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As the household effects leave the Rhine port in Basle, their owner takes a courageous step into the big wide world.

Off to new shores

For thirty years the "Swiss Review" has been sent to all registered Swiss Abroad, bringing them regular news of their home country. A whirlwind tour of three decades of Swiss emigration.

CHARLY VEUTHEY

THE 30TH ANNIVERSARY OF the "Swiss Review" provides an opportunity to ask a few fundamental questions. How much has its readership grown? What prompted its readers to emigrate? What relationship do Swiss Abroad have with their home country? The first question can be answered in statistical terms. Thirty years ago, "Swiss Review" had a readership of 323,167. By the end of 2003 the circulation had grown to 612,562 – almost double the original volume.

As ever, the reasons why Swiss leave their home country are many and varied. We asked a few representatives of the Fifth Switzerland who emigrated in the 1970s.

45-year-old Dominique Baccanaud now lives in Agen, France. She first left Switzerland in 1965 and, after a brief return, left the

country for good in 1971. As a young girl she followed her father to France, where he had found a job in the dairy industry. Later, she chose to live in Greece. In her younger years she regularly returned to Switzerland for the summer months. After Greece she had planned to return to Switzerland for good, but then she met her future husband, a Frenchman, and settled back in France again. Like many other Swiss Abroad, Dominique Baccanaud's choice of country was influenced by love.

Her first sojourn abroad was prompted by her father's professional career.

Work and education are common reasons for emigration. 63-year-old Jean-Paul Aeschlimann is a prime example. Now head of an 800-strong institute for environmental

research, he left Switzerland in 1972 when the Australian government offered him a position at the Montpellier-based institute he now manages. Since then, Jean-Paul Aeschlimann has lived in several countries around the world.

Individualism above all

Jean-Paul Aeschlimann does not believe much has changed over the past thirty years – at least in terms of his scientific field: “Because the level of education in Switzerland is good, Swiss scientists are always able to find work abroad. The only thing that has changed is the fact that they are less likely to settle in Europe nowadays.” He notes that, generally speaking, modern-day Swiss emigration has become “more individualistic in the positive sense”. “In the 1970s, Swiss emigrants formed veritable colonies – for example in Spain. That was unsustainable, and this phenomenon has now disappeared.” He also regards individualism as the key to successful emigration. “People who emigrate are also forced to integrate, which in turn makes a very good impression with the locals.”

Many emigrants are retirees seeking a country with a lower cost of living. This trend has been especially marked over the past couple of years in the Languedoc-Roussillon region. “Hundreds of people whose pensions are insufficient for living in Switzerland, emigrate to this region,” because Languedoc-Roussillon is a poor area of France and it is cheaper to live there. “Burgundy and Provence have become too expensive.”

Switzerland’s high cost of living is not only driving large numbers of Swiss pensioners abroad; a great many Spaniards and Portuguese who found work in Switzerland in the 1970s, are also returning to their home countries. Added to this, Switzerland’s high prices are discouraging people who would like to return, says 67-year-old Martin Strelbel, who was born in Burg/AG and has lived in Paris since 1967.

“I emigrated to France in order to gain first-hand knowledge of a foreign country and to learn languages. Then I had the opportunity to work for a branch of the Swiss Emmental Group in Paris. Since then I have lived in France. I couldn’t afford to return to Switzerland. And all my friends are now in France.” Martin Strelbel has been married to a Finn for 29 years. One of his daughters has been living in Berlin for the past four years.

Obviously the yen to discover the world runs in the family...

Seeking a better life

Love, education, work, cost of living: these are by no means all of the reasons for emigrating. Take, for example, the Swiss farmers who seek freedom and more extensive land to cultivate, as described in “Nouveau monde, simple course” (Ed. la Sarine), a wonderful book by Michel Gremaud and Daniel Pittet. Then there are missionaries like 64-year-old Willi Böhi, who was sent to Taiwan in 1969 by the Bethlehem Mission Immensee and now lives in Taipei. There are more poignant cases such as that of Alisa, née Guttmann, who was born in Zurich in the 1960s to Zionist parents and now lives in Tel-Hayim, Israel. She left Switzerland after completing her matriculation, because she did not feel at home in this country. And there are those who seek spirituality, such as Gérard Cruz, one of 43 Swiss nationals living in the “ideal city” of Auroville in Pondicherry, in southern India, about whom Fribourg’s “La Liberte” published an article last year. Gérard Cruz has lived in his country of choice since 1955.

All these reasons for emigration share a common element: the sheer determination to live one’s own life, find more freedom, seek a better life and achieve one’s goals.

Contrasting fates

The examples of people like Jean-Paul Aeschlimann, Martin Strelbel and Leo Schelbert (see interview), who have made a career for themselves abroad, are in stark contrast to the many Swiss who have been unable to find their fortunes abroad. Juan Carlos Martinez, an Argentine living in Switzerland for the past thirty years, observes that some Argentine-Swiss attempt to return to their home country during times of crisis. Yet many have lost any contact with Switzerland and are no longer able to communicate in a Swiss language. So they commute between the two countries, still caught in their difficulties.

Some emigrants return after only a short stay abroad. Ernst Müller of Schaffhausen was sent to Genoa in 1972 by his employer, the Georg Fischer company. He spent only two years in Italy, but those two years changed his life since it was there that he met his wife Janna. Now the entire family has dual citizenship.

A link

Talking to Swiss who have lived abroad for some time, one quickly notices how much they enjoy speaking about Switzerland. The response to our website appeal was gratifying. Lots of Swiss Abroad sent in their personal views on their relationship with the home country, and the topic obviously provoked powerful emotions.

Many Swiss Abroad are active in Swiss clubs, where they can exchange memories and dust off their Swiss identity. We hope that “Swiss Review” offers our compatriots abroad an additional link to home. 

Michel Gremaud and Daniel Pittet,
“Nouveau monde, simple course”, Ed. la Sarine,
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Translated from German

Since 1966 the Federal Constitution has contained an article whereby the Confederation undertakes to promote relations of Swiss Abroad among themselves and with the home country, and support institutions which promote this objective. The Organisation for the Swiss Abroad (OSA) is such an institution. As a private foundation, it is responsible for ensuring that all Swiss Abroad are kept informed about events back home. For many years, this task required a great deal of groundwork. In 1974 a world-wide distribution network was set up when the OSA launched “Swiss Review”, which is automatically distributed to all officially registered Swiss Abroad (currently some 360,000 households) free of charge and postage, thanks to financial support from the Federal Department of Foreign Affairs (DFA). Contrast this with the “Echo”, a magazine available on subscription which was published by the OSA between 1920 and 1980. Nowadays the OSA as publisher and the Confederation work closely together, with Berne granting “Swiss Review” unlimited editorial freedom (see also pages 12 and 13) 