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Images for eternity

The "C'est la vie" exhibition at the National Museum Zurich is displaying 500 press photographs of important moments in Switzerland's history. A visit to the photo exhibition is just as much a history lesson about Switzerland in the 20th century as it is a journey of personal recollection.

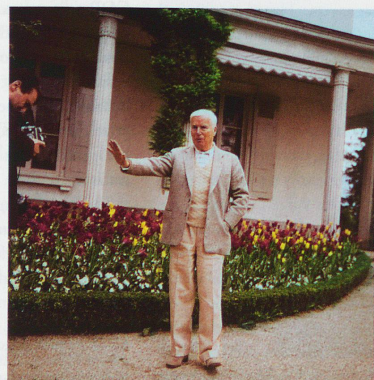
By Manuel Gnos



The Federal Council on its travels in 1996
Front: Federal Councillors Arnold Koller, Jean-Pascal Delamuraz, Kaspar Villiger, Flavio Cotti, Adolf Ogi, Otto Stich and Ruth Dreifuss. Behind: Federal Chancellor François Couchepin and the two Vice-Chancellors, Hanna Muralt and Achille Casanova (from left to right)



Opening of the Gotthard road tunnel on 5 September 1980



Charlie Chaplin, director and actor, in front of his house in Corsier-sur-Vevey, circa 1964



Demonstration by opponents of the planned power station in Kaiser-augst in 1985



Arrival of the Nobel Prize winner Alexander Solschenizyn in Zurich on 15 February 1974. Solschenizyn was expatriated by the Russian government because of his book "The Gulag Archipelago". He migrated to the USA two years later



Swimming lessons for school classes at the Seebad Wollishofen in Zurich in 1943

Photographs that made it into the many illustrated magazines of the 1960s had to go through a protracted process. There were at least a few hours, but normally days or weeks, between the time when photographs were taken and the moment when readers flicked through them in the living room or on the kitchen table. A photographer's work was extremely time-consuming. After returning from an event, he would spend several hours in the dark room developing the film, making an initial selection and enlarging the best negatives. The copies were sent to the photo agencies or editorial desks where the selection was narrowed down before the photos were inserted onto magazine pages, sent off for printing and finally distributed to kiosks and households nationwide.

These days, images appear on news websites just a few seconds after an event in some cases. The agency swiss-image.ch, for example, has developed a procedure where photographs taken of an occasion are simultaneously sent to computers at the agency offices and – depending on the event – automatically uploaded to the Internet. Negative strips and photographic chemicals were definitively consigned to the history books several years ago. Keystone, the leading Swiss photo agency, supplies editorial departments with 3,500 photos a day, around a seventh of which come from Switzerland.

This technical aspect of press photography is part of the "C'est la vie" exhibition in which the National Museum Zurich traces the history of Switzerland in the 20th century. The exhibition is magnificently presented. Metre-high illuminated cabinets are interspersed with series of small-format photographs, while black-and-white images of avalanche accidents follow on from glossy pictures of the coronation of all the winners of the Miss Switzerland title since the Second World War.

The exhibition organisers have not focused on sensational topics and headlines. Instead they present a well-rounded picture of Switzerland since 1940. The material for the exhibition comes from the collections of two photo agencies from French-speaking Switzerland, which the museum obtained several years ago. A selection from this wealth of press photos of major events is now on public display for the first time.

History or personal recollection

For a long time, press photographs were the only source from which a reasonably realistic perception of an event could be formed. Moving images have now been around for many years. Nevertheless, photography remains an excellent way of capturing contemporary history. The exhibition at the National Museum Zurich, for example, provides reportage on the first babysitters in 1948 and highlights how controversial this form of childcare was at the time. Images of holidays at a campsite in Lausanne around 1940 are also displayed, making visitors wonder when campsites came into existence and what it would have been like to go on holiday during the Second World War.

In addition to social and historical aspects, the exhibition also reveals a very personal history to observers, that of their own media consumption. It is extremely interesting to observe from what point in time the photos are no longer perceived as a depiction of historical events but instead as a reflection of history that has been experienced personally. This is particularly evident in the chronologically arranged sequences "Bundesrat auf Reisen 1950–2011" (The Federal Council on its Travels 1950–2011) and "Eine Chronik der Schweiz 1940–2011" (A Chronicle of Switzerland 1940–2011).

This chronicle, featuring three or four photos a year, also provides the opportunity to test one's powers of recollection. Or can you easily recall when the following events took place – the flooding of the Grande-Dixence dam, the opening of the road tunnel through the Gotthard, the death of General Guisan, the clampdown on the open drugs scene at the Oberer Letten in Zurich or the triumphant Ski World Cup in Crans Montana? (1957, 1980, 1960, 1995, 1987)

The exhibition pays great attention to traditional photo reportage, partly but not solely because this genre has almost completely disappeared from the media today. This reportage often focused on themes like the everyday life of very ordinary people in Switzerland – farmers in Valais at the asparagus harvest, a day in the life of a simple old lady, a boat trip on Lake Maggiore shortly after the end of the war or the first broadcasts by Swiss television. Anyone looking at these photos today will, above all, be astonished at how much zeitgeist they convey and will wonder whether this will also be true of photographs from their own everyday lives fifty years from now.

MANUEL GNOS is an editor at "Swiss Review"