, but little fuss



By far the biggest Jewish diaspora in Africa is in South Africa – with upwards of 100,000 members. As Ambassador Robert May and Consul

General Leo Renggli report, discussions with the South African Board of Jewish Deputies have been extremely down-to earth and free of the kind of polemic emanating from New York.

Following publication of the list of names of dormant account holders, only

a few enquiries from Jewish people in South Africa have been forwarded to Berne. Most of the Jews in this part of the world came from the Baltic states before the rise of the Nazis. A law which limited immigration, the 1938 Aliens Act, had a massive throttling effect on the arrival of more Jewish immigrants.

The South African media have reported only sporadically on the subject of unclaimed property, Switzerland's trade in gold with Nazi Germany and Switzerland's conduct during the Second World War generally. However, in almost all African states a Swiss citizen is likely to find himself approached with interest on the question. In most cases, however, he will find Africans think that Switzerland has been too ready to compromise in its attitude to the World Jewish Congress and American government bodies and that this is a sign of weakness on the part of the banks and the government in Berne.

**Werner Vogt, Johannesburg, South Africa correspondent of 'Neue Zürcher Zeitung'**

## Coco: what it does for Switzerland

In 1972 the Federal Council set up a consultative body called the Coordination Commission for Switzerland's Presence Abroad – or Coco for short. After the No by voters to Switzerland joining the European Economic Area, Coco's role in representing the global interests of our country grew in importance. It has 20 members and 18 observers. These represent federal offices and organisations like Switzerland Tourism, Pro Helvetia, the Swiss Office for Trade Promotion and the Organisation for the Swiss Abroad. Its present chairman is former state secretary Klaus Jacobi. A number of working groups exist within Coco to put its projects into practice.

Coco's secretary, Claude Borel, is assisted by three other staff members. The annual budget for the coordination of activities such as participating in world exhibitions and trade fairs, supporting the Swiss film industry and producing publicity material about Switzerland is extremely modest by international comparison: a mere Sfr. 2.33 million.

Claude Borel has this to say: "In 1991, the 700th anniversary year, we had a special budget at our disposal. This enabled us to invite a few dozen journalists. That was a campaign, not simply promotion. I am in fact against one-time operations to mark special occasions. We are not a propaganda machine".

Coco has left strategy about recent events to the task force set up by the Federal Council. This has a staff of 25 and is concerned mostly with Israel and the English-speaking countries. It is assisted by an American public relations firm.

Claude Borel does not think it is possible to correct an image. "What we actually do is more important than what we do for our image", he says; "it is the facts that count, not campaigns".

**AB**