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'U OF ZÜRICH' – THE WORLD'S FIRST COED UNIVERSITY

Countries and their peoples are most often known by clichés. These may be handy simplifications but they usually point into certain directions only and thus omit the natural complexities inherent in social units. Switzerland for example, gets the sting by foreign observers as being a conservative place, especially in regard to the slow pace of women's emancipation. Only since 1971 has women's suffrage been introduced on a national level in this mountainous republic. Yet, the same country pioneered in the last century the admission of women to higher learning, as it had pioneered public schooling altogether, a century earlier.

The claim of being the first modern university to open its doors to female students may be made by the University of (the Canton) Zürich in Switzerland. It was in the year 1864 when two young ladies, both Russians, started to attend lectures in natural sciences on a regular basis. At that time other European universities admitted women only as listeners, without any possibility of obtaining a degree, whereas in the United States some all-women academies already existed.

It is revealing in this context to look at the political circumstances of the period. The year 1848 has entered into history as the year of the liberal revolutions. In several countries attempts were made to modernize political life according to egalitarian and democratic principles. They failed, however, in all cases except in Switzerland, whose present constitution was essentially shaped at that time. As to the major European monarchies, above all Germany and Russia, opposition to the changing wind remained still dominant. Subsequent reaction caused, among other things, a stream of political refugees, many of whom found lasting or temporary asylum in liberal Switzerland and supplied Swiss universities with some brilliant teachers and students. In the 1860s a new social force emerged from England and America: the women's movement for emancipation. In the shape of militant political groupings it probably shocked the unprepared male-oriented world quite a bit.

Anyway, it was only natural that women began soon to press more vigorously to being considered as worthy of higher education.

Switzerland was the place where these two streams, liberalism and the feminist movement could freely meet, and their convergence was certainly instrumental in getting the girls into university. Other circumstances also appear as strategically favourable in retrospect. For certain reasons, none of the first two ladies who regularly followed courses from 1864 onward demanded formal immatriculation at first. Furthermore, the University of Zürich was then definitely not the reputed but crowded institution it is now, so that it probably offered enough space and needed extra money from school fees. The issue arose officially only three years later — at the exit gate, so to say — when one of the two academic débutantes applied for graduation exams. Her intellectual performance must have been convincing enough, and together with some special sympathy among the important corps of foreign professors she got the decisive support. She was then immatriculated with retroactive effect and graduated. Being now Fraulein Dr. med. Nadejda Suslowa, she opened a practice in St. Petersburg. In that year, 1868, dozens of girls were already following in the steps of their pioneer sister. They hailed from England, Germany, Poland, Finland and, mostly, Russia. Soon a good quarter out of some four hundred students in Zürich belonged to the fair sex. The Swiss girls though were slower in aspiring for academic distinction. Accordingly, the proportion of female students went down in later years when foreigners had less opportunities to study abroad.

Today the intellectual cream of Swiss womanhood falls hardly back in international comparison. Women almost dominate some Zürich faculties like languages and veterinary medicine. Altogether they constitute a third of the total new entries this year, in a student body that has meanwhile swollen to 12,000 at Zürich University.

by Peter A. Schweizer

