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A debate is needed

The quintessence of Georg Kohler's article in the August issue is the assertion that national state democracy is no longer capable of guaranteeing the solid foundation for an internationally acceptable system and development alone and without taking account of transnational interests. However, the following question needs to be raised before addressing this claim: How are an internationally acceptable system and development achieved? The EU is responsible for this task in Europe and illustrates how decisions are made by small groups. It is sufficient to mention Greece, TTIP and CETA. Policy on the issue of Greece is determined by the most economically powerful EU partner – Germany and its Chancellor. Secret meetings are held over TTIP and CETA, and an EU-wide vote, which is possible in principle, is being prevented. I am not in the position to propose the best solution but the Swiss method of finding solutions through referenda meets more interests and is also feasible internationally.

GÜNTER BERGERHOFF, BONN

Exasperatingly sluggish

I find the sluggish pace of progress with electronic voting exasperating. I've been unable to vote since I moved to live in central Brazil. I receive the voting material only a few days before the ballot or even after it. It is pointless to even consider sending it back. I don't understand why those responsible have been unable to agree on a workable system despite quibbling for so long. And once again, instead of there being a national project, each canton is working separately. The only people being discriminated against are the Swiss Abroad who are unable to exercise their constitutional rights.

ALAIN LEUBA, BRAZIL

Just a few pied pipers

There is not a section on one single website of Switzerland's major parties where the Swiss Abroad are taken seriously or which might be of interest to us as Swiss citizens abroad. We simply don't exist. At most a few isolated pied pipers (politicians) are carrying out self-promotion for the election in October 2015 but not one of them is providing any evidence of what he or she really intends to do for the Swiss Abroad. That is the reality of the situation.

DAVE DANCER, BY EMAIL

Zimmerwald and Switzerland

I discovered the anecdote about Zimmerwald in a book by Jean Ziegler with the French title "Le bonheur d'être Suisse". This book can contribute to the debate on the history of Switzerland, and I recommend reading it. I believe it would be of interest if "Swiss Review" were to interview the author.

ROBERT GALL, FRANCE

Back to the family drama



JOACHIM B. SCHMIDT:
"Am Tisch sitzt ein Soldat":
Landverlag Langnau 2014;
360 pages; CHF 33.90;
EUR 26 approximately.
www.joachimschmidt.ch

"He resolved no longer to think about his homeland" – this is the decision made by the young protagonist in spring 1967 in Hamburg. But shortly afterwards he is abruptly torn away from his student life after receiving a telegram from his aunt Rósa. Jón returns home to the island of Iceland aboard a cargo ship. His mother lies dying and wants to confide a long-held family secret in him. But Jón can only recall one single word after the night of her death – tree. When it dawns on him that this must be the exotic tree of heaven planted by his grandfather, the plot starts to move at a rapid pace. Digging at the foot of the tree, Jón finds a skull and then an entire skeleton. Are these the remains of his father, who was supposed to have drowned in the glacial river in 1942 together with the head of the local authority and whose body had never been found?

Joachim B. Schmidt masterfully portrays and characterises the figures in his novel "Am Tisch Sitzt ein Soldat" (At the Table Sits a Soldier): Aunt Rósa, who looks after Jón's mentally handicapped brother with great determination, or the sheep farmers, who wring life from the barren, cold landscape and escape into home-made schnapps during the long, dark winter. The father figure is lovingly depicted in the way a two-year-old child can remember him. The protagonist not only has to contend with his family's dark secrets but also with the difficulties faced by people who live cut off in the middle of the North Atlantic. The author skilfully switches the narrative between the past, with the family drama set in 1942, and the 1960s. The outcome of the plot may seem rather elaborate but this is precisely where the author's storytelling skills are reflected. A real coming-of-age novel in which the protagonist ultimately returns to Hamburg and is able to reconcile himself with his origins.

Joachim B. Schmidt, who was born in Grisons in 1981 and grew up there, has been living in Iceland for eight years. The qualified structural draughtsman today works as a journalist and an author. He has also previously made a living as a gardener and a farm labourer. The adopted home of this Swiss Abroad plays a key role in his stories, the first of which he published in 2010 with his first novel "In Küstennähe" coming out in 2013. Readers will hope for more of these tightly-crafted tales from Iceland.

RUTH VON GUNTEN