

Zeitschrift: Swiss review : the magazine for the Swiss abroad
Herausgeber: Organisation of the Swiss Abroad
Band: 51 (2024)
Heft: 4: The burden on Swiss farmers : they feel powerless - and are speaking out

Artikel: "Robert de Traz created the myth of the Swiss Abroad"
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DOI: <https://doi.org/10.5169/seals-1077636>

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“Robert de Traz created the myth of the Swiss Abroad”

Not only was the author of the novel “La Puritaine et l’Amour” an avowed patriot, he was also one of the major post-World War I bridge builders.

CHARLES LINSMAYER

In 1911, discontent with the Gotthard Treaty was building in Switzerland. The agreement gave the Axis powers unrestricted use of the railway tunnel. A Franco-German war seemed imminent.

Against this backdrop, linguist Alexis François and writers Gonzague de Reynold and Robert de Traz convened a meeting in Geneva, the outcome of which was the New Helvetic Society (Neue Helvetische Gesellschaft, NHG), which still exists today. Its objective: “to manage the national heritage, strengthen patriotic sentiment, and ensure a worthy future for Switzerland”. The movement quickly gained traction, formed many chapters and experienced initial highlights, as in 1914 for example, when Carl Spitteler gave his “Unser Schweizer Standpunkt” (our Swiss position) speech in Zurich, arguing that the German and French-speaking areas of the country were not so different after all. The NHG also played a big part in Switzerland’s accession to the League of Nations in 1920.

First Swiss Abroad secretary

However, shortly before then, in September 1919, one of the founding members, Robert de Traz, was selected by the NHG central committee as the first secretary of the Swiss Abroad. Within 24 months, de Traz had set up a functional organisation, which was well equipped for the future with its logistical and propagandistic platform. “Robert de Traz created the myth of the Swiss Abroad,” acknowledged Agénor Kraft, one of his successors, after de Traz died in 1951: “He was the architect of the doctrine that Switzerland had responsi-

bilities towards him. It took a poet, a visionary to do that as the idea was completely new at the time and almost laughable to many people.”

Who was Robert de Traz, this man who created a bridge for expatriate Swiss to their homeland, the like of which doesn’t exist anywhere else?

Journalist, military author, novelist

Like Gonzague de Reynold, he was influenced in Paris by Maurice Barrès’ argument that regional roots were an existential dimension. However, whereas de Reynold became a pioneer of right-wing movements with his authoritarian conservatism, the love of de Traz for his homeland of Switzerland, which he initially only knew from having spent holidays there, was always coupled with a distinct international sentiment. As editor of the magazines “Voile latine” and “Feuillets” he argued strongly for a Swiss culture, in stark contrast to leading intellectuals from the French-speaking part of the country, and printed the first chapter of “L’Homme dans le rang” (the man in the ranks) in “Feuillets” in 1913. That was the book he used to make Swiss youth interested in military service and which became a bestseller in 1914 for obvious reasons.

“Offensive insolence”

However, in 1917 when the war was raging, the celebrated officer and son-in-law of the banker Pictet published the novel “La Puritaine et l’Amour” (the puritan and the love affair) about the secret romance between a Geneva banker’s wife and a bank trainee. Not only was this book condemned as immoral from the pulpit of Geneva cathedral, it was also

described in the Swiss press as “offensive insolence”, (“Der Bund”) or “Madame Bovary Geneva-style” (“Revue de Lausanne”). It took the new Paris edition of 1928 and the voice of François Mauriac to give the book its due as one of the great love stories of the time.

Publisher of “Revue de Genève”

De Traz was not only atypically Swiss in his writing; he also established a position through his commitment to the Swiss armed forces and the “Fifth Switzerland”, which made him one of the main intellectual bridge builders and conciliators following the First World War. On 1 July 1920, four months following Switzerland’s accession to the League of Nations, de Traz published the first edition of “Revue de Genève”, which covered the League of Nations and of which there were to be 127 editions, going up to the end of 1930. A European institution in which Cocteau, Gide, Ramuz and Proust as well as Sigmund Freud and Virginia Woolf were able to have their say and in which, even if they were ultimately disappointed, the hope is touchingly documented that the generation that lived through the First World War would strive for a more peaceful world.

BIBLIOGRAPHY: “La Puritaine et l’Amour” or in German “Genfer Liebe 1913” with a detailed biography of de Traz by Charles Linsmayer as Vol. 5 of “Reprinted by Huber” in Th.Gut, Zurich, publishing house. The French edition is out of print.

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Robert de Traz
(1884 – 1951)