

Zeitschrift: Swiss review : the magazine for the Swiss abroad
Herausgeber: Organisation of the Swiss Abroad
Band: 38 (2011)
Heft: 5

Artikel: Quadrilingual or multilingual? Swiss literature and the world
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DOI: <https://doi.org/10.5169/seals-907363>

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Quadrilingual or multilingual? Swiss literature and the world

The Swiss literary scene is incredibly small on the global stage, but it is far from insignificant. However, the creation of literary works, with their division into linguistic regions, would hardly be feasible without the involvement of countries abroad that share the same language because the barriers within Switzerland are too high.

By Barbara Villiger Heilig

Agota Kristof died in Neuchâtel at the end of July. Her books were world literature in the truest sense of the term. They included the trilogy of "The Notebook", "The Proof" and "The Third Lie", which was followed by the novel "Yesterday". This was unfortunately to be this great author's last work. Agota Kristof wrote in Switzerland, where she lived since fleeing Hungary in 1956. Her work was influenced by the major impact this flight had on her life as the native Hungarian was existentially uprooted. The experience of emigration accounted for the power of her literature and took her far beyond the realm of the personal biography, making her universally relevant in a world that has often been confronted with the phenomenon of migration and will certainly continue to face it in the future.

A godsend for Swiss literature

It comes as little surprise that Kristof's work has now been translated into over 30 languages. This immigrant, an outstanding writer, has helped Swiss literature achieve global prominence. Is this a paradox or a symptom? Probably neither. Switzerland is tiny, and literature is an art. Really great works are extremely rare. In this respect, more than anything, Hungarian-born Agota Kristof was a godsend for the Swiss literary scene.

Through her new home, where she never really settled, Agota Kristof found a unique form of literary expression with the French language she struggled to learn. The result was a sparse, minimalistic language whose apparent naivety concealed a subtle art. Her four novels were all published by Le Seuil in Paris, one of the leading publishing houses for fiction. France – and above all Paris – continues to exercise great influence over literature written in French, even if it comes from French-speaking Switzerland. French-speaking Swiss authors who do not make it in Paris face a tougher challenge. While they may well get their work published thanks to the large number of Swiss publishing houses, it will usually only reach a domestic readership.

French literature from Switzerland only reaches French bookshops to a very limited extent. This is explained by distribution, the workings of the press and, above all, proverbial French chauvinism. Authors who do manage to be published in France are also held in higher esteem and receive more attention at home. This is a well-established tradition – even Charles Ferdinand Ramuz, the grand old man of lettres romandes, had to go via Paris to achieve fame in Switzerland. Jacques Chessex, another great author from French-speaking

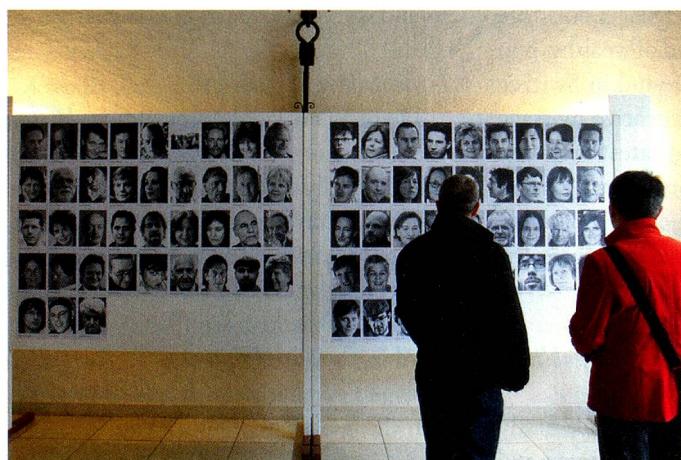
Switzerland who passed away recently, also had his books published in Paris – and was proud of the fact. In 1973, he received the Prix Goncourt, the most prestigious prize in French literature, for his work "L'Ogre". He was the first recipient from outside France and remains the only Swiss winner.

Ticino poetry for Italians

Switzerland, with its four national languages, is also an anomaly in literature. Each linguistic region – apart from Romansh, an exception in this exceptional situation – borders a neighbouring country that shares the same language: German-speaking Switzerland has a border with Germany and Austria; French-speaking Switzerland with France; Ticino and Italian-speaking Grisons with Italy. Writers from each of these linguistic regions naturally look beyond national borders to where there are not only more publishing houses, but also, above all, a sizeable potential reading public.

While this only opens up opportunities to a limited extent for French-speaking Swiss, as explained above, authors from Ticino do actually find their readership in neighbouring Italy. Ticino authors tend to write poetry rather than novels, and the poetry collections of leading Ticino writers are published by renowned Italian publishing houses. The Limmat publishing house in Zurich has shown an ambition for some time to make this literature accessible to a native German-speaking audience as well and continually publishes translations of poetry collections from Ticino. It is no secret that such works are not bestsellers. Even in its original language, poetry has to content itself with a readership of devotees. This is diluted even further when poetry is transported across language barriers in a translated form.

It is well known that these barriers also exist within Switzerland despite manda-



Visitors in front of a wall featuring portraits of writers at the Solothurn "Literary Days" festival.

tory language lessons in schools. The great divide between French-speaking and German-speaking Switzerland is as strong as ever. Attempts to overcome this language barrier have nevertheless been made recently in the literary world. A group of young writers have united under the slogan "Bern ist überall" (Berne is Everywhere). They appear at festivals and even in schools with animated musical spoken-word performances in various formations and have received accolades from across the generations. The members of "Bern ist überall" come from Berne, Lausanne, Geneva, Zurich and Romansh Surselva. They speak in their local tongues confidently and successfully too: it is thanks to them that Swiss German is suddenly being seen as cool by youngsters in French-speaking Switzerland, much to the chagrin of their German teachers. Unpopular High German, as taught in schools, is still another story altogether.

Pro Helvetia finances translations

Noëlle Revaz from Valais belongs to "Bern ist überall". Her first novel "Von wegen den Tieren", a shocking, raw portrayal of the farming community depicted with linguistic brutality, was a sensation in 2002. The book hit a nerve in our high-tech civilisation. The fact that the agricultural world is currently in vogue is also highlighted by another member of "Bern ist überall", the young author Arno Camenisch. He wrote his first novel "Sez Ner", set in the Grisons Alps, in two languages, Romansh and German. Published in 2009, it has sold extremely well, with around 6,000 copies purchased. It has already been translated into French, Italian and even Romanian, and other versions are currently being produced. Top-quality translation is provided by the Swiss Arts Council Pro Helvetia. This not only supports primary literary production, but also pays special attention to translation. Besides seeing to the distribution of Swiss literature abroad, it facilitates the transfer from one national language to the others.

Pro Helvetia has apparently even launched a "Der Goalie bin ig" project to translate the successful novel written in dialect by Bernese author Pedro Lenz, who is also a member of "Bern ist überall", into High German. That promises to be quite a challenge. "Der Goalie bin ig" was nomi-

Pedro Lenz, author of "Der Goalie bin ig", during a reading at the Solothurn "Literary Days" festival on 5 June 2011.



nated in 2010 for the Swiss Book Prize, a relatively new institution associated with the "BuchBasel" book fair. However, last year's award went to Melinda Nadj Abonji with her second novel "Tauben fliegen auf" (Falcons without Falconers). She had won the German Book Prize with the same title just before, and this was celebrated as recognition and a shot in the arm for literature in German-speaking Switzerland. Gaining a foothold in the German-speaking market as a whole is no mean feat for writers from German-speaking Switzerland either, although it is easier to penetrate than the French market.

Melinda Nadj Abonji was fantastically well received thanks to the two high-profile prizes. Her award-winning novel interweaves autobiographical detail with contemporary history and is set in both Serbia, her country of origin, and Switzerland. She came to Zurich as a child from rural, Hungarian-speaking Vojvodina. Although, in contrast to Agota Kristof, she has developed a breezy, poetic style, there are parallels between the two writers. Alienation in a new environment also pervades "Tauben fliegen auf" and at times the almost gentle tone fails to conceal the harsh experience of emigration which was given new resonance by the war in the

former Yugoslavia. Melinda Nadj Abonji will now become the first artist in residence at the Swiss Institute in Rome – a newly created position for promoting art and, in this case, literature.

Writers also have to make a living. Since 2006, many have earned some of their income by lecturing at the Swiss Institute of Literature in Biel, which, as a university, offers courses in literary writing in German and French. The list of lecturers there reads like a who's who of the newer generation of Swiss authors and includes Silvio Huonder, Francesco Micieli, Urs Richle, Ruth Schweikert, Michael Stauffer, Beat Sterchi, Claire Genoux, Eugène Meiltz, Ilma Rakusa, Peter Stamm and Raphael Urweider. But the lecturing staff is not restricted to Swiss talent. There is intensive exchange and contact with literary figures abroad, particularly in German-speaking countries. In the theatrical world, Lukas Bärfuss, Switzerland's leading young dramatist, is popular in Germany and Austria, where his works are often performed and even premiere. And he is not alone. National patriotism is not a literary criterion. Thankfully.

BARBARA VILLIGER HEILIG is editor of the "NZZ" review section and a critic on the "Literaturclub" programme on Swiss television.