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A foreign experience for airline youngsters

SINCE English is Swissair's international language it is very important for many young staff members in Switzerland to achieve proficiency in it at an early stage.

The UK and Ireland are the English-speaking countries nearest to Switzerland, and for some years "trainees" have spent six months in these countries, learning English and doing useful work in Swissair's local offices and stations.

Every year about 20 commercial trainees work for six months in the London sales and accounts offices, usually on completion of three years' commercial apprenticeship in Switzerland.

They start in London in January and July, spending two afternoons a week at the Swiss Mercantile School learning English.

About 20 air traffic trainees (Luftverkehrslehrlinge) come to the UK and Ireland in February, June and October. They first have 10 weeks' full-time English instruction at the SMS followed by four months' work in the ticket, telephone sales, cargo and airport offices in London, Manchester, Birmingham, Glasgow and Dublin.

They have generally completed two years' training in a Swiss transport school and then joined Swissair for two years of air traffic apprenticeship. This is followed by a period of work at airports, town offices and telephone sales in Switzerland.

It is important to note that, although called trainees for the sake of convenience, all these young colleagues have been with the company for at least three years and acquired a good deal of practical work experience.

Their stay abroad to study and work is entirely voluntary; they are not sent abroad according to some selection and qualification system.

Recently I interviewed four trainees to hear their impressions of work and life after several months in London.

They were air traffic trainees Rita Lengwiler (21) and Ralph Staub (22), both working at Heathrow airport ticket desk, and commercial trainees Brigitta

Michel (20) and Doris Würmli (20), the former in London finance accounts, the latter in UK sales.

Rita Lengwiler and Ralph Staub had been with Swissair for about three years, the others for four years.

Their reactions to the English teaching they are receiving were predictably mixed, depending in part on their knowledge of English before they came to the UK.

By JOHN ELLIOTT

They appeared to find the oral exercises and vocabulary more useful than the written work. The commercial trainees were due to take their First Certificate in English of the Cambridge Examination Board in June and were confident of passing.

The air traffic trainees usually take the First Certificate in English in Switzerland before coming to Britain.

After the 10 weeks' course they take the exam for the school's Certificate of Competence in English, which is rated higher than the First Certificate.

Another variable factor is the practice the trainees are getting in speaking English. Those working in customer contact at airports or ticket counters clearly have more opportunity to speak English than those in administrative jobs.

Most trainees share houses or apartments with others or with transferred Swissair staff, and conduct much of their social life in each other's company. They naturally speak their own language to each other, and in this respect their opportunity for speaking English is also limited.

It has to be appreciated, however, that the trainees have to make their own accommodation arrangements and teaming up obviously makes practical and economic sense.

Rita Lengwiler and Ralph

Staub considered their work experience at Heathrow ticket counter very useful. They had not previously been used to working independently, making their own decisions and having to deal with such a variety of tasks, including ticket accounting.

Brigitta Michel and Doris Würmli were more involved in routine work and did not feel the experience added a lot to their job knowledge. For Doris Würmli, at least, this was offset by getting a lot of practice speaking English in the office.

She also joined a class of Modern Dancing where she meets local girls. Coincidentally, while in London she can also practice her French as some French speakers live in her house.

What is it the trainees like in

particular about life in Britain? Chiefly the feeling of freedom, of having so many opportunities for recreational and cultural activities.

They enjoy being together, doing things together as a group, going to the cinema, the theatre, to spend time in the large parks in and around London.

All said they will be sorry when it's time to go back to Switzerland. They will miss the comradeship and togetherness of their time in England, and also the sense of responsibility they could exercise in their work and in their leisure.

The scheme enabling young staff to spend time and gather experience abroad is very important for the company's future. Many of them eventually become manager of stations and air travel offices all over the world.

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