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Behind bars

I am 20 years old and have been in prison for just under 15 months. I am sitting in a young offenders' institution for a transgression I committed in Bavaria. I received a prison sentence of three years and nine months for grievous bodily harm, and rightly so! I have made one huge mistake in my life, which unfortunately cannot be reversed. I have never been to prison in Switzerland, my homeland, never been charged with anything before in my life, nada! And then something like this happens.

I have learned my lesson and am looking positively to the future. The young offenders' institutions in Switzerland are not like those in Germany. As far as I know, there are only reform centres – without barbed wire and walls. You can do apprenticeships. In this prison many of the inmates but also the wardens and other people are interested in me and, above all, in Switzerland. They want to know what the wages are like and that sort of thing.

I also finally managed to get a job a few months ago. I earn EUR 1.70 an hour. My cell (8 m²) is covered with pictures of the Alps, Swiss crosses and photos of Toggenburg, my home.

I have not written my letter because I am looking for sympathy. I would like to receive letters, or even read readers' letters, from people who are behind bars in Germany.

MARCO BÖHL,
EBRACH, GERMANY

Not a nation of "heartless" officials

I read Esther Zuger's letter in the November issue of "Swiss Review" on security checks at Zurich airport. I am really sorry that this couple's final memory of our lovely country

was such a negative one. We can safely say that it is not the uniform that makes the person, but the person who gives the uniform its lustre through their behaviour. However, Switzerland is not a nation of "heartless" officials. This is my experience.

On 25 November 2011, my mother from Basel died unexpectedly on a journey to Switzerland. I, who am her only child, live in Spain. When I arrived at the office of inheritance in Basel, I was immediately greeted with compassion and received lots of support. The certificate of inheritance, the most important document in such cases, arrived within two weeks. I was then able to settle invoices that I would have struggled to pay with my Spanish income. This was necessary as I had to collect my mother from the hospital in Thun and transfer her to Basel. I found everyone to be compassionate and respectful and everything was dealt with swiftly. I felt well respected and well supported at all times as a Swiss citizen abroad.

I am looking forward to the day when I, as a dual citizen of Switzerland and the UK, return to my home country of Switzerland.

ANDREW SANDILANDS,
BARCELONA, SPAIN

Summary of the Hildebrand case

The saying "a leopard never changes its spots" is true of the experienced hedge fund manager Hildebrand. It seems to me that you are attributing too much importance to the Bernese schemers from the worlds of politics and the media in the Hildebrand case. Of course, the manner in which the leaks occurred should be investigated but the complaints were certainly not

Pedro Lenz, juggler of dialects

AS A CHILD, HE BELIEVED HE WAS DUTCH FOOTBALLER JOHAN CRUYFF. His hero. But everyone calls him "the goalie". A role he takes on for want of anything better. In his village, he is looked upon as an outsider, a loser. A lesson he learns well. "Der goalie bin ig." ("I'm the goalie.") It is almost his litany.

The "goalie" comes from the imagination of Berne-based poet Pedro Lenz. His novel, written in dialect, tells the story of a junkie returning to his village after being released from prison. Attempting to rebuild his life, he falls in love with Regi, finds a job and has to reconcile himself to ordinary life. "But nobody knows how long such a start lasts and if it even is a start at all." This is the moroseness of small-town life, with its drop-outs and losers, set against the backdrop of vibrant sound.

The novel has had a tremendous impact in German-speaking Switzerland. It was nominated for the 2010 Swiss Book Prize and won the Schiller Prize in 2011. It has already sold over 16,000 copies. Pedro Lenz, accompanied by a musician, also holds regular, popular public readings. "I have the music of the dialect in my head when I write", he says.

Yet, to sum up this work as part of the wave of popularity enjoyed by dialect would be reductive. At 46, Pedro Lenz certainly cannot be accused of provincialism, embracing instead a regional lyricism reminiscent of the musicality of Hemingway. The best parables tell a local story. In Lenz's work, the power of the dialect, its oral character, is woven into a subtle irony. The narrative of the junkie, his predilection for euphemism, reflects the candour he has inherited through his destiny as the "goalie".

"Der goalie bin ig" tells a story that goes way beyond the regional framework to which it could be confined as a result of its use of dialect. Its anti-hero, an observer of a world moving ahead without him, can be found on any street in any backwater region. At the same time, the novel fosters a literary aesthetic that is not bound by the constraints of standard, academic German in much the same way as the work of immigrant writers such as Melinda Nadj Abonji and Catalin Dorian Florescu. Free of

such constraints, the strength of the relationship with the language shines through.

Pedro Lenz says he dreams of helping "bärndütsch" escape from "intellectual reductionism". Poet Raphaël Urweider produced a translation into "standard German" in February 2011. "Der Keeper bin ich" (Bilgerverlag) remains true to the narrator's style. The care taken with rhythm underscores the oral character of the work. However, its success in terms of

copies sold does not match that of "Der Goalie bin ig", due – perhaps – to the fact that some of the musicality has been lost. Following a translation into Italian ("In porta c'ero io", Cappelli, 2011), a French version is set to come out in 2013 (Editions d'en Bas). in a popular voice that will have to steer clear of kitsch if it is to reflect the talent of Pedro Lenz.

ANNE FOURNIER

Pedro Lenz
Der Goalie bin ig
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4