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"Switzerland is a unique creation"

Dori Schaer (61), former Director of Public Works for Berne, has succeeded Jean-Claude Hefti as President of the New Helvetic Society (NHS): the first time this venerable society has had a woman at its helm.

SWISS REVIEW: *The NHC is the mother of the Organisation for the Swiss Abroad. What does it have in common with the Fifth Switzerland?*

DORI SCHAER: The NHC was founded in 1914 to promote dialogue between the various segments of the Swiss population. At that time, this also covered dialogue between Swiss Abroad and Swiss at home. In 1916 the "Swiss Abroad Agency" (as the OSA was then called) was created to address the growing numbers of Swiss Abroad joining the society.

The NHC has evolved to become a venerable part of the establishment. But you are a dynamic left-wing woman. Why did you take on this office?

In my time on the cantonal council I encountered increasing polarisation and a growing tendency towards ideology. Defensive attitudes had a tendency to suffocate positive energy. People always talk about the "rösti trench", but I am much more concerned about the divide between the rural and urban population and between educated and less educated people. This is where the NHC can act as go-between.

Is the NHC not itself an elitist institution?

There is that danger. But that's exactly why electing a woman President – and a left-wing one at that – is a good sign. Also, I am not an academic myself. I am a teacher and housewife. It's just a pity that they were unable to find a younger woman for the job.

The NHC has a membership of 1400. Your newsletter "Contact" complains about the increasing average age of members. How do you intend to make the NHC attractive to younger people?

We also have some younger, highly committed members. But almost all NGOs suffer from the same ageing problem. The NHC is interesting for young people because its members discuss the essence of Switzerland from a variety of standpoints.

And what is the essence of Switzerland?

Without wanting to sound over-patriotic, I must say that Switzerland is a unique creation. For over 150 years – since the "Sonderbundskrieg" – we have managed to co-exist in peace, even though we are a highly multicultural construct. Think of the four language regions and the wide range of religious denominations alone. Where else can you find that? It's a remarkable achievement and one which we must continue to pursue.

In line with the motto "Protect and preserve"?

Yes, but with a resolute eye to the future. After all, we are a consultation partner for the government. There are also other ways in which we can take a stand, state our posi-

tion, express our opinion and make recommendations. I will do my utmost to ensure that the NHC is consulted more, as in previous times.

And what is your message?

The question of Switzerland's existence is closely related to the question of solidarity. Here I mean solidarity among groups within Switzerland as well as ties with the world at large. So we should not merely ask what the world can offer us, but also what we can offer the world.



Dori Schaer, new President of the New Helvetic Society.

History

The NHC was founded in 1914, shortly before the outbreak of the first world war, at a time when differences of opinion between German and French-speaking Swiss threatened to endanger the country's internal peace. It was founded as the successor to the Helvetic Society which played a key role in consolidating the confederation and forming the federal state between 1761 and 1858. Since the NHC receives no public subsidies, it is dependent on support from the business sector and other private institutions. Naturally, NHC officials hold honorary positions.

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