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Swiss to accept one Guantánamo detainee

The Swiss government has said it will take one detainee from the United States detention facility at Guantánamo Bay, Cuba. It said it would allow an Uzbek national to live in Switzerland for "humanitarian reasons". Canton Geneva has said it is prepared to accept the man. European nations that have agreed to accept detainees in recent months include France, Hungary, Ireland, Italy and Portugal.

The US's original accusation that the man had links with terrorist groups has never been proven, according to a Swiss government statement on Wednesday. As long ago as 2005, the imprisoned Uzbek was classified by the US as "cleared for release".

The Swiss government sent a delegation to Guantánamo last August which spoke at length with the detainee and had him examined by a Swiss doctor. The US authorities have assured Switzerland that the man has been neither prosecuted nor convicted, and that he constitutes no danger to public safety.

After discussions with the Swiss delegation, the Uzbek submitted a written application for transfer to Switzerland. He confirmed that he had not been involved in terrorist activity in the past and that he would not participate in any illegal activities in the future. He promised to respect Swiss law, to learn French and to find work.

from swissinfo

Refuge established for battered men

Switzerland's first refuge for men and their children is to open next month in the canton of Aargau.

It has been established by the private VeV organisation, but its exact location will be kept secret, VeV's chairman, Oliver Hunziker said.

Financing for the Zwüschehalt (stopover) refuge is assured for a year, but the initiators hope to bring in more partners and also to raise money from the public.

Hunziker said the number of men who were victims of domestic violence was on the increase, but they were not taken seriously. They did not dare speak of their experience. So far, most state aid has gone to women's organisations, he said.

The new centre intends to offer time out to fathers under stress as well as a refuge for men and their children who flee the family home. Women victims will also be catered for.

VeV has groups in different parts of German-speaking Switzerland. Its purpose is to help parents - especially those who are separated and divorced - to create the best possible conditions for themselves and their children.

from swissinfo

"Mushroom violin" outplays Stradivarius

A wood scientist and a violin maker are revolutionising the design of violins by using wood that has been treated with fungus. They even dared to put their instrument up against a Stradivarius in a "blind listening" experiment - and won!

In a steel and glass building in St Gallen, Francis Schwarze points to his computer screen and the secret of his winning sound.

"We use filamentous fungi," he said, referring to the group of parasitic fungi that causes a cottony growth on organic substances. "This makes the wood lighter by reducing its thickness."

Schwarze is leader of the wood protection/biotechnology group at the Swiss Federal Laboratories for Materials Testing and Research (Empa). In the refrigeration room Schwarze stands among hundreds of fungus-infested wood samples and shows off the fruit of almost six years' work.

Two types of fungus turned out to be most suitable, since they decompose the wood cells from the inside, thus making the cell walls thinner. This has a direct influence on the wood's acoustic properties.

In addition the filamentous fungi re-open the cell membranes - the link to the exchange of material between cells, which with dead wood is blocked. As a result the sound can permeate the wood more quickly and so sounds more harmonious.

Violin maker Michael Rhonheimer built two violins from the Empa wood. Sycamore was used for the back and ribs, and Norway spruce for the top.

"Working with the wood that had been treated for six-and-a-half months was just like working with untreated wood," he said, pointing to the resulting instrument, Opus 58.

Knowing when to stop the fungi growing is vital, he said, explaining that eight months would have been too long.

Five violins were lined up behind a white curtain and the British virtuoso Matthew Trusler played works by Brahms and Mendelssohn on all of them.

One was Trusler's own Stradivarius, built in 1711 and worth \$2 million; two have been built by Rhonheimer. An audience of 180 volunteers and a renowned panel of experts sat in the hall and listened intently. Schwarze thought the Stradivarius sounded the best because its sound was beautifully round and harmonic. But the audience and jury disagreed, eventually picking Opus 58, one of Ronheimer's violins, as the best-sounding violin.

Schwarze believes the new fungus method will be very significant for the building of violins in the future. Until now only star soloists could play on a Stradivarius. But now negotiations are underway between Empa, tonewood dealers and violin makers. Empa or an Empa spin-off will cultivate fungus tonewood and make it available for every violin and guitar maker.

from swissinfo