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Understanding the Swiss

Margaret Oertig-Davidson's
Beyond Chocolate – understanding Swiss culture

Margaret Oertig-Davidson (2002)
Beyond Chocolate – understanding Swiss culture
Bergli Books, Basel (240 pages)
ISBN 3-905252-06-6

Margaret Oertig-Davidson's book is a great starting point for outsiders like myself to better understand the unspoken assumptions that shape many Swiss behaviours and ways of doing things. It is also a highly entertaining read.

The central argument in the book is that many Swiss people's approach to personal and public space is different to people in Anglo-Saxon cultures such as New Zealand. Oertig-Davidson contends that these differences are evident in different social mores and values.

Many Swiss distinguish between their neighbours, colleagues and acquaintances as an outer layer of contacts, and friends and family as a tight inner layer of contacts. This distinction is typically less clear in Anglo-Saxon cultures.

Many Swiss are instinctively uncomfortable about sharing personal information and personal space with people in the outer layer, but are comfortable sharing their deepest thoughts and experiences with the people they know well who make up their inner layer of contacts. Oertig-Davidson contends that the limited mobility of Swiss life supports the development of trust and connections as part of an inner layer while the greater mobility in Anglo-Saxon cultures provides less opportunities to do so.

The chapters provide examples of how these differences play out in practice. Examples include discussion about the gradual and considered application of 'Du' and 'Tu' in Switzerland, compared with the rapid and overwhelming use of first names in Anglo-Saxon cultures. Other examples include differences in approaches to small talk, the use of direct and critical language, and the different levels of reliance on rules and reference to external authority.

Oertig-Davidson's argument is more than pop psychology. It is grounded in her own training and reading, the personal experiences of the people she interviewed, and other works by Bergli Books focusing on inter-cultural matters.

Her book integrates a number of threads and provided me with a range of 'eureka' and 'that's familiar' moments. It reminded me that what sometimes feel like frustrating and unnecessary misunderstandings across the Swiss - Kiwi divide, are usually grounded in real differences in language and thought. Although the Swiss and Kiwi involved in the same conversation might use the same word they will not necessarily select it for the same reason or to convey the same meaning, and what appears as diffidence or rude behaviour for one party, may feel completely appropriate to the other.

Craig Press

Molly Gianotti 90 Years Old!



Molly and family: Brian, Molly, Geraldine, Maurice and Bill

In December last year, Molly Gianotti celebrated her 90th Birthday, surrounded by her family and relations.

Molly was born in Kaponga, Taranaki, in 1916. When she was 18 months old the family moved to a farm on Stuart Road, Eltham. She was educated at Finnerty Road School and later at Eltham Convent.

In 1939 she married Rodolfo Gianotti. They had five children: Maurice, Peter (deceased), Bill and Brian and then Geraldine. Her husband, Rodolfo, died in 1980.

Molly still lives in Greenlane, Auckland, where her family went to live in 1956. Molly now lives in Tawhiri Road, still plays bowls, Canasta and Housie. She is also a passionate Jasser who would not miss a chance to play our favourite Swiss card game.

We wish Molly all the best for the next ten years!

YOUR SWISS CHEF, BERTA

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