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Autor: Baumann, Alice
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A portrait of Federal President Ruth Dreifuss

At the top and in the midst of it

For the first time since its foundation 150 years ago, our Federal State is presided over by a woman: Social Democrat Ruth Dreifuss will head the Federal Council and hence Switzerland itself until the end of 1999.

A woman leading our country: my dream of democracy has come true," says Ruth Dreifuss during a photo session in the Houses of Parliament, adding, "but I never thought I would be that woman." So saying, she strikes a new pose that typifies her.

Alice Baumann

The "servant of the people", as she calls herself, has learned to stand in the spotlight. She does it skilfully and to great effect. When in March 1993, in the presence of 10,000 demonstrating women from all corners of the country, she was elected as the 100th Federal Councillor in place of the left-wing official candidate Christiane Brunner, Ruth Dreifuss allowed herself to be shown in her own home, feet up, with the obligatory knitting in her hands.

Six years on, the resolute Minister of the Interior would never dream of exposing this side of her private life. Nowadays she projects a very decisive image and avoids any form of public intimacy. Her political line is underscored by her clear-cut clothes. Asked about her professional appearances, she answers: "Only the wardrobe has changed, I'm just the same."

Under pressure as Minister of Health

Reluctant to seek compliments, Ruth Dreifuss appears equally immune to criticism. And critics there are: while simple minds even lament her sex, others blame her for the increase in health insurance premiums, the financial consequences of the recently-approved maternity insurance, the insecure future of the AHV, and Switzerland's liberal drugs policy. As a pragmatist she shrugs off such complaints.

True to her social conscience, she firmly admonishes the nation that it is only right to make financial sacrifices as long as social differences remain as great as they are at present.



FOTO: MICHAEL STAHL

No need to play the feminine card

It is said that Ruth Dreifuss has become more diplomatic and amenable to consensus. But she has not suffered any loss of image. On the contrary: she comes across as friendly and charming in the Federal Council, but can argue heatedly with her six colleagues without exploiting the female factor. She runs her dozen or so Federal Departments more competently than ever. She accepts personal responsibility for failures, yet ascribes successes to joint efforts.

If her obsession with Europe and other characteristics have led to accusations of perfectionism and stubbornness, she is happy to accept them, adding in a soft undertone: "I merely act consistently."

Modest and resolute

Her determination has stood her in good stead in all her professions: secretary, journalist, teacher, development aid worker, union representative. Now, surrounded by stacks of papers, she devotes herself wholeheartedly to projects that are so long-term that others will probably see them to completion and reap the benefits. But that does not seem to bother her. After all, the motto behind

all her professional activities is "Solidarity".

Typically, the Social Democrat – who wore a sun brooch during her first days in office – has not forgotten the movement to which she owes her rapid rise: "I am at the top because the generation before mine fought for women's rights, and women's suffrage was introduced 27 years ago. But being President is still no guarantee of the equality of the sexes."

Catapulted to the top with good luck

In the view of the 59-year-old supporter of women's rights, women in the future should not have to struggle to get on in the world – unlike herself, who only got around to studying economics in later years. She believes that the professional and financial starting positions should be more equal, and that quotas should be introduced. Addressing the women gathered on Parliament Square to inaugurate her year as President, she said that the day of her election to President was only a "stage in a long struggle for equal rights." She went on to ignore official protocol by inviting some of her sympathisers in the crowd for a drink in the Houses of Parliament. "We are a majority, but we are treated as a minority." Such provocative statements still trip easily from her tongue.

"I don't know whether women make better politicians," she explains in an interview with 'Swiss Review', but I'm convinced that politics should and must benefit from both women's and men's experiences."

On the equality of the sexes, Ruth Dreifuss is a strong supporter of human rights – "in everyday life", she emphatically adds.

Perhaps it was human rights that moved Ruth Dreifuss to protest vehemently when a photographer attempted to take an upward-angled shot at the first female Federal President in Swiss history on the steps of the Houses of Parliament. "You will get no picture of me where my people have to look up at me," the popular Federal Councillor stated categorically. Such down-to-earth statements sum up her non-nonsense approach. That and the fact that, even in her presidential year, she still goes to work by bus. ■