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Feeling claustrophobic

AT SOME POINT IN AUGUST, Switzerland exceeded the “magical” number of eight million inhabitants. This was acknowledged by the media but there were no celebrations to mark the occasion. Instead, a sense of panic could be felt in the country. We experience an ever more densely populated Switzerland every day in the vast swathes of commuters in overcrowded trains, growing traffic congestion and urban sprawl in the countryside. This sense of claustrophobia is actually nothing new. A century ago, when Switzerland’s population had not even reached four million, fears that the people in our small country would soon take over all our natural surroundings led to the foundation of the national park in the Engadin. The aim was to create a free zone for nature.

The news of Switzerland’s population reaching eight million resulted in extensive analyses by the media and politicians concerning its significance and which approaches should now be adopted. The proposed solutions range from the termination of the freedom of movement of persons with the EU to calls for the construction of more high-rise buildings. The analyses underlined the point that life in Switzerland is good, very good



even. This explains why so many people wish to live here. The statistics suggest that the eight-millionth resident is highly likely to be a well-educated German, a doctor or an engineer – in other words, an employee who is contributing to Switzerland’s prosperity and development. The statistics also reveal, for example, that already over half the professors at Swiss universities come from abroad. These realities cannot be changed with a defensive attitude or sectoral approach without this having far-reaching consequences. We need to adapt to these realities even if the developments cause many people concern – the same may also be said of our expectations and consumption levels.

Unlike the country itself, churches in Switzerland are experiencing a huge exodus, with membership on the decline. One in five Swiss today indicates that he or she has no religious affiliation, yet churches are an issue that is covered extensively in public debate – this is what the results of a national research project on church and religion in Switzerland reveal. This issue is covered from page 8 as this edition’s key focus topic.

Finally, I would like to draw your attention to the series of articles on literature that begins in this edition. These will feature books and literary figures among the Swiss abroad, authors who spend or have spent all or part of their lives living outside Switzerland and naturally reflect this in their work. Charles Linsmayer, a literary scholar and journalist living in Zurich, will present famous and lesser-known faces from the Swiss literary scene in every future edition. The series begins on page 23 with a portrait of Guy de Pourtalès.

BARBARA ENGEL

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Echo

Cover photo: This photograph of the church at Saas im Prättigau, shrouded in mist, can be seen as a symbol of attitudes towards religion and churches in Switzerland, suggesting distance and estrangement, but also fear and mistrust.

Photo: Keystone / Arno Balzarini