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Is Switzerland dying out?



Patrick Lütty / Imagopress

The changing face of the Swiss population. Cultural mixes are the norm.

ROLF RIBI

Switzerland's population is growing only thanks to the number of foreign nationals and to the naturalisation rate. The number of children borne by Swiss mothers is insufficient to maintain Swiss population numbers. Is there any hope left for the Swiss?

IMAGINE THE AMAZEMENT of students at St. Gall University when, in the early 1960s, Professor Francesco Kneschaurek announced his forecast of a Switzerland with ten million inhabitants! This prediction, based on a flourishing economy and the baby boom, was used as a benchmark for planning schools, hospitals and roads.

By the mid-1980s the situation had dramatically reversed. Now the burning ques-

tion was "Are the Swiss dying out?", prompted by fears that the low numbers of children being borne to Swiss women would reduce the population to only four million by as early as 2010. As a result, family-friendly measures such as maternity benefits, crèches and tax concessions were promoted.

Three years ago the Tages-Anzeiger, a Zurich newspaper, caused a stir following the Swiss Federal Statistical Office's announce-

ment that, to maintain the population replacement level, 210 children would need to be borne to every 100 women as opposed to the actual figures of 128 children to every 100 women. On this basis the newspaper concluded that: "Given an immigration rate of zero, the number of inhabitants will decline from the current seven million to zero in almost exactly 1000 years. Within 34 generations, therefore, Switzerland would be extinct."

Historic trend reversal

The current population has neither grown to ten million nor shrunk to four million. Nevertheless, according to the Swiss Federal Statistical Office, our country is facing a "sea change":

- Since 1993, the total population of Switzerland has grown only thanks to the number of foreign immigrants, their rela-

tives and the higher number of children borne to them.

● Over the past ten years the Swiss population has been increasing only thanks to the number of foreign nationals being naturalised, because the number of deaths outweighs the number of births, and more people are emigrating than returning.

Our country has been recording population statistics for well on 150 years. According to the national census conducted in March 1850, the population of Switzerland was 2.4 million, and Berne was the most populous canton with almost twice as many residents as Zurich. On average, 12 people lived in the same apartment block and 4.7 people in the same household, and the proportion of foreign nationals was a mere 3 percent.

Since then the population has trebled: In 2001 Switzerland's population was 7.3 million, with 1.5 million foreign nationals (equivalent to 20.1 percent of the total population). The number of Swiss nationals had risen slightly to 5.8 million, thanks to naturalisation.

Since 1984 the Swiss Federal Statistical Office has been publishing its population scenarios for our country. The latest studies estimate the population trend up to 2060. The government statisticians designate the basic scenario "Trend" as the most probable of their various scenarios. According to this, the overall population will

rise to 7.4 million by 2028 only to decline again to 7.06 million – even lower than the current level – by 2060. By the end of 2060 Swiss nationals will number only 5.4 million, while the number of foreign nationals will have increased to 1.6 million (see box on page 7).

The population study conducted by the Avenir Suisse think tank came to a different conclusion. These scientists also base their findings on different scenarios, the most probable of which, "W", predicts a total population of 8.07 million by 2060, comprising 6.4 million Swiss nationals and just under 1.7 million foreign nationals. Unlike the Federal Statistical Office, the Avenir scientists believe the Swiss population will grow due to even longer life expectancy, more immigrants and increased naturalisation (see box on page 8).

Five factors dictate population trends – births, deaths, immigration, emigration and naturalisation. Let us look at each of these in more detail:

Births – declining

For centuries, population growth was mainly attributable to the high birth rate and large families. Around 1880 the average number of children borne to Swiss women was four. This had declined to 1.8 at the outbreak of World War Two but increased again to 2.6 by the end of the war. Following the baby boom of the 1960s the number of children fell sharply, stabilising at 1.5 children for every woman resident in Switzerland, although only 1.3 children for every Swiss woman.

"Forecasting future fertility rates is difficult," says Anne-Christine Wanders, scientific assistant at the Swiss Federal Statistical Office. The role of women in business and society, the social importance of the family, childcare, and working hour patterns can all influence the desire to have children. "If the employment situation and family life of women could be better harmonised in future, this could prove extremely important in terms of fertility rates," explains the research scientist.

The low birth rate in Switzerland and higher numbers of children in France prompted SP National Councillor Jean-Claude Rennwald (JU) to submit a question to parliament. While the number of births in Switzerland dropped to 73,500 in 2001 (6 percent below the previous year's level), the



Foreign workers in a print factory.

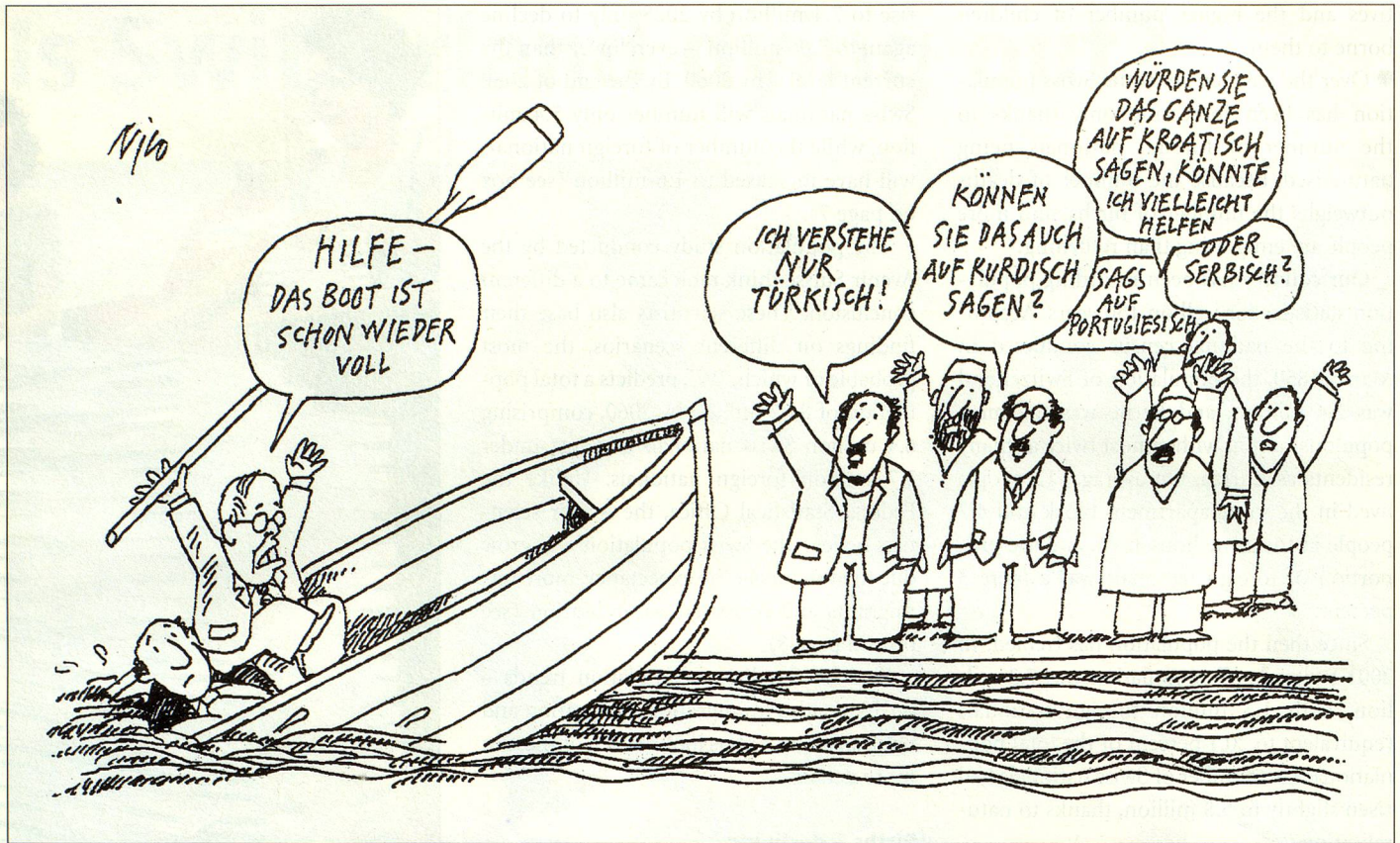
birth rate in France has increased from 1.65 to 1.9 children per woman since 1994. According to Rennwald, "These differences between Switzerland and France must give cause for thought."

The Federal Council's answer was somewhat phlegmatic: Since 1970 birth rates have been continually declining in all western European countries, including France, from 2.47 to 1.9 children per woman. But fewer women remain childless in France than here in Switzerland, many have three or four children, and the incidence of births to unmarried mothers is higher. Plus: "France's family policy provides for a broad range of measures covering tax, family allowances, maternity benefits and childcare."

Not only the number of births to Swiss women dropped sharply in 2001. The number of marriages also declined and the divorce rate increased. Although the number of people of marrying age has increased, the number of marriages dropped by almost ten percent last year. Walter Zingg of the Swiss Federal Statistical Office points to another factor: "According to a survey, 56 percent →

Swiss Abroad

At the end of June this year Swiss nationals resident abroad numbered 598,934. The immigration and emigration of Swiss nationals has little impact on the population of Switzerland. Between 1981 and 1991 the migration balance was virtually level (i.e. the number of people emigrating was roughly equal to the number immigrating). Statistics for the 1990s recorded a median annual emigration surplus of 6000. The Federal Statistical Office estimates that this number will increase to 8000 as a result of the agreement with the European Union on free movement of persons.



Cartoon by Nico in the "Tages-Anzeiger".

SVP National Councillor Christoph Blocher's cry of "Help – the boat is full" is answered by an echo from the Swiss shore: "I only understand Turkish", "Can you say that in Kurdish?", "Or Serbian?".

of women of child-bearing age have decided not to have children or to postpone having them until a later age."

Werner Haug, Vice Director of the Swiss Federal Statistical Office, sums up the declining birth rate among Swiss women thus: "The number of children with Swiss nationality has dropped so low that the number of deaths would outweigh births were it not for the children of young migrant families."

Deaths – longer life expectancy

In Switzerland, life expectancy at birth rose continually during the 20th century. Whereas in 1876 the average life expectancy was only 39.5 years for men and 42.5 years for women, this has now increased to 76.8 and 82.5 respectively. Life expectancy in Switzerland is among the highest in the world. The causes are well documented: the decline in infant mortality (120 years ago, every fifth child died before its first birthday), better living conditions and improved medical care.

Research scientists at the Swiss Federal Statistical Office and at Avenir Suisse are unanimous: Since the mortality rate is already very low, only modest progress is pos-

sible. Hence the decline in mortality rates is flattening out. However, in the Avenir study Professor Rainer Münz of Berlin's Humboldt University (a Swiss resident abroad) estimates a "greater drop in mortality rates among the over-sixties, who can expect to live to a ripe old age" thanks to advances in medicine and pharmacology.

As life expectancy rises and the birth rate declines, Switzerland's population is increasingly ageing. According to the Federal Statistical Office's "Trend" scenario, within a few years the number of people over 65 will exceed the number of under-15s. In 2060 senior citizens will account for one quarter of the entire population, i.e. one in four people will be drawing an old age pension (unless the retirement age is increased). By 2040 there will be two pensioners to every three persons in employment (as opposed to one to three at present). The average age of voters will rise from 46 to 54 by 2060. Will future people's referendums therefore be decided in the retirement home?

Population movements – a major influence

Immigration and emigration exert a significant influence on population trends. Migra-

tion patterns fluctuate wildly over the years, are often politically motivated and, generally speaking, cannot be predicted.

According to Swiss migration statistics, 24000 people immigrated and 30000 emigrated during the 1990s, equivalent to a median annual emigration surplus of 6000. The bilateral agreement with the EU on free movement of people will increase this surplus to 8000 as more and more Swiss move to an EU country to study or work. So will Switzerland see an influx of EU immigrants? The Swiss Federal Statistical Office reckons that the agreement will have "only a temporary impact" since at present European mobility is mainly the preserve of managers and highly qualified professionals.

The statisticians anticipate relatively large migration movements by people from outside the EU and estimate the annual immigration surplus at 23000. By 2060 foreign nationals will account for 22.8 percent (according to the Federal Statistical Office) or even as much as 26.4 percent (according to Avenir Suisse) of the total population.

In the 19th century, emigration was still the main factor affecting Swiss population numbers. Poverty and hunger in the valleys

of the Grisons and Ticino drove many Swiss to seek better lives abroad. This trend was only reversed around 1880, when construction began on the Gotthard and Simplon railway tunnels, bringing with it an influx of Italian labourers. In the early 20th century foreign nationals became a political issue and the Federal Council made moves to “safeguard against excessive immigration”. Following the Second World War, the restrictive law on foreign nationals was implemented to protect the labour market. In the 1960s, when Italian workers and their families began to enter the country in droves, the “anti-immigration movement” reached its climax in 1969 with the Schwarzenbach initiative.

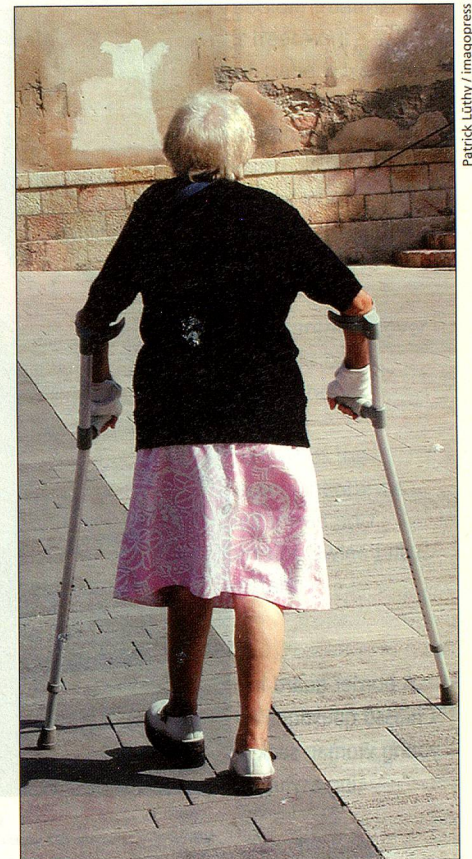
By 1980, the crises of the 1970s and the anti-immigration policy had resulted in a 14.8 percent reduction in foreign nationals. During the 1980s there was a marked wave of immigration from Portugal and Yugoslavia. In 1991 the Federal Council introduced its controversial three-circle model which imposes severe restrictions on non-Europeans entering Switzerland for employment purposes. The agreement on free movement of persons, concluded with the EU in June 2002, facilitates access to our labour market by people from EU countries

and their families, and opens up new opportunities for Swiss nationals to study and work in Europe.

“At the end of the 19th century, after many years of excessive emigration, Switzerland became a country of immigrants,” writes Philippe Wanner of the Swiss Forum for Migration Studies. How did the wave of immigration affect Swiss demographics?

- Most of Switzerland’s population growth in the second half of the 20th century is attributable to first-generation immigrants and their children (Philippe Wanner). Nowadays one in three residents of our country is an immigrant or a direct second- or third-generation descendant (Federal Statistical Office).

- Young people account for a high proportion of the non-Swiss population. Migration is therefore lowering the median age of the population. While immigration cannot bring the ageing process to a halt, it can slow it down. The excess births among non-Swiss women, coupled with family members who join immigrants in Switzerland, have saved the country “from an even more negative population trend” (Marc Spescha, Lawyer for foreigners’ rights).



Patrick Lüthy / Imagopress

The Swiss population is ageing.

- Without additional immigration the number of people of employable age (20 to 65 years old) would decline. Thanks to migration the relation between employed persons and retirees is still viable. That is important, since the working population bears the main burden of financing the Old Age and Survivors’ Insurance and the public purse (Avenir Suisse).

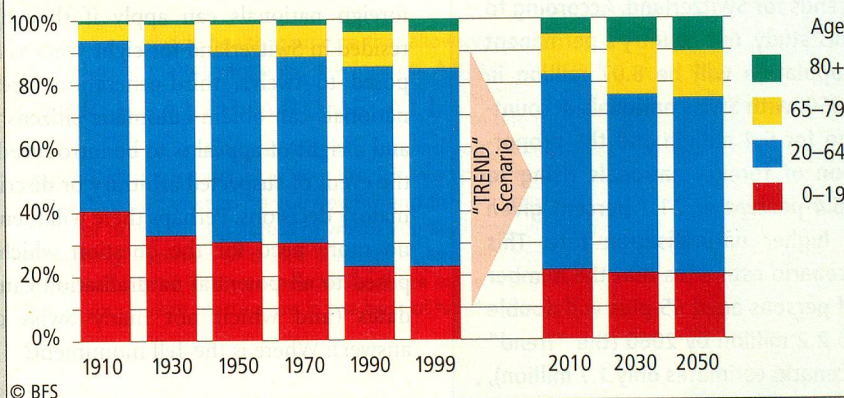
- “The contribution of non-Swiss residents to the gross national product is above average. One quarter of the goods and services produced in Switzerland is accounted for by foreign workers.” (Marc Spescha).

- “Without non-Swiss contributors the financial situation of the AHV would be much more precarious. In 1999 only 13 percent of the benefits were paid out to foreign nationals, even though they account for one quarter of the contributions.” (Otto Piller, Director of the Federal Office for Social Security).

Naturalisation – the right move

“To date, Switzerland has had one of the lowest naturalisation rates in Europe,” declared Federal Councillor Ruth Metzler recently →

Age Structure



“Trend” scenario

The Federal Statistical Office believes its basic “Trend” scenario to be the most likely in terms of population trends. This forecasts a continuation of recent demographic trends and takes into account foreseeable political changes such as the introduction of free movement of persons between Switzerland and the EU. According to this scenario, by 2060 the number of persons permanently resident in Switzerland will drop to around 7 million and the number of Swiss nationals to a mere 5.45 million, while the proportion of foreign nationals will increase to 22.8 percent.

Patrick Lüthy / Imagopress



A border guard in Chiasso questions a young woman seeking asylum.

in a parliamentary debate on the revision of the citizenship law. Our country wants the labour which foreign nationals provide, but not their social and legal integration. "Yet many of them are already Swiss."

The naturalisation conditions imposed by "Swissmakers" in many communities and cantons are much more rigorous than those required by Germany, the Netherlands and Scandinavia. In the 1980s the naturalisation rate even declined to one percent, or a mere 8800 persons. Between 1996 and 1999 the average naturalisation rate was 1.5 percent per year. The Federal Statistical Office estimates a future average rate of 1.5 percent, while Avenir Suisse predicts 2 percent.

"Naturalisation now represents the only growth factor for the Swiss population. Without naturalisation the population of Swiss nationals would have dropped since 1993," says Anne-Christie Wanders. From 2020 onwards the annual number of naturalised foreigners will exceed the number of persons emigrating (more immigration than emigration). The foreign population will then grow only on the basis of excess births. "If foreign nationals in Switzerland had been naturalised at the average European rate, the proportion of foreigners living in Switzerland would be below ten per-


Scenario «W»

The Avenir Suisse think tank for economic and social issues believes that its „W“ scenario reflects the most likely future demographic trends for Switzerland. According to this study, our country's permanent population will be 8.07 million in 2060, with Swiss nationals accounting for 6.4 million and the proportion of foreign nationals rising to 26.4 percent or 21.1 percent given a higher naturalisation rate. This scenario estimates that the number of persons aged 65-plus will double to 2.2 million by 2060 (the "Trend" scenario estimates only 1.7 million), with 880,000 people over 80 requiring intensive care (as opposed to 550,000 according to the "Trend" scenario).

cent – less than half the current number," declares Marc Spescha.

The research analysts at Avenir Suisse come to an interesting conclusion: "A moderate rise in the naturalisation rate to 2 percent would be sufficient to allow the num-

ber of foreign nationals to grow by not much more than 20 percent, given a moderate rate of immigration and despite the higher number of children."

The National Council wants to facilitate and accelerate the naturalisation process for foreign nationals: now second-generation foreign nationals can apply if they have resided in Switzerland for eight years as opposed to twelve, third-generation foreign nationals can obtain automatic citizenship, and a right of appeal is to be introduced in the event of suspected arbitrary or discriminatory decisions. Perhaps there will then be no more need for the question which is posed to all potential naturalisation candidates (and which not many Swiss can answer): Where is the Tell monument? 

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