

Zeitschrift: Swiss review : the magazine for the Swiss abroad
Herausgeber: Organisation of the Swiss Abroad
Band: 34 (2007)
Heft: 5

Inhaltsverzeichnis

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Swiss army knives made in China?

OMINOUS NEWS WAS ANNOUNCED by the newsreader on Swiss Radio one early morning at the beginning of July: according to reports, there was a distinct possibility that the new Swiss army knife would have to be manufactured in China. Due to the large volume of orders, an international WTO tender was being considered, in which all knife suppliers and manufacturers would be invited to participate.

While good-quality pirate copies of the famous Swiss army knife have long been in circulation, the idea that the official Swiss soldier's knife could bear the words "Made in China" caused quite a stir. This raised the curtain on a mini-drama in the Swiss media, resulting even in a petition to the Federal Council calling for the soldier's knife to be defined as a stabbing weapon (since weapons are not covered by WTO provisions and not therefore subject to international tender regulations).

Why does the Swiss army need a new soldier's knife in the first place? Armasuisse, the procurement office of the Federal Department of Defence, Civil Protection and Sport (DCS), explains the rationale: The old "61" soldier's knife no longer meets modern criteria in terms of safety and technology. For instance, the blade cannot be locked, which may result in injury during use. Added to this, better stainless steel is now available for the blades.

The army therefore wants 65,000 new soldier's knives worth CHF 1.17 million. The new knife, which will be issued to recruits in 2009, will have the following features: stainless steel, lockable cutting blades and a serrated knife, screwdriver, wood saw, reamer and punch, screwdriver with locking can opener and one-handed springless opening of the blades.

The soldier's knife will also be low-maintenance and can be worn on a belt.

The Swiss soldier's knife has been manufactured by Victorinox in Schwyz ever since 1891, and a Swiss army knife made in China would be more fatal for the company's image than for its finances. So does the new knife really need to be put out to international tender? No, says lawyer Alois Kessler, the initiator of the soldier's knife petition and a candidate for a seat on the Schwyz cantonal council. For him, the new knife is clearly a stabbing weapon and, as such, not subject to a WTO invitation to tender. Kessler accuses the Federal Council of a "goody-goody mentality" that is putting jobs at risk. Other states also interpret the WTO regulations in their favour, he says.

What happens next remains to be seen. A decision is to be reached by the end of the year. Armasuisse is now reviewing its position. After this "Furore over a penknife tender" (*Neue Zürcher Zeitung*), no-one seriously wants to believe that the 2009 batch of recruits will be wearing knives made in China on their belts.

We have received a large number of e-mails and letters from readers complaining that we published an SVP advertisement for the forthcoming elections, and criticising what is perceived as our pro-SVP leanings. The fact is that we invited all parties in the Federal Parliament to advertise in "Swiss Review" to publicise their political manifestos among the Swiss abroad. The editorial team and publishers dictate neither the size nor the frequency of advertisements placed by political groups. This is a matter solely for each political party to decide.

HEINZ ECKERT, EDITOR-IN-CHIEF



The first Swiss army knife, manufactured by Victorinox. The first shipment was made in 1891.

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Cover photo: "20 Minuten", a free commuter newspaper, made its appearance in Switzerland at the start of the new century
Photo: RDB

IMPRINT: "Swiss Review", the magazine for the Swiss abroad, is in its 34th year of publication and is published in German, French, Italian, English and Spanish in 21 regional editions. It has a total circulation of 400 000. Regional news appears four times a year.

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Single copy: CHF 5 ■