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An excellent way of encouraging reading

The "Schweizerisches Jugendschriftenwerk" (SJW), a Swiss organisation publishing literature for young people that was founded over 80 years ago, still focuses on ensuring affordable and attractive literature for young people in multilingual Switzerland. By Charles Linsmayer

Klaus Merz, one of Swiss literature's living greats, has kept all of the 76 SJW books he was given as a child and, when he picks up no. 552, "Mit dem Düsenflugzeug durch die Schallmauer" (An Aeroplane Goes Through the Sound Barrier), he still recalls his first middle ear infection when his mother forbade him from reading further because she feared that his ear drum would burst. His colleagues Franz Hohler, Etienne Barilier and Giovanni Orelli also go into raptures when they remember their first encounters with the books of the "Schweizerisches Jugendschriftenwerk (SJW)", which also exists in the other national languages under the labels of OSL and ESG.

Countering smut and trash

The organisation was founded in Olten on 1 July 1931 by a group led by Fritz Brunner, a schoolteacher from Zurich, whose mission was to combat "smutty and trashy literature". To counteract "trashy novels" effectively, their outward appearance was replicated as far as possible. An edition had 32 pages, cost 25 cents and had an illustrated colour cover. However, the first 12 books were unable to compete with John Kling's sensational crime novels. In 1932, in addition to stories for very small children, a biography of Edison, a report from South Africa and a case for the "sleuths' club"

were published. It took another 50 years before SJW found the courage to publish crime novels. However, with the help of teachers, it succeeded in selling large numbers of copies. The publishing house employed illustrators like Gregor Rabinovitch and Paul Bösch from the outset who were later followed by well-known artists, such as Hans Witzig, Isa Hesse, Alois Carigiet, Meret Oppenheim and Hanny Fries. The small volumes are therefore also significant from an art history perspective. The programme included texts by Swiss authors – Olga Meyer, Elisabeth Müller and Hans Zulliger – alongside works by teachers that told Swiss history from the pile dwellers to the withdrawal from the Beresina.

Intellectual defence of the nation

Four books were published in French for the first time in 1935, and the first titles in Italian and Romansh appeared in 1941. At the same time, a new initiative was the publication of a book, "650 Jahre Eidgenossenschaft" (650 Years of the Swiss Confederation), in all four national languages. 614,900 copies were handed out to Swiss children free of charge. After the war, when the intellectual defence of the nation had had its day, SJW failed to recognise the sign of the times. The publications did not include any political or social topics until well into the 1970s and also practically over-

looked the everyday realities facing the young readership.

The situation improved when Heinz Wegmann, a secondary schoolteacher from Zurich, took over the management of the publishing house in 1977. There was even a title on AIDS, sparking angry public protest. The comic also became acceptable, and authors such as Franz Hohler and Niklaus Meienberg were allowed to take a critical look at Switzerland and its history. A book entitled "Drogen? Ich nicht!" (Drugs? Not Me!) came out in 1990 and one on sexuality and contraception in 1992.

Financial crisis

The company ran into difficulties in the 1990s for financial reasons and because in 1990 it had broken away from Pro Juventute,

which had been responsible for sales, warehousing and accounting. In 1991, to celebrate "60 years of SJW", it published 60 new titles and organised a lavish celebratory event – this resulted in a dramatic net loss that used up all its financial reserves and left the publishing house in a precarious position. Production was scaled back massively, and sales fell constantly from 439,158 copies in 1994 to 272,277 in 1999.

Give up or carry on?

In 2005, it looked as though the foundation board would have to wind up the company sooner or later. However, after much deliberation, a proposal was finally approved to continue the publishing house with an attractive new programme and to introduce measures to modernise the sales system and reduce costs.

This had been strongly advocated by the filmmaker Margrit Schmid – and a miraculous turnaround was achieved! With the unveiling of a series of previously successful books and four new titles – including one in German, French, Italian, Romansh and English – Margrit Schmid started a new chapter in SJW's history in 2006. This was a chapter in which the expansion of the sales network was just as important as co-operation with young authors and various outstanding artists and designers. Just a year later, with 27 new titles in all the national languages, the publishing programme had returned to the scale of the 1990s,

though it covered a much wider range of interests and target groups and – with its attractively presented and modern image – bore little resemblance to the unadventurous layout of the editions during the war and post-war period. The financial situation has today been stabilised.

THE NEW PROGRAMME

The 2013/14 programme includes 24 new titles. A collection of stories by Robert Walser appropriate for young people with original illustrations by Anna Sommer entitled "Der Räuber", published in German, French and Italian, is the most spectacular among them. Another classic, "Der Lebhag", based on a story by Meinrad Inglin, is available in German, French and Romansh. Nadine Spengler colourfully illustrated this story about hedgehogs under threat in their natural habitat, which remains relevant to this day.

"Salzkrebschen", a brilliant educational book that serves as a guide for young amateur breeders, is writ-

ten by science journalist Atlant Bieri and illustrated by Anna Luchs, and published in German, French, Italian and Romansh.

There are, of course, also new titles that appear in just one language. In German, Anita Siegfried excitingly continues the "pile dwellers" tradition at SJW with "Lelech und Nardu. Pfahlbauer am Zugersee"; Sabina Altermatt has written a new crime novel entitled "Der nächtliche Besucher", which is enigmatically illustrated by Adrian Tobler, and Lorenz Pauli and Kathrin Schärer contribute a gem for small children – "Eine schlimme Geschichte" about a cat that ends up in an eagle owl's nest. "Lilly

Margrit Schmid was awarded the Swiss Youth Book Prize in 2009 for repositioning SJW and making it a serious player in Swiss publishing for young people.

CHARLES LINSMAYER is a literary scholar and journalist in Zurich



Three examples of books from the SJW's latest publishing programme

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