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"Letting in the unknown"

The door to the Stockmann family home in Dübendorf is open to guests from all over the world. Dozens of young Swiss abroad have been introduced here to everyday life in Switzerland.

A visit to an OSA host family. By Claudio Zemp



Young people are regular guests in this room. Francesca Stockmann, Mirjam Stockmann, Marcio Aggeler and Curdin Spirig in the "Casa Vivaio di Gaia" in Dübendorf.

The Stockmann family has a long tradition of hosting an open house. When Francesca Stockmann (61) moved back into her parents' home in Dübendorf in 1999, her then 90-year-old father grumbled when they had no visitors for a fortnight. The teacher has hosted at least one Swiss guest from abroad every year for the last almost 20 years. People from all over the world have stayed with her in Dübendorf, including youngsters from Paraguay, Japan, Holland and Guadeloupe. And it is not just Swiss expatriates who enjoy staying in the two guestrooms in Francesca's "Villa Kunterbunt". 20-year-old Curdin Spirig, from Engadine, is currently staying with the family. This student at the Federal Institute of Technology in Zurich confirms the impression created: "People are always coming and going here!"

The appeal of broadening horizons

Two of them are Francesca's daughter, Mirjam Stockmann (30), and her husband Marcio Aggeler (27). The recently married couple are a host family themselves. "Our first guest from Australia slept on the sofa in our shared apartment", recalls Mirjam. Before his arrival, she was worried that the city apartment would not be comfortable enough for their visitor. However, he liked it so much that he continued to call round to see them long after his language course had finished. "He wanted to stay with us", laughs Marcio.

The couple hosted "Junior" from France last summer. "I have never seen anyone eat so much", laughs Marcio. The bank employee, who grew up in French-speaking Switzerland, was able to brush up his French with "Junior". But far from all young Swiss visitors from abroad speak a Swiss national language. "As a host, you need a flair for languages", confirms Mirjam. Her mother too loves foreign languages. "I find it fascinating speaking different languages", says Francesca. Her house is a miniature cultural centre. Francesca redecorates her living room several times a year, and organises readings and musical evenings.

An immediate insight into a country and its people

Mirjam knows just how valuable staying with a host family can be. After meeting Marcio six years ago, the couple travelled to Brazil where they stayed with a family. Mirjam believes this was the perfect introduction. She says: "You get to know the country and its people so much more quickly than tourists who go sightseeing from their hotels." Marcio and Mirjam make their guests part of their own lives. They show them the places to go and take them along when friends invite them over. "You have to spend time with guests as well as providing them with a room", emphasises Mirjam. The hosts have also enjoyed accompanying Swiss guests from abroad on visits to the Rhine Falls or to Lucerne.

"The guests experience life as we know it", adds Mirjam. They also have the freedom to discover Switzerland for themselves. Marcio once had to go into the city centre at night to collect a teenager who could not find his way home. These days she no longer worries about guests being shocked by the young couple's often haphazard everyday routine.

Personal contact with people from all over the world

The Stockmanns are happy to share their private lives with complete strangers. "You let the unknown into your home, but that is the appeal", says Mirjam with conviction. The guests also play a part in this cultural experiment. Shared Swiss nationality makes contact easier. This at least provides a connection, as Francesca explains: "Having a Swiss background creates a bond, even if it is just through a name that originates from Central Switzerland." The jovial host has never doubted her decision to receive guests who come from such diverse backgrounds. She says: "An open house provides lots of stories." One such tale concerns two ladies from New York whom she took in years ago. The big-city ladies turned out to be faith healers who wanted to convert Francesca. The pastor's widow dealt with their missionary zeal by putting them straight around the kitchen table.

The Stockmanns have no end of stories to tell. Francesca collects the addresses, photos and thank-you letters from her guests. As she enjoys travelling herself, she has taken advantage of contacts made on her own trips abroad. Whether in Australia or Spain, she has been welcomed by Swiss people abroad everywhere. When she retires, Francesca would like to visit Shanghai. She already knows whose door she will be knocking on.

EVERYDAY SWISS LIFE FRESH FROM THE SOURCE

The Organisation of the Swiss Abroad (OSA) arranges host families for young Swiss people abroad who wish to take advantage of an OSA offer in Switzerland. This is the best way for young people aged between 15 and 25 to experience everyday life in a Swiss family. Around 70 young people are welcomed by host families each year.

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