

Zeitschrift: Swiss review : the magazine for the Swiss abroad
Herausgeber: Organisation of the Swiss Abroad
Band: 42 (2015)
Heft: 1

Buchbesprechung: La Trinité bantoue [Max Lobe]

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Known all over the world

Look at how the modern world works. Without a common language – at least a basic knowledge of the second major national language – it will be difficult to explain to future generations how Switzerland works. We Swiss are also well known for our linguistic skills all over the world. And I'm not referring to English here because that is now spoken by many people. Let us not give up this advantage through being idle!

STEPHAN BERNHARD, BY EMAIL

Early English is superfluous

(Almost) everyone will learn English sooner or later because it is an omnipresent, prestigious and useful language. Early English learning is therefore superfluous. Our children and young people should learn French (or German) first. The minimum requirement is a passive knowledge. The call for Swiss German to be spoken in French-speaking Switzerland is absurd. We write our readers' letters and comments in High German without any problems.

ANDREAS ERNST, BY EMAIL

"Home advantage" of linguistic diversity

The Swiss should make the most of their home advantage to start learning French as early as possible. They will learn English at some point anyway. I am extremely grateful for having "home advantage" with French in my new home in Belgium, both professionally but also privately and culturally. Switzerland should maintain its cultural and linguistic diversity, otherwise it risks being diminished. The German-speaking Swiss, even if they make up the absolute majority in Switzerland, should not become idle. The example set by the people of Ticino and the Romansh speakers should be followed!

GRAZIA BERGER, BY EMAIL

Can the people also get it wrong?

I holiday in Switzerland every year. It is the most wonderful country on earth. The natural environment is perfect, the food is of the highest quality, transport is readily available, and the Swiss people generally are a pleasure to deal with. The most wonderful thing of all about Switzerland is that, through direct democracy, the Swiss have the power to stop government from destroying their society, and that is why Switzerland is the envy of the world. Naturally, there will be an element within Swiss society who resent the fact that they cannot force their views on everyone else, but, fortunately, the Swiss democratic system prevents this from happening. In contrast, in my home country, Australia, we truly have a "tyranny of the minority". The media, academia, the public services and the institutions of the country are predominantly leftist and they tightly control the political agenda, ensuring ordinary people have little or no say in national policy. As a consequence, our society and our economy are in decline. So, be thankful that you have the power to stop politicians from making self-serving decisions that cause great harm to your country.

BARRY, AUSTRALIA

Max Lobe and the language of joy



MAX LOBE: "La Trinité bantoue" (in French only), éditions ZOE, Geneva 2014. 208 pages.

In 2010, when the Swiss people were called upon to vote on a federal popular initiative entitled "For the deportation of foreign criminals", posters displayed by the majority party on which white sheep chased a black sheep out of Switzerland's borders could be seen everywhere. In Max Lobe's latest novel, "La Trinité bantoue", the same posters adorn the walls of "Helvetia". This small country at the heart of Europe strangely resembles the Switzerland we know and it is here that the narrator Mwána lives. Originally from an imaginary African country, Bantouland, he lives in poverty in Geneva with his friend Ruedi.

They have difficulty making ends meet, as Mwána lost his job as soon as he finished studying. His applications never come to anything. Ruedi, unemployed, refuses to accept any help from his family in Graubünden. Fortunately, Monga Míngá, Mwána's mother, sends them food from Bantouland – "cassava pancakes, cassava and more cassava". But not for very long: Monga Míngá, diagnosed with throat cancer, comes to Helvetia for medical treatment, staying in Lugano where Mwána's very Catholic sister, Kosambela, lives. "Misery is knocking hard at our door," laments Mwána, who will not give in. With a joyful spirit and inventive use of language, he chooses to laugh about the xenophobic climate prevailing in Helvetia where skinheads disrupt 1 August celebrations on the Rütli meadow. But something more tragic lies beneath the salutary laughter – the hard-to-imagine misery that plagues this country, often invisibly and silently. Max Lobe looks at unemployment, charity organisations, social welfare and the sense of shame associated with it with a deep sense of humanity and sharp observation to reveal the antechamber to the idyllic and wealthy Switzerland.

Max Lobe casts a sharp eye on the time in which he lives, using a language that reveals the constant search for identity. Dreamed up, warm and powerful, Max Lobe's language draws upon many sources – German, Swiss German, Italian, various forms of French and African tongues. All of these languages sit side by side, clatter together and complement one another to provide an open outlook on the world, forging links between Bantouland and Helvetia. This language also represents a means of not giving in to the silence imposed on Monga Míngá by her illness.

ROMAIN BUFFAT