

# Readers letters

Objektyp: **Group**

Zeitschrift: **The Swiss observer : the journal of the Federation of Swiss Societies in the UK**

Band (Jahr): - **(1980)**

Heft 1767

PDF erstellt am: **23.06.2024**

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# READERS' LETTERS

OUR eldest son, Peter, born in 1966, heard a lot of Bärndütsch from the word go both from me and my parents. When he was two, my husband (English) took up a teaching appointment with the British Army of the Rhine in Germany. Peter and I spent nearly three months at my parents' in Brugg, Argau, while accommodation was sorted out.

Peter learnt to talk and his first phrases came out in the most beautiful Bärndütsch (both my parents came from the Emmental). He soon picked up on his English when we joined my husband in Hamm. He also made lots of little friends and as we 'lived in' there was very little privacy and consequently very little time to speak Schwyzerdütsch as I didn't like to use my mother tongue in front of my English and German friends who couldn't understand us.

In spite of this, Peter's Swiss progressed nicely, mainly due to the fact that he spent quite a bit of time in Switzerland with my parents, who don't speak any English.

Our second son, Timothy, born in 1969, heard less Bärndütsch than Peter and began to talk much later. We then found that he was very reluctant to accept any other word than the original one learnt.

For instance, when my mother pointed to a 'Chue' he was quite adamant on the 'cow'. He even managed to teach her 'strawberries' - his favourite at the time. At the age of about four he got very angry one day in the Brugger Strandbad when he couldn't converse with children of his own age and I eventually convinced him that it was he who must learn their language rather than they his! From then on, he progressed.

I wouldn't say that either of them is completely bi-lingual as their Swiss vocabulary is much more limited. However, they both manage well in Switzerland (with my parents Bärndütsch rather than the Aargauerdütsch which they find a bit more difficult, especially when people speak fast) and I hope they go on liking the language and 'my' country.

Incidentally, we came back to England in 1971 and have been in Eastbourne ever since. I did speak Swiss to both of them at the nursery age, but found that

## The question of whether we should speak Schwyzerdütsch/Français/Italiano/Romansch to our children or not is still occupying the minds of our readers. Here is a further selection of letters.

once they started school and brought their friends home they were reluctant to speak it. Later on they just stopped bothering - after all, why make the effort, when mum understands English just as well?

It upset me a bit at first but I didn't want to force them. So now it's just a quick change-over when we go to Switzerland (usually approaching Basle) or when my mother comes over.

Peter has now started High-German at school. I did warn him not to take it for granted that he would 'know it all'. I think he has taken my advice, is prepared to work at it and also very pleased to find that he has a great advantage over his friends.

Now and again I hear that they show off - he in Swiss, one of his friends in Spanish and another one in Welsh. It's nice to think they've got over the shy stage and are beginning to accept the 'other half'. - **Katharina Birdsall (née Zürcher).**

I WAS pleased to learn from the Swiss Observer that other

women have problems in teaching their children Schwyzerdütsch.

After my three year old son was born I was determined to 'kill two birds with one stone' and teach both my husband and my child dialect. But so far I haven't had much success.

My husband is very reluctant to learn as he can't see much benefit for him in it. Therefore as a family we only speak English.

When my son was a baby I used to speak mostly in dialect with him when alone. But now when he plays with other children it seems easier to speak in English, especially when other mothers are present too.

I know this is wrong and I should be harder with myself. It is a pity he hasn't got any Swiss playmates to play and practice with here. This would make it a lot easier for both of us.

But even so I am quite pleased with the amount of words he actually does know and remember. I even have to be careful at times that he doesn't twist my arm.

If he really wants something and I say no, he would try very

hard and say, "bis so guet Mueti", etc. The easiest he learns through stories, songs and nursery rhymes. Here he picks it up quite quickly. But it isn't the real thing and I should practice much more with him.

It is no good thinking that he is only three and has plenty of time to learn. I have to make a bigger effort otherwise I will never bring it any further than to satisfy his Swiss relatives.

Anyway I am more determined than ever to make a fresh start, especially with a new baby coming next month. I don't want to be blamed by my children in a few years' time for not having given them the opportunity to learn while they were young.

I hope you receive lots of useful advice about this matter, especially from older and more experienced parents. — **Elisabeth Miller.**

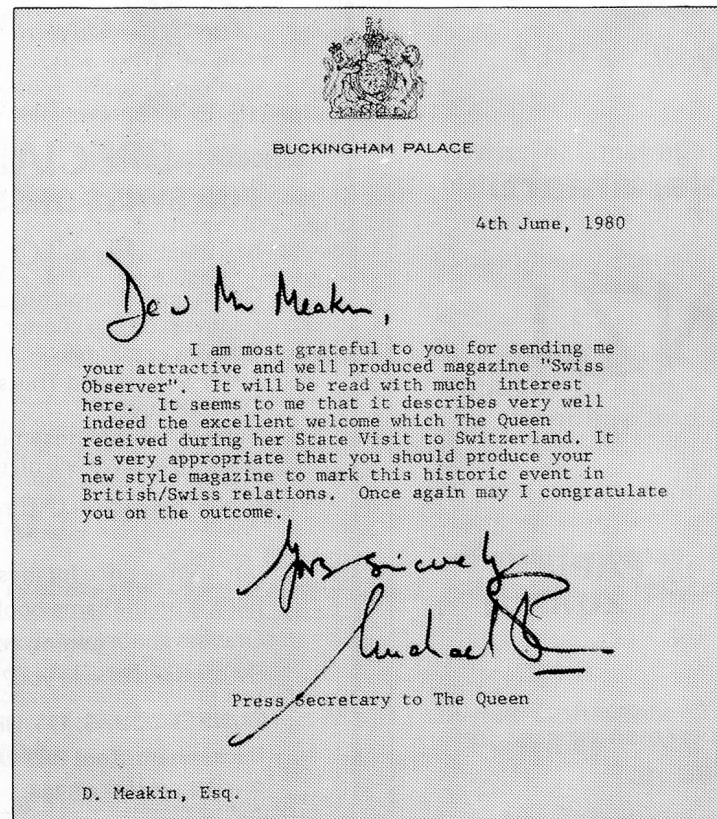
I WRITE as a person born of an English mother and a Swiss father. I more or less grew up with both languages.

I was born in England and learnt English first. At the age of four my family and I moved to Switzerland where, mixing with the local children, I quite soon picked up the dialect and by the time I went to school I was quite able to follow the lessons in the same way as other children.

At this point I would have dropped English, because it was much easier to come home from school and relate what had happened in the same language. However my mother, who had quite a bit of difficulty picking up German - mainly because the dialect is difficult for English people and as she was trying to learn "proper" German the two got rather mixed up - insisted that I spoke English to her when I came home.

When my father and I were alone together we would invariably lapse into Schwyzerdütsch, but when my mother was present we all went back to English. As I was an only child I think this was probably easier - I don't know how it would work out if there were several children.

At that time I was, of course, learning to spell in German, and found it very difficult to read books in English. I think I must



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have been about 12 years of age before I could enjoy English books, which my relatives sent to me from England. I think my mother must have spent many hours reading to me before then.

At that time it was also the practice for children to write letters to say "thank you" for presents received. This may be a chore to most children, but it was purgatory for me, because I had to ask my mother for the spelling of all but the simplest words.

However, I grew up with two languages, completely bi-lingual, and when we returned to England when I was 21 this was a great help in getting a job immediately.

It may not be so easy for all children. I find that my spelling is better than most people's who have been to schools in England. But for some it might become confusing.

I have a relative living in Switzerland, coming from the German-speaking part married to a French-Swiss and now living in the French part of Switzerland.

When children arrived they tried to keep up both languages. The first child, a girl, coped quite easily and translates back and forth with no problems. The second child, a boy, seemed not to want to speak at all.

Eventually they took him to a doctor, because they assumed he had some speech impediment. But the doctor said he was just confused between the two languages and had decided to speak neither!

I feel that there is one other aspect to children born of "mixed" parents. There is always some slight pull of

loyalty — which country does one settle in, which country is one's own?

I have lived in England now for many years and go to Switzerland for holidays when I can. When I am in England I praise the Swiss and their way of life — when I am in Switzerland I defend the English against any remarks, just or unjust. — **J. Houlmann.**

THE Ticinese community of Great Britain acknowledges the recent success of Her Majesty Elizabeth II on her visit to Switzerland, but also notes with regret the omission from the royal itinerary of Switzerland's Italian-speaking region.

In fact, in the past, apart from some insignificant exceptions, Swiss decision-makers have not included the Ticino (never mind the Grigione Italiano) on official sightseeing programmes of foreign dignitaries, heads of state or other international delegates.

It might well be that the Alps, as a natural physical barrier, are also a psychological deterrent to organisers who have the pretext of a tight time schedule.

Nevertheless as a Ticinese abroad one cannot avoid being suspicious about the contempt by some of our national officials for the four or so per cent Italian-speaking Swiss representing one of the ethnic groups of the so much envied multi-racial and multi-lingual Switzerland. — **G. Broggin.**

VOR ein paar Wochen habe ich von der Existenz des Swiss Observers gehoert und habe ihn sofort abonniert. Ich fand damals die Idee, dass es eine Zeitschrift fuer Schweizer in England gibt, grossartig und

wartete voller Spannung darauf.

Wie gross war aber meine Enttaeuschung, als ich darin blaetterte und abgesehen von einem einseitigen deutschen und einem 1½-seitigen franzoesischen und italienischen Artikel nur solche in englischer Sprache fand! Hatte ich doch eine Zeitschrift fuer Schweizer erwartet und nicht eine fuer Englaender, oder ist die Landessprache in der Schweiz jetzt englisch? Ich lebe zwar erst seit Ende 1978 hier in England, aber als ich damals die Schweiz verliess, sprach man immer noch deutsch (oder franzoesisch oder italienisch).

Ich frage mich, ob denn alle in England wohnenden Schweizer die englische Sprache absolut perfekt beherrschen oder ob es noch andere gibt wie mich, die erst seit kurzer Zeit hier leben und deshalb das Gesprochene zwar fast ganz verstehen, aber mit dem Geschriebenen noch etwas Schwierigkeiten haben?

Wie waere es doch schoen, die letzten Nachrichten aus der Heimat in der dort ueblichen Landessprache zu lesen oder

haben die Damen und Herren Redaktoren bereits ihre Muttersprache vergessen oder ist es gar mit zu hohen Kosten verbunden?

Ich lasse es bei diesen Beantwortungen bewenden, moechte aber zum Schluss nicht versaeumen, nochmals mit Nachdruck zu wiederholen, dass ich vom Swiss Observer sehr enttaeuscht bin, da ich doch einen Gruss aus meiner Heimat erwartete. — **Pia Clarke-Roesch.**

● For 61 years the Swiss Observer has been printed in English. And for a very good reason. English is the common language of all Swiss people living in Britain. It is the link between German-speaking, French-speaking and Italian-speaking Swiss. If Mrs Clarke prefers a journal printed in German we suggest she subscribes to the "Echo", published by the Auslandschweizersekretariat der NHG, Alpenstrasse 26, 3000 Bern, Switzerland. But we hope Mrs Clarke will stay with us. We have lots to interest her in the next few issues. — **Editor.**

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I AM particularly pleased with the presentation of the new-style Swiss Observer, which conforms most satisfactorily to what is expected of a periodical of this nature. I feel confident that it will be well received by its readers and I wish to compliment you and your staff on your endeavours to meet our objective.

**Claude Caillat  
Ambassador of Switzerland**

I LIKE the look of the Swiss Observer very much indeed and I am certain that it will greatly appeal to the subscribers and hopefully interest other members of the Swiss community in Britain.

Please accept my best congratulations on the result of your efforts and those of your staff.

**Urs Karli  
Consul General of Switzerland, Manchester**