

Zeitschrift: Helvetia : magazine of the Swiss Society of New Zealand
Herausgeber: Swiss Society of New Zealand
Band: 78 (2012)
Heft: [3]

Artikel: Foreigners outnumber Swiss in mountain village
Autor: [s.n.]
DOI: <https://doi.org/10.5169/seals-944033>

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Former immigrants turning Swiss

Lathan Suntharalingam came to Switzerland from Sri Lanka 20 years ago. Speaking not a word of German, he settled in the central city of Lucerne. Today, he is a politician who advocates a progressive immigration policy including language courses and support for new arrivals.



Lathan Suntharalingam is a Swiss politician, activist, student and father

He introduces himself by his first name, Lathan. This is a good thing – his last name is difficult to pronounce and impossible to remember.

Lathan is unlike the stereotypical Tamil in Switzerland, who works in the catering trade, keeping a low profile, speaking German badly, retiring to the Tamil community after work and having little to do with the Swiss.

Although he has little contact with Sri Lanka – only one uncle still lives there – he is aware of his roots. He is saddened by the civil war going on there and the suffering of the people.

When he arrived in Switzerland at the age of 14, Lathan was put in a special class for new immigrants, but learned quickly and made the transition to secondary school. Like many Tamils awaiting the outcome of asylum applications, the Suntharalingam family lived with uncertainty for years. Should they move on to a different country? Should they go to Canada or Britain? Or to India, where their relatives lived? After years of waiting, they were finally allowed to stay on humanitarian grounds.

In 1997, Lathan was one of the first young immigrants in the city of Lucerne to become naturalised. One year later, he started his compulsory military service.

Lathan went on to qualify as a nurse and later, to work in intensive care.

Along with friends of different nationalities, he became involved in integration projects. Lathan's vision was a progressive immigration policy. With an energetic political team behind him he made it into the Lucerne city parliament in 2004 and three years later, won a seat in the cantonal parliament.

from swissinfo

The true meaning of life is to plant trees under whose shade you do not expect to sit.

Foreigners outnumber Swiss in mountain village



In the small village of Täsch near the popular mountain resort of Zermatt, foreigners outnumber locals, with the majority being of Portuguese origin. Coexistence is not always easy. But integration measures introduced by the local authorities

and the migrants themselves show that a harmonious balance is possible.

Every year hundreds of thousands of tourists from around the world travel to Zermatt to see the iconic snow-capped pyramid, the Matterhorn. A curious visitor generally does not take long to notice that most of the local workers there are not Swiss. Immigrants are busy behind the scenes keeping the discreet tourism machine ticking over. And according to Zermatt's mayor Christoph Bärger, 80 per cent of them are from Portugal.

Portuguese immigrants have been present in the Valais region since the 1980s, when large numbers of mainly unskilled workers travelled to tourist areas in search of jobs. In the past they were granted temporary "seasonal worker" status, but today the free movement of persons accord signed between Switzerland and the European Union allows them to settle with their families. And with the recent economic crisis in Portugal the flow of migrants has increased considerably.

However, Zermatt's high rents and lack of accommodation force workers to look for places to live away from the resort. As a result the neighbouring villages of Täsch and Randa now have more foreign residents than Swiss. The population of Täsch currently has 562 Swiss inhabitants and 742 foreigners – including 481 from Portugal. Of the 150 children registered at nurseries and primary schools in Randa and Täsch, 84 have Portuguese as their mother tongue and only 32 Swiss German.

Relations with the Portuguese community are good, but interaction with locals is limited. The main problem is the foreigners' poor level of German and their limited participation in communal affairs. The village recently invited Portuguese parents to explain to them the provision of childcare for working couples but nobody turned up for the evening information session.

Faced with mounting difficulties, the local authorities decided to introduce a number of measures to bring the communities closer together. They created the post of integration delegate, who coordinates various projects such as language and integration classes, and social activities like association meetings and parties. Demand for the German language classes is substantial. More than 40 people are currently following a course.