

Zeitschrift: Swiss review : the magazine for the Swiss abroad
Herausgeber: Organisation of the Swiss Abroad
Band: 48 (2021)
Heft: 2

Artikel: Honduras and Venezuela in Romansh
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DOI: <https://doi.org/10.5169/seals-1051910>

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Honduras and Venezuela in Romansh

Luisa Famos's poignant, inspiring works evoke memories of her Engadine homeland as well as her encounters in Latin America

CHARLES LINSMAYER

“Trais randulinas / Battan lur alas / Vi dal tshêl d'instà // Minchatant tremblan / Trais sumbrivas / Sùlla fatschad' alba / Da ma chà.” This is a Romansch poem called “Lügl a Ramosch” (July in Ramosch), which reads like this in English: “Three swallows / open their wings / into the summer sky // Three shadows / quiver sometimes / on the white facade / of my house.”

It was in Ramosch, a village in deepest Engadine, that the poem's author Luisa Famos was born in 1930. Famos chose the most attractive career path for girls of that era: gaining her qualifications in Chur to become a teacher in Sertig (near Davos) and in Guarda (near Scuol). Yet her childhood memories of Ramosch remained with her forever. Once she began to put pen to paper in 1959 while studying literature in Paris, she soon realised that the fields, pines, flowers and swallows of Engadine only made sense to her in her native language, Romansch.

Famos had a genuine talent for words. With an innate sense of piety and a longing for love and endearment, she lent brilliant, long-lasting intensity to these memories – the fluffy clouds of summer, the sound of church bells, stars twinkling in the night sky – without ever descending into kitsch. In 1960, she published the widely acclaimed “Mumaints” (Moments) – a collection of poems – following her literary debut in the “Chalender Ladin” almanac. (Famos had returned to Switzerland by then and was teaching at a school in the canton of Zurich.)

But Famos had no wish to become Engadine's resident poet. Instead, she chose to work in television from 1962, where she presented the first-ever Romansch programme “Il balcon tort”. However, Famos moved to Honduras in 1969 with engineer Jürg Pünter, with whom she was now married, and her two children. She went on to Venezuela in 1971. During a three-year sojourn, Famos showed that her poetic range was by no means limited to Grisons, but that her Romansh lyrics were also very well suited to describing the landscapes and people of Latin America – and, indeed, breaking away from the environment of white colonial privilege to bring the plight of indigenous populations into heart-rending focus.

Her memorable poem “Pitschna indiana” (Little Amerindian), which tells of an indigenous Amerindian girl who is run over by a truck, is like a plaintive cry for help. At the end of the poem, the red ribbon in the girl's hair

comes to rest next to her hand: “Pitschna indiana / cul bindè cotschen / Dasper tei man brün” (“Little Amerindian / with the red ribbon / next to your brown skin”). The effortless quality of Famos's vernacular poetry is astonishing both here and in the context of the Engadine Alps.

Famos also addressed the theme of death relatively early in her life – and most movingly in the 1972 poem “L'Ala de la mort” (The wing of death), written after her return to Switzerland, which ends as follows: “Davo ais gnüda la not / Sainza gnir s-chür / Stailas han cumanzà lur gir / E Tü o Dieu / Am d'eirast sten dastrusch” (“Then night fell / without warning / Stars began their nocturnal dance / And you, my God / were next to me.”). These are the farewell verses of a poet eternally remembered as a beautiful young woman. Before they appeared in “Inscunters” (Encounters), Famos had lost her battle to cancer on 28 June 1974, aged 43.

BIBLIOGRAPHY: Luisa Famos's poems (in the original Romansh with German translations) are available in “Unterwegs / In viadi”; Limmat-Verlag, Zurich.

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D'ingionder ch'eu vegn
Where I am coming from
Ingio ch'eu giarà
Where I am going
Chi'm sa dir
Who can tell me

Sch'eu sun
Whether I am
Sch'eu sun stat
Whether I was
Sch'eu sarà
Whether I will be
Chi'm sa dir
Who can tell me

Porta'm vent
Carry me wind
Sün ti' ala
On your wing
Bütta'm flüm
Throw me river
A la riva
On to the bank