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Swiss stars in the international firmament

With its banks, cuckoo clocks and mountains, Switzerland is often an easy target for caricaturists. Far more serious is the position that Switzerland occupies within the international community, as depositary state of the Geneva Conventions. Many of our compatriots were active in the service of various international organisations long before Switzerland joined the UN in 2002.

This spring Nicolas Michel, Professor at the University of Fribourg and former head of the Federal Department of Foreign Affairs' Directorate for Human Rights, was appointed to head up the UN legal department. From now on the Fribourger will be responsible for international legal issues that concern the UN, and is one of Kofi Annan's five Deputy General Secretaries. Two years ago, during the conference on establishing an international court of justice, the attention of the UN General Secretary was drawn to this tireless fighter of crimes against humanity. Michel now holds the highest office ever held by a Swiss in the UN executive.

Carla del Ponte was appointed Chief Prosecutor of the UN War Crimes Tribunal for ex-Yugoslavia (ICTY) and Rwanda in 1999. Her mandate for Rwanda was not renewed, since Kofi Annan intends to divide the UN Tribunal among two prosecutors. This is a heavy blow for the Swiss federal attorney, who has to pay for her determination to prosecute Rwandan government officials. But she still has the task of seeing the trial against Slobodan Milosevic, the main defendant at the ICTY, through to completion, though this seemingly endless test of endurance is far from over. Whatever the outcome, it is the first time since the Nürnberg and Tokyo trials that an international court of justice has tried a head of state for crimes committed during his term of office. The Ticino lawyer is no prophet in her own country, and her bluntness has earned her few compliments, particularly in Switzerland. Nevertheless, Carla del Ponte has gone down in history and was even considered for the Nobel Peace Prize in 2002.

Heidi Tagliavini, personal representative of the Chairman-in-Office of the Organisation for Security and Cooperation in Europe (OSCE) for missions in the Caucasus, is another example of a Swiss who shows courage and commitment in the international arena. The Russian-speaking diplomat from Basle proved her diplomatic skills in crisis regions during OSCE missions in Chechnia. Edouard Brunner, also representative of the OSCE, served before her in Georgia. Then there is ex-Federal



Isabelle Eichenberger

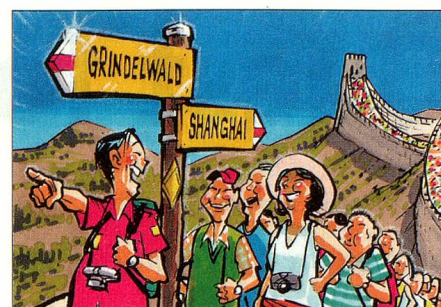
"These examples show that there are Swiss stars shining in the international firmament"

Councillor Adolf Ogi, who since 2001 has performed his mandate as the UN Special Ambassador for "Sport in the service of development and peace"; and former SP National Councillor Jean Ziegler, who has been UN Special Rapporteur for the "Right to Food" since 2000.

The list is by no means exhaustive, but the above examples show that there are Swiss stars shining in the international firmament: personalities who have been selected for their experience, expertise and international contacts rather than their red passports with the white cross. Yet their achievements are not always given the recognition they deserve in a country that mistrusts anyone who stands out from the crowd. After all, Henry Dunant, the founder of the Red Cross, would have almost certainly died in a poor-house in eastern Switzerland had the international community not paid him homage for his work to improve the lot of prisoners-of-war, and rescued him from obscurity by awarding him the Nobel Peace Prize in 1901.

Isabelle Eichenberger

Translated from German.



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The Swiss tourist industry is in the doldrums. Products and service levels have declined compared to prices. But new markets are opening up. What the industry needs is imaginative and innovative products.

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