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My life back in Switzerland

It is already 6 months ago that I embarked on my reversed OE. I have worked most of those, and though I would like to see more of Europe, my main aim in being here was to get a feel for my birth country, which in the last 35 years I had experienced more and more as a nostalgic holiday place, with my kiwi family and focused mostly on the well documented tourist attractions. And thus created a slightly distorted picture of my home country - one that is just a collection of clichés created by myself and people who had never lived there.

Cliché No. 1: Switzerland is rich. Yes, Switzerland is rich. In landscape, in geography, in food, in water (it is said to be the water reservoir of Europe) and electronic devices – coffee machines, telephones, TV's and toys. Rich in creativity, rich in activity, rich in music and cuisine and entertainment per se. Rich in custom, rich in discipline, rich in hard work. And no, money does not grow on trees. People, despite money overflowing the banks (for certain sums you have to pay a fee to have it deposited), work long hard hours and their money goes out of their hands very easily. And no, there is no poverty. But I would dare a guess, there is sometimes, maybe more often than visible, struggle. (I know the story of a single mother who worked 3 jobs to keep her kids schooled and fed and housed, and to make sure people didn't notice how little clothing they got by on, they would swap jumpers among themselves.) A value that I feel has sustained the passage of time: modesty.

Cheese & Chocolate: Chocolate is still a favourite item in any Swiss pantry. Chocolate is a gesture of thanks, peace, friendship, courage, congratulations, just about everything can be said with chocolate. Something new with chocolate is to use it to flavour a meat dish. Though I've tried it and it's not sensational but good, I withhold my opinion on it. Cheese and bread, I could live on - with coffee. And I will eat as much of it as I can until I leave. It is simply divine. I cannot explain why, but it just is. The cheese, whatever kind, is creamy, flavoursome and smooth, the bread is flavoursome and crunchy, chewy, thick. I can't get enough. Lucky I don't have a car, so I walk and bike a lot.

Mountains: After seeing the breathtaking pictures of various Auckland Swissies on their travels back here I am wondering what I am doing here in my Zuerich lowland little fog-engulfed village, grovelling around in the nursery and locked up beside the massive building site of the Hospital in Winterthur (a new very people-friendly

Radiology block and replacement for the "Hochhaus" will be completed around 2020). But I have to remind myself that I have come here to be immersed in life and not to sight-see. I have made a few mountain visits during my 6 months here, and

A) they are steep and life in New Zealand does not uphold one's fitness level to take on hiking them easily,

B) They offer simply breathtaking scenery and their heritage is dutifully maintained by ecological and agricultural law, a vital measure to preserve their vegetation and fauna because the influx of tourists, despite the economic crisis and high value currency, is huge. The mountain tops serviced by the famous cable cars sometimes resemble a major congregation of the United Nations.

C) Mountains are, compared to New Zealand, so much part of people in Switzerland – every hill, valley, creek, every nook and cranny has a name and a history ie. a group of people who have a connection to it.

D) they are simply life-savers for the people in the lowland where I am, who crave for the mountains during the winter. It saves them from depression when fog engulfs the plains of the Rhein and Thur and Aare rivers. In the words of Hannelore, (the wife of Ah it's a long story) "...after this invigorating weekend, tanked up with sunshine, we drive along the motorway from St.Gallen and around Aadorf we dive back into this ...hole. It's like diving into nothingness and to imagine that above is sunshine and life... is just magic." To escape to the hills is a call to everyone every weekend, and I am looking forward to responding to it with skis and boots.

Farming: Living with my brother in the traditional farming village brought this industry back to the foreground in a very personal way – the main word being PROTECTIONISM. I was soon told where to shop for food and where not. That one does not buy fruit that is out of season and when it can be produced here you do not buy from another European country. If it grows on the farm you don't buy it in the shop at all. Farming has evolved hugely since my departure and I would like to elaborate on this at a later stage.

Signs of decadence: turquoise is the favourite colour and it's EVERYWHERE, and cute Kitsch is at every doorstep. It cannot be more "gediegen": A little angel out of a mixture of stone and hessian, with some wooden sticks and dried flowers as decoration, a pile of stones, a bundle

of wood with flowers and seedpods and golden pinecones, love hearts cut out of copper sheets, flowers on a rusty steel rod. Cute but sickeningly plentiful.

Favourite Swiss word: *abartig* (this is typical of the Thurgau region) an adverb, and means: not normal, outstanding.

Education: I am pleased that my highly-hailed tradition of passing on a trade is still very much engrained in the Swiss industry: You learn a trade from the bottom up. And you learn ALL there is to know of that trade, and not just the trade but also how to behave, how to succeed, and how to cope when the going gets tough, to the point of being pushed, kicked, dragged to the finish line. And when you finish after 3 – 4 years you know what you're doing and you are employable. But nowadays a trade is not a trade, it is a profession with a very sophisticated name. A nurse is not a nurse, but a 'Pflegefachperson'. A gardener is not a gardener, but a 'Pflanzenpflegefachperson'...? And the training school for such professionals is not just the 'Berufsschule' but the 'Fachhochschule'.

Refugees are a central issue and in the news almost every day. The main point is that Switzerland has to keep up with the ratio of all the other EU countries and that is around 0.7% of the population that has to be accepted in numbers of refugees. Every county (Gemeinde) has to provide for this and pay for this out of their social funds. My village has already filled this quota with a Syrian family of four who have lived here around 2 years and are well accepted. Though on a general level the resistance is quite strong and with the inevitable influx mixed with frequent reports of terrorist attacks, a protectionist and racist attitude comes to the fore. Just yesterday in the news, one hears of a mosque in Winterthur which is under suspicion of recruiting Shihad members. And many from there appear to have travelled back to take part in the movement. Hair raising stuff, and a real threat to the peace of mind.

On a final and personal note. During my stay here I have learnt that society moves on wherever it is. Swiss society evolved very much along the path of New Zealand society. And while I feel very much at home here, I have to fast-forward often from my childhood to my advanced age and realise that I am no longer a part of the network here. That I am a visitor. And I assure people here that I will return to New Zealand in May 2016. Switzerland is my cradle, New Zealand is my home.

Much love, Trudi Fill-Weidmann