Why Switzerland?

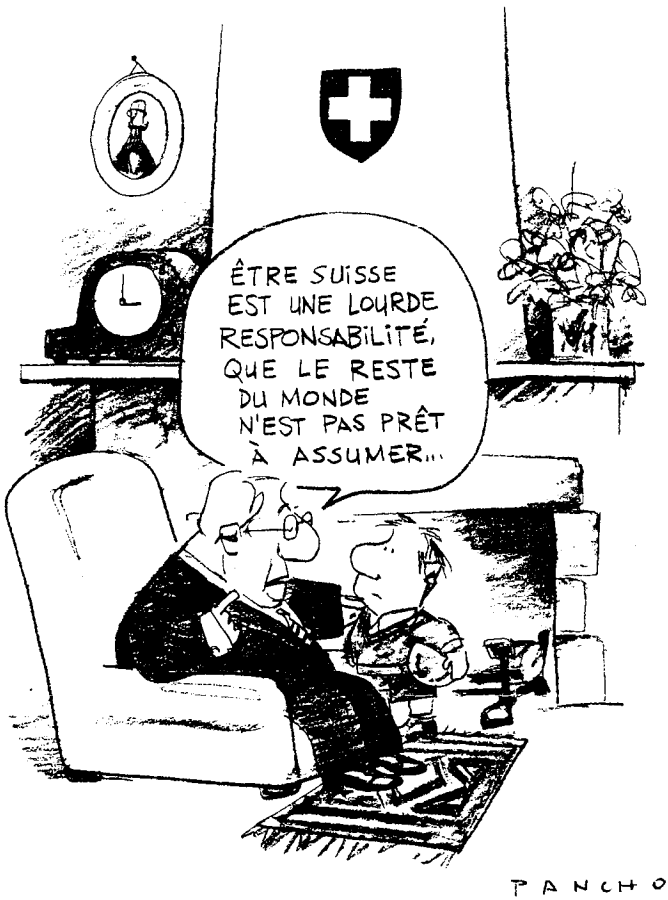
Jonathan Steinberg

SECOND EDITION

WHY SWITZERLAND?

Switzerland is a special and fascinating place. Its unique institutions, its direct democracy, multi-member executives, absence of strikes, communal autonomy, its universal military service, its wealth, and four national languages make it interesting in itself. But it has wider significance, in representing the 'Europe that did not happen', the Europe that escaped the centralisation of state and economy associated with the modern world. Today, there is a new special feature. Switzerland is an island surrounded by the European Union, and resists membership.

Why Switzerland? attempts to answer three related questions: why has such an exception to European norms survived? Why should outsiders notice its peculiarities and what can they learn from them? Finally, can so unusual a society continue to exist when many of the conditions in which it evolved have disappeared? *Why Switzerland?*, which was first published in 1976, has been completely revised (with new illustrations) to try to answer these questions for the present generation.



Cartoon from *Revue économique franco-suisse*, 1991

WHY SWITZERLAND?

Second edition

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For
Matthew, Daniel and Peter

I pastori che passano l'estate sulle *alpi*, discendono di tanto in tanto nel villaggio a rinnovar le proviste, e le proviste sono: pane, vino, sale e giornali. E in alcuna di quelle alte capanne, simile a tante trogloditiche, in quell'odore acre di latte cagliato, di fumo, di sterco, più d'una volta mi è accaduto di trovar chi sapeva fin'ultime minuzie della politica cantonale e mondiale, chi, a me che parlavo dialetto, si studiava di rispondere in lingua letteraria.

Francesco Chiesa

Überhaupt ist nicht gross oder klein, was auf der Landkarte so scheint: es kommt auf den Geist an.

Johannes von Müller

Trois Suisses vont à la chasse aux escargots et ils comparent leurs prises en fin de journée. – 'Moi', dit le Genevois rapide, 'j'en ai cent.' – 'Moi', dit le Bernois, 'j'en ai attrapé quatre.' – 'Et moi', dit le Vaudois (imaginez l'accent), 'j'en ai bien vu un, mais il m'a échappé.'

Denis de Rougemont

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Preface to the second edition

When *Why Switzerland?* appeared twenty years ago, I asked my readers to understand its title as two questions: why a place as idiosyncratic as Switzerland existed, and why non-Swiss should care. Today, a third, much more ominous, question joins the first two: why Switzerland should continue to exist. Twenty years ago, Switzerland saw itself threatened from within and without by the Soviet empire. The still living experience of the second world war with its 'fortress mentality' reinforced Swiss defensiveness. Yet inside Switzerland the Swiss felt good about themselves. They believed that their will to resist had forced Hitler to drop his plans to invade them. They were proud of their historic liberties, their institutions, their religious peace, their wealth, their efficiency and their social harmony. Switzerland had, they believed, no strikes, no slums and no debts.

That complacency has vanished. Switzerland has drugs, AIDS, unemployment, huge public debts and one of the highest adult male rates of suicide in Europe. As former Federal Councillor René Felber said in 1990, Switzerland has become 'normal'. Yet if Switzerland has really become 'normal', then why have a Switzerland at all? The European Union asks 'why Switzerland?' almost every day. Switzerland obstructs the final integration of Europe. Its peculiar laws interfere with road traffic. Its government can never promise to fulfil treaties because the citizens say 'No'. Brussels sees Switzerland as tedious, and unreliable. But it is not Norway. The EU cannot ignore the fact that Swiss trade matters to the EU and that Switzerland controls vital land routes across the Alps.

Europe threatens Switzerland but in a new way. For the first time in seven centuries, Switzerland is surrounded by 'friends'. Beyond every frontier the Swiss see peaceful, capitalist democracies not

unlike their own. The only significant difference – and it matters more each day – is that they are members of the European Union and Switzerland is not. The Swiss at the geographical centre of Europe have become politically peripheral. They stand in queues at airports with the non-European 'others'. They have no voice in the debate on European integration.

The internal structures of Swiss identity no longer seem self-evident. The Swiss maintain the second largest land army in Europe and almost all adult males have to serve in it. To fight whom? In November 1989, a third of those who turned out voted in a popular initiative to abolish the army. The shock felt even by those who supported the initiative still reverberates in Swiss society. The uncertainty about the army undermines the historic assumptions about neutrality. For nearly five hundred years Swiss neutrality has been 'armed'. It rested on the importance of territory and foot soldiers in warfare. In 1991 Switzerland tried to be traditionally 'neutral' in the Gulf War and succeeded in looking clumsy. Its citizenry have rejected government proposals to join the United Nations and to send 'blue berets' for UN service. They rejected the European Economic Area proposals in 1992 and a proposal to free Swiss property to foreign buyers in 1995. A kind of 'isolationism' has replaced 'armed neutrality' in the minds of many Swiss citizens.

Direct democracy – that thicket of initiatives, referenda, town meetings, elected bodies, corporate structures of land ownership and cartelisation which makes Switzerland utterly unlike anywhere else – looks incompatible with the *acquis communautaire*, the fourteen hundred or so regulations and directives, which membership of the European Union demands. Even at home citizens trust their system less than they used to do. Pressure groups and single-issue parties have turned direct democratic instruments into devices to cripple government. The government itself, the unique Swiss executive, has lost prestige alarmingly. A public opinion poll in the spring of 1995 showed that more than a third of those questioned had no confidence in their executive, three times more than in 1979. The executive itself – the reader might think of it as the American presidency turned into a seven-member committee – functions less well than it used to do. Both inside and outside the national parliament in Bern proposals for radical change to the Swiss executive multiply. 'Why Switzerland?' has now become a question the Swiss ask themselves.

This revised edition attempts to answer the third question as well as the two original ones. To the first, original question it replies that Switzerland exists in its present form for good historic reasons and that Switzerland provides a model of the Europe that did not become the norm, that is, a Europe without the national state. To the second question it urges foreign readers to take the Swiss state and society seriously, to look at its systems for resolving conflict as possible devices to be used elsewhere and to see in Swiss specialness some useful correctives to the 'naturalness' of any other system. In answering the third question I hope to show that Switzerland is not, as many Swiss fear, a *Willensnation*, a fragile historic antique, which will fall apart if the Swiss stop willing themselves to be Swiss. Switzerland enjoys a robust, rooted and extremely functional set of human institutions which will have a future no matter what happens elsewhere.

The political environment around Switzerland has also begun to change. It has been clear since the early 1990s that 'Eurocrats' like Jacques Delors have failed. The European Union cannot survive in its present *dirigiste*, centralised form. Each new member state makes it harder for Brussels to govern from above. The European Union will be forced by its own inner logic to become more 'Swiss', more federal, more transparent and, above all, more democratic. The Swiss have nothing to fear from or in such a Europe.

This revised edition also reflects other changes that have occurred since 1976: the emergence of unsolved environmental questions, social plagues like drugs and AIDS, the explosion of means of communication, the medical revolution. Swiss observers, partly in response to these changes, have been re-examining every aspect of Swiss life from William Tell to the provision of free needles to addicts. As a result I know more about Switzerland than I did when I wrote the first edition two decades ago. I have added a chapter on 'religion' because I now see the resolution of religious conflict as a central constituent in the establishment of the equilibrium that became modern Switzerland.

In the first edition I thanked a great many people, including members of my wife's Swiss family. To all of those who then helped and have helped since I extend my thanks again. They know how much I owe them. In preparing the revised edition I made two extended trips to Switzerland, one in 1991 and one in 1995. The 1991 trip was arranged through the Swiss Embassy in London by the

then ambassador His Excellency Franz Muheim and the cultural counsellor, M. Livio Hürzeler. My thanks to them are profound. My stay in Bern turned into one of the most exciting experiences of my life. The then British ambassador, His Excellency Christopher Long and his wife Patricia, let me stay in the Residence and gave me their grand official car and chauffeur to carry me to my appointments. During that trip I was granted (and allowed to record) interviews with members of the Swiss government, and senior civil servants. They spoke to me frankly and at length. This edition bears the imprint of their views, if imperfectly. If I list them, I do so with deep gratitude and with unforgettable memories of the time they generously gave me: consigliere federale Flavio Cotti, at that time President of Switzerland and Minister of the Interior; conseiller fédéral René Felber, then Federal Minister of Foreign Affairs; Bundesrat Otto Stich, then Federal Minister of Finance; Staatssekretär Franz Blankart, director of the Federal Office for Foreign Economic Affairs in the Ministry of Economic Affairs and principal negotiator with the European Union; Ambassador Jenö Staehelin, then political director of the Department of Foreign Affairs; and M. Marc Salamin, section chief. I am also grateful to Sign. Marco Cameroni, then press officer at the Federal Department of Foreign Affairs, for his guidance and suggestions.

On that same trip, I recorded and profited from interviews with a great many other distinguished Swiss citizens in the world of politics, the arts, industry, government on cantonal level, journalism, the army and the two great churches. The Pro Helvetia Stiftung helped both to arrange some of these interviews and to finance my trip. I am grateful to the Stiftung, to Frau Hanne Zweifel-Wütrich in its offices, and to my conversation partners: Professor Dr Urs Altermatt of the Université de Fribourg; M. Pierre Baudère, architect in Fribourg; Dr Albert Bodmer, then Deputy Chairman of Ciba-Geigy, Basel; Professor Iso Camartin, Professor of Romansch Literature, University of Zürich; Dr Raffaele Ceschi, historian, Bellinzona; Professor Dr Victor Conzemius, church historian, Luzern; Divisionär a.D. Gustav Däniker, formerly chief of staff for operational training; Herr Max Frenkel of the *Neue Zürcher Zeitung*; Herr J. Frey, synodal legal officer of the Evangelical and Reformed Church of Canton Bern; Regierungsrat a.D. Dr Walter Gut, Luzern; Dr Max Hofer, episcopal vicar and chairman of the Diocesan Pastoral Office and Dr Markus Ries, then archivist,

in the Bishopric of Basel; Dr A. M. Schütz, former president of Eterna Watches; Ständerrätin Rosemarie Simmen, who represents Canton Solothurn in the Upper House; Dott. Federico Spiess, Vocabolario dei dialetti della Svizzera Italiana; Landschreiber Dr Hans Windlin, Canton Zug; Sign. Flavio Zanetti, press officer of Radiotelevisione della Svizzera Italiana; Herr Egon P. S. Zehnder, Egon Zehnder and Partners, Inc., management consultants, Zürich.

In 1995 I retraced some of my steps. I spoke to the Rotary Club of Entlebuch in Canton Luzern which I had addressed in 1973 and had interviews with communal officers in Malters (Luzern) and Grenchen (Solothurn). My thanks go, first of all, to Herr Benno Baumeler, architect in Willisau, Luzern, the president of the Rotary Club and to Herr Kantonsförster a.D. Otto Bättig for the invitation and to the members of the Rotary for letting me try my thoughts on them. I am grateful to Dr Markus Dürr, Gemeinderatspräsident and Herr Josef Geisseler, Gemeindeschreiber in Malters; Herr Rolf Enggist, Stadtschreiber in Grenchen; Dr Yves Fricker, department of sociology, University of Geneva; Herr Hans Christen, press officer of the Union of Swiss Machine Industrialists, Zürich; Herr Ernst Flammer, Federal Office for Education and Science and, as always, Dr Anton Meinrad Meier and Erna and Seppi Seeberger, my wife's cousins, who arranged interviews both in 1991 and 1995 and provided a base of operations for my Swiss research. I am extremely grateful to my copy-editor, Mrs Virginia Catmur, whose eye for detail, sense of style and passion for accuracy have made this a much better book.

Much of the research on which a book like this depends involves reading newspapers. Switzerland can be proud of the high level of many of its newspapers, but it has one that I must mention. *Die Neue Zürcher Zeitung* has been serving its readers in the German-speaking world for more than two centuries. Its international and domestic reporting, the breadth of its cultural, financial and scientific interests, make it the complete daily newspaper. I could not have assembled this portrait of Switzerland without it, and I take this occasion to say 'thank you' to the *NZZ* for its superb journalism.

Finally, I am grateful to the citizens of Willisau in Canton Luzern, although they do not know it. Willisau with a total population of about 8,000 voters is divided into Willisau-Stadt and Willisau-Land, two separate self-governing communes. In Willisau-Stadt the Liberal Party and in Willisau-Land the Conservative

Party dominates local politics and favours its own party members in giving contracts and making public appointments. Each party has its own pubs, singing and gymnastic clubs and local organisations. A Willisau architect, who belongs to the Conservative Party, told me in 1995 that in seventeen years in practice he had never been engaged by a Liberal, except one who was a cousin. This historic, deeply rooted, polarisation of politics occurs all over the world and reminds me of Belfast. Nobody outside Switzerland would associate it with such practices. When I told Professor Sir John Plumb about Willisau in 1969, he urged me to write a book about Switzerland. A generation later I offer Willisau-Stadt and Willisau-Land my belated but sincere thanks.

Trinity Hall, Cambridge JONATHAN STEINBERG

Preface to the first edition

Switzerland is a hard country to get to know. Many tourists never see the 'real' Switzerland behind the neat façade of the tourist industry. I happened to be lucky. I married into a very large, very real, Swiss family. My father-in-law, Mr O. A. Meier, his nine brothers and sisters, and the horde of cousins in different parts of the country provided my introduction to Swiss life. I hope that they will forgive me for not mentioning each by name but I must make two exceptions. Seppi and Erna Seeberger-Krummenacher owned one of the last unspoilt Alpine hotels, Kurhaus Seewenalp. There was no electricity and no motor road to ruin the hiker's paradise until the army commandeered it for manoeuvre grounds. They, their friends and the lively assortment of hotel guests from all over Switzerland put up with a lot of questions. They know how much I owe them. The other exception is also a cousin; Dr Anton M. Meier, theologian and Director of the Kinder- und Erziehungsheim St Josef in Grenchen, has been the *spiritus rector* of this entire operation. He allowed me to use his flat in Grenchen during an extended visit in 1972, arranged many fascinating interviews for me and set exacting intellectual standards for the enterprise. I know that I have fallen short of them, but, rather like the Alps themselves, I have known that his standards were there as a permanent background and goal.

Professor J. H. Plumb of Christ's College first gave me the idea that there was a book in my fascination with the idiosyncrasies of Swiss life and has kept me cheerful during some bad moments. Dr John Barber of King's College noticed that I had left out the most important piece of the argument, the economic substructure of the special Swiss political and social framework. Dr J. A. Cremona of Trinity Hall served as my Virgil in the *selva oscura dei dialetti*. Professor Frederick P. Brooks Jr of the University of North Carolina

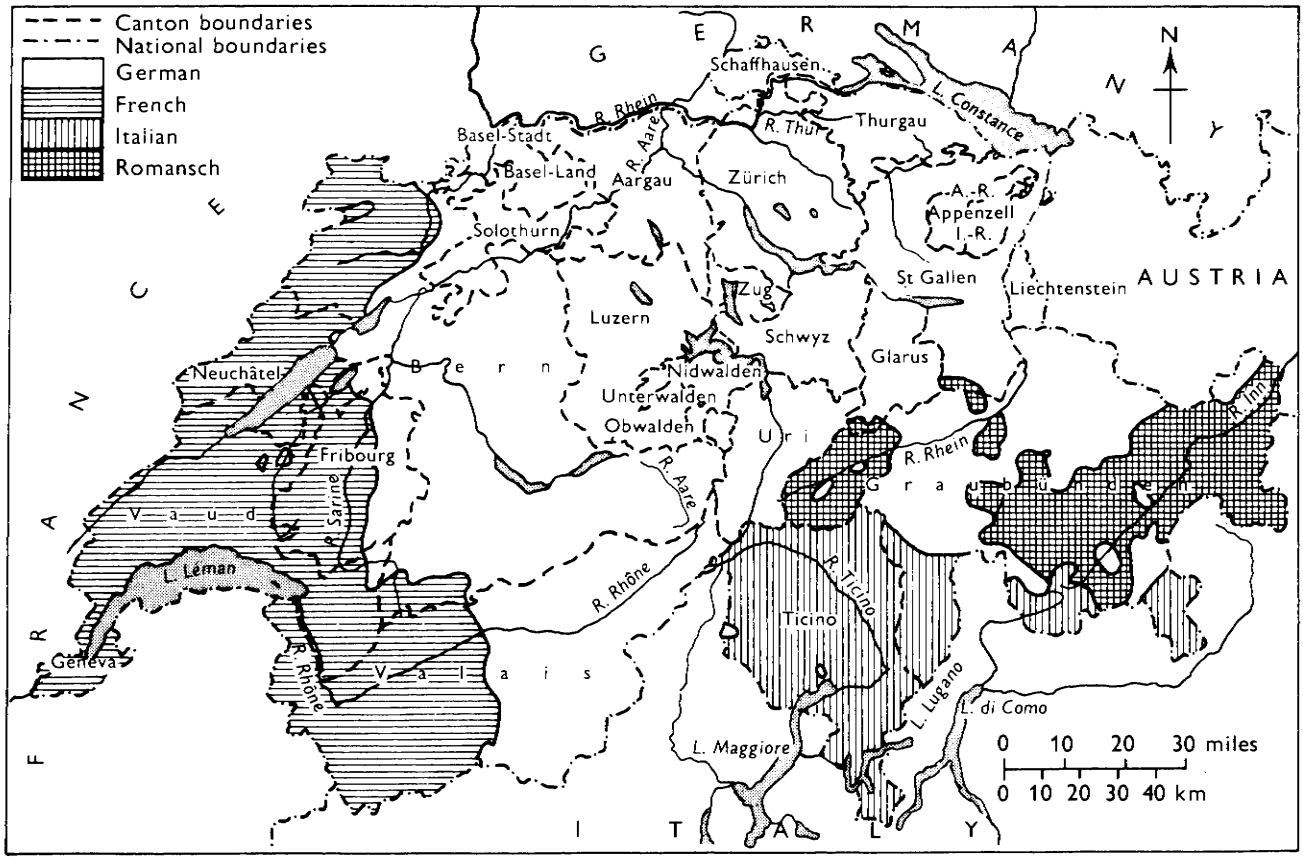
let me have his only copy of his fascinating study of computer software at a crucial moment in the writing and reassured me that the historian can understand the world of high technology, if he has a good guide. Mr C. A. A. Rayner, formerly of Ciba-Geigy (UK) Ltd in Duxford, drew my attention to aspects of the chemical industry in Basel. Mrs Leonard Forster saved me from making a silly mistake about Gottfried Keller. Professor James Joll read the first draft of the manuscript and gave me a good deal of good advice about what was wrong with it. Miss Marjorie Shepherd helped me in preparing the manuscript and listened to my complaints when things were not going well. I owe them all my thanks.

Many people in Switzerland in every walk of life have been generous with their time and trouble. It would illustrate much of the variety of Swiss life if I paused by each to describe how he or she had opened new areas of Swiss reality to me. I hope that they will forgive me if I list them by name without further comment. My thanks and respect are theirs: Herr Dr Franz Birrer of the Swiss Embassy in Bonn, formerly cultural attaché in London; Herr Paul Adler of the Pro Helvetia Stiftung, Zürich; Dr Alfred Rötheli, Staatsschreiber of Canton Solothurn; Dr A. M. Schütz, President, Eterna Ltd; Professor Dr Adolf Gasser, Basel; Professor Dr Dietrich Schindler, Zürich; Dr R. J. Schneebeli, Director of the Volkshochschule, Zürich; Colonel Dr Walter Schaufelberger, editor of the *Allgemeine Schweizerische Militärzeitschrift*; Professor Dr Peter Stadler, Zürich; Professor Dr Arthur Rich, Zürich; Herr Ulrich Kägi of *Die Weltwoche*, Zürich; Dott. Flavio Zanetti, Corrispondenza Politica Svizzera, Lugano; Dott. Federico Spiess and Dott. Rosanna Zeli, Vocabolario dei dialetti della Svizzera italiana, Lugano; Professor Giuseppe Martinola, Lugano; Dr Alfred Peter, *National-Zeitung*, Basel; Herr Frank A. Meyer, Büro Cortesi, Neuchâtel; Mme Lise Girardin, Députée du Conseil des Etats, Geneva; M. Claude Monnier, *Journal de Genève*; M. Ambassadeur Pierre Micheli, Geneva; Professor Dr Erich Gruner, Bern; Herr Rolf Siegrist, Schweizerische Politische Korrespondenz, Bern; Herr Benedikt von Tscharner formerly of Integration Section, Federal Political Department, Bern, and now Counsellor of Embassy (Economic and Labour) at the Swiss Embassy, London; Herr Peter Erni, Information and Press Officer, Federal Political Department, Bern; Sign. Piero Bianconi, Minusio; sign. Enzio Canonica, Consigliere nazionale and president of the Federazione Svizzera

dei Lavoratori edili e del legno, Zürich; Herr Otto Bättig, Kreisförster, Schüpfheim, Luzern.

I am grateful to the following publishers for permission to quote: *Die Weltwoche* for the table by Ulrich Kägi, copyright *Die Weltwoche*; *Schweizer Zeitschrift für Volkswirtschaft und Statistik* for the table by Peter Gilg; Francke Verlag, Bern, for the tables by E. Gruner; Huber & Co. AG for extracts from *Allgemeine Schweizerische Militärzeitschrift*.

J.S.



Map 1 Cantons and languages in contemporary Switzerland

CHAPTER I

Why Switzerland?

'Why Switzerland?' is really two questions not one. The first is the understandable question which any English-speaking reader who picks up a book on Switzerland must ask: 'Why should I read about Switzerland, when there are so many other things to read about?' The second, less obvious question is why there is a Switzerland at all. The present chapter will try to answer the former question; the whole book is devoted to the latter. What you have in your hands is not a guidebook. You will not find places to eat in Solothurn nor the height of the Matterhorn here. It is not a conventional history. The chapter called 'History' starts in the middle, goes backward in time and only after that does it proceed in the usual way. It is not journalism either, although most of the raw material which has been worked into the argument is drawn from our own day. If it has any clear claim to be any specific category of literature, I suppose that *Why Switzerland?* is a latter-day version of those eighteenth-century philosophical histories in which the thinkers of the Enlightenment thought they discerned underlying laws. It is a history in the way that Dr Johnson thought of history, 'contrary to minute exactness, a history which ranges facts according to their dependence on each other, and postpones or anticipates according to the convenience of narration'.[1]

If the book is odd, so is its subject. There is no place like Switzerland and hence any attempt to catch its meaning must be pretty odd too. The sheer variety of Swiss life, what I think of as its 'cellular' character, makes it hard to write a coherent account of the place. Then there are the various institutions, habits and customs unique to Switzerland: its unbelievably complicated electoral procedures, its referenda and initiatives, its specialised economy with its banks and watches, its cheese and chocolates, its citizen-soldiers with their guns in the downstairs cupboards, its complicated

federalism of central government, cantons and communes, its three official and four national languages, its neutral status, its astonishing wealth per head, its huge proportion of foreign workers, its efficient public services, its enormous number of very small newspapers, its religious divisions, and until February 1971 its exclusion of women from the vote on the federal level. That is an impressive list of oddities for a country of only six million souls. But there is more.

In a world shaken by industrial unrest, Switzerland has been an island of labour peace. During 1974, there were six industrial disputes, three of which led to strikes of a day or more. The total number of days lost was 2,777. In Great Britain during the same year, the figure was 14.7 million. Nor was 1974 unusual in Swiss labour relations. The *Statistisches Jahrbuch der Schweiz 1995* reports that between 1975 and 1993 there was a grand total of twenty-seven strikes or lockouts which lasted for at least twenty-four hours or more, or just under three a year. In 1987 and 1993 there were no strikes at all and in 1986 and 1991 only one. The worst year for disputes was 1980 when five strikes and 330 firms were involved, costing 5,718 lost days of work.[2] A modern state which had done nothing else but achieve a truce in the battle between employer and employee would deserve close attention for that accomplishment alone.

Most people know that Switzerland is a country of many languages. There are in fact four national languages: German, French, Italian and Raeto-Romansch. The first three are official languages, which means that all official documents, railway timetables or postal notices must be published in each. According to the 1990 census, 63.6% of the population speak German, 19.2% French, 7.5% Italian, 0.6% Romansch and 8.9% 'other languages'.[3] The operation of a country so constituted would be fascinating enough if that were the whole story. The reality is much more complicated, indeed bewilderingly so. Here are some facts about language in Switzerland. The 40,000 people who speak Romansch as mother-tongue divide into those who speak the Ladino of the Upper Engadin and that of the Lower Engadin – each of which has its own written language – the Surselva of the Upper Rhine valley also with a literary tradition, and the non-literary dialects of Surmeirisch and Sutselvisch. The 63.6% who speak 'German' are actually bilingual, for they speak a language they do not read or write, and read and

write in a language which they sometimes speak but not as a mother-tongue. The language of the Swiss Germans, *Schwyzerdütsch*, divides itself into almost as many versions as there are valleys in the Alps, some of which, such as those of the Bernese Oberland and Oberwallis, are incomprehensible to most *Schwyzerdütsch* speakers. There is one canton, Ticino, where Italian is the official language and another, Graubünden, in which three valleys and a few communes also use it as the official tongue. What sort of Italian? Let me cite a passage from Fritz René Allemann's *25 mal die Schweiz*, where he describes the village of Bivio in Canton Graubünden:

> The census of 1960 recorded a total of 188 inhabitants for Bivio . . . with an Italian majority (it is the only commune north of the main chain of the Alps which belongs to the Italian linguistic area), an old-established Raeto-Romansch minority and also some German enclaves, with a Catholic and a Protestant Church, which have co-existed in 'parity' for centuries. (Both pastors look at the congregation first before deciding which language to preach in.) But that is not all. If one listens closely, one can hear three different dialects of Italian: the native dialect which is closely related to the Raetolombardic used in the Bregaglia; the Bergamasco dialect spoken by shepherd families who during the centuries wandered over the Alps from Northern Italy; and written, 'High', Italian.[4]

Religious divisions cut deeply into Swiss life. As Urs Altermatt puts it, until recently Swiss Roman Catholics lived in a ghetto. There were Catholic bookshops, Catholic employment offices and Catholic old people's homes:

> A Catholic might be born in a Catholic hospital, attend Catholic schools from kindergarten to university, read Catholic newspapers and magazines, vote for the Catholic party and take part in Catholic clubs or associations. It was not unusual for a Catholic to insure himself against sickness or accident with a Catholic company and put his savings in a Catholic savings bank.[5]

Even the Swiss Constitution played a part in making Swiss Catholics feel themselves to be second-class citizens by forbidding Jesuits to live and work in the country. The provision was altered by referendum in May 1973.

Here then are three bits of Swiss reality, chosen more or less randomly from the thickets of Helvetic oddity. They seem to point in entirely different directions. There is evidently a national pattern in labour relations. All Swiss shun the strike, not just Swiss

Germans or Swiss Catholics. Yet the other evidence illustrates the extreme particularism, the divisions within divisions or the 'cellular' quality of Swiss life. How can a place so varied have national behaviour patterns? How are the complex layers of identity (language, region, creed, party, class, occupation, age) reconciled in Swiss heads? These seem to me to be interesting questions which in a way hold up a mirror to our own less dramatic equivalents.

Switzerland is a useful place to look at some other European problems. It is small enough to be studied conveniently, odd enough to be an abbreviation for the whole of European life and advanced enough to be fully integrated into all the trends of the era. In looking at the way the Swiss cope with mass culture, modern transportation, technological change, inflation, urbanisation, population growth, secularisation, environmental pollution and violence by extremist groups, we can see in a small arena what faces Europe in the large one. Can the 'Swissness' of Switzerland adapt to the great levelling trends of the time? If it can, there is reason to hope that the Europe of the twenty-first century will not have doused national characteristics in bureaucratic grey. Particular identity will still be the essential feature of European identity, as the particularity of Switzerland is its most striking general characteristic.

The oddest thing about Switzerland is how little most foreigners know about it. No country is more frequently visited but less known. Switzerland has two faces, the smooth, expressionless, efficient surface which the tourist glides by without noticing and the turbulent, rich, inside surface which he or she never sees. The average English-speaking person, if asked to choose a few adjectives to describe Switzerland, would probably end up with a list containing the following: 'beautiful', 'efficient', 'expensive' and 'boring'. The last one crops up so frequently that I find myself shrieking 'Switzerland *is* interesting' over and over again, just to be heard. I know that Switzerland is in many ways a fascinating country but, if I mention the word 'Swiss', eyes glaze and attention wanders. In a lecture course on European history of the nineteenth century, I once announced that I intended to devote the next lecture to the Swiss civil war, and halved my audience. Not only will a Swiss question never 'come up' in an examination but even a civil war, if it happened in Switzerland, cannot be interesting.

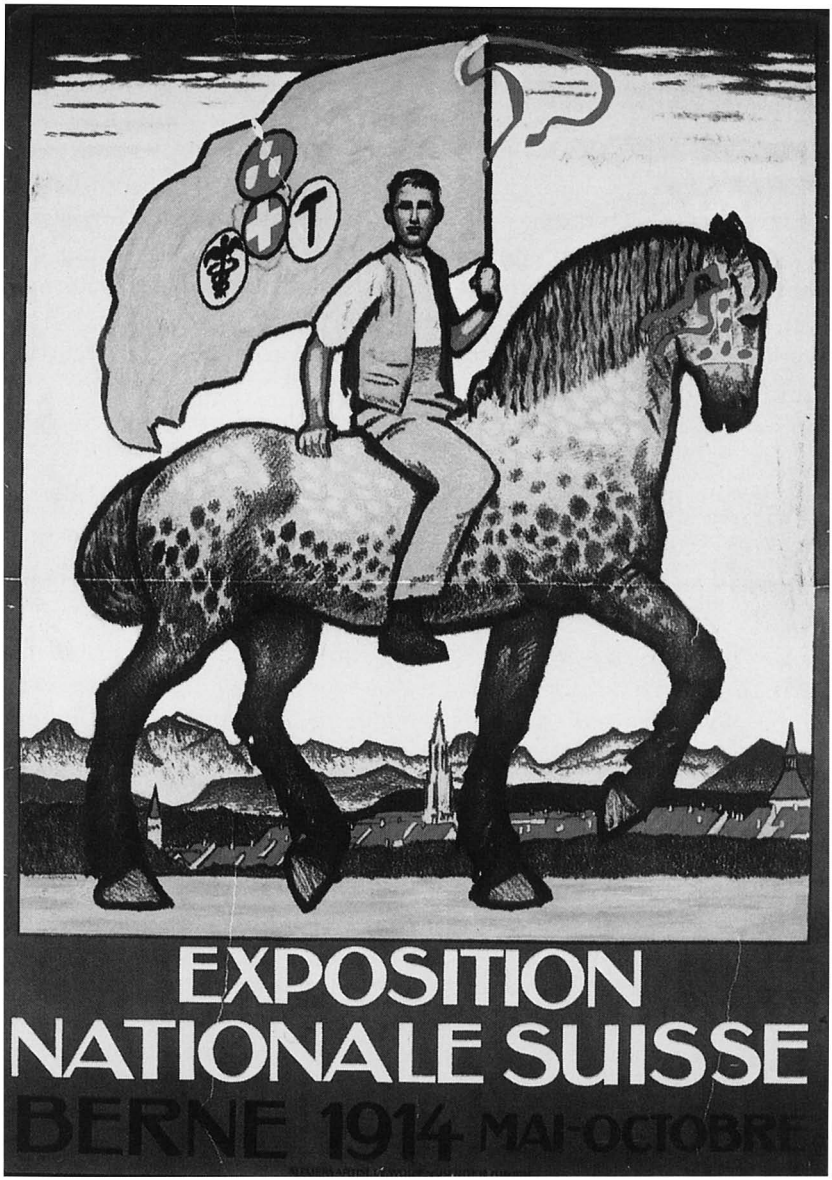


Plate 1 Poster for the Exposition nationale suisse, 1914

Part of this is sheer prejudice, and not new either. In 1797 the exiled French aristocrat Chateaubriand observed bitterly: 'Neutral in the grand revolutions of the states which surround them, they enrich themselves by the misfortunes of others and found a bank on human calamities.'[6] The following year French troops swept away the old Swiss Confederation and the Swiss revolution began. Chateaubriand should have waited a little. Like so many foreigners he was tempted to generalise because Switzerland sometimes seems changeless. How many of those who say flatly that nothing ever happens in Switzerland would recognise this picture of the country, taken from a letter of Prince Metternich, the Austrian Chancellor, in 1845?

> Switzerland presents the most perfect image of a state in the process of social disintegration . . . Switzerland stands alone today in Europe as a republic and serves troublemakers of every sort as a free haven. Instead of improving its situation by appropriate means, the Confederation staggers from evils into upheavals and represents for itself and for its neighbours an inexhaustible spring of unrest and disturbance.[7]

Another reason why Switzerland is unknown abroad is that it is hard to know. Centuries of tourism have left a mark. The Swiss simply do not reveal themselves easily to foreigners. An alien can live in some Swiss cities for years and never be invited to a Swiss home. Geneva is notorious for this but not unique. There are barriers everywhere to easy contact. It is also hard to know intellectually. There are so many puzzles and difficulties. Take the problem of frontiers. How does an artificial line drawn through a continuous stretch of countryside or marked on a bridge make everything change: table silver, foods, smells, customs, appearance of the buildings and so on? For the frontier watcher, Switzerland is a paradise. Cross the language border in Canton Fribourg (this is one not even marked by an outward sign) on the road from Bern to the city of Fribourg, and the streets become dirtier, and the window boxes of flowers less frequent. It is Francophone territory. Why are French-speaking communities less neat than German-speaking ones? Travel the road from Biel–Bienne to Porrentruy (all French-speaking) and watch the 'Jura libre' slogans painted on walls appear and disappear as the car passes from Catholic to Protestant community and back again. How can one make sense of the invisible barriers which seem to divide otherwise identical settlements? The

Plate 2 The ski resort of Sörenberg

answers to such questions are extremely difficult to devise; it is not always clear what the question is. Understanding Switzerland is so hard that few ever try.

There are modest satisfactions for those who do, and I hope that you will end up sharing my delight in the variety and exuberance of Swiss life, as I try to sketch it for you. There are also some grander rewards for anybody who takes the case of Switzerland seriously, as Dr Johnson pointed out:

> Let those who despise the capacity of the Swiss, tell us by what wonderful policy or by what happy conciliation of interests, it is brought to pass, that in a body made up of different communities and different religions, there should be no civil commotions, though the people are so warlike, that to nominate and raise an army is the same.[8]

CHAPTER 2

History

Switzerland has no natural frontiers. The mountains and valleys of the Alps continue to the east and west into what is now Austria and France as they do on the southern slopes into what is now Italy. That the Bregaglia and the valley of Poschiavo are Swiss, while the Valtellina or the county of Bormio are Italian, can only be understood historically. Every Swiss frontier represents an historic act or set of events. Vorarlberg is Austrian because the Great Powers in 1919 refused to accept a plebiscite of its people for union with Switzerland. Geneva's borders on Lac Léman were settled by the Vienna Congress. Canton Ticino was conquered by Uri and later by other Swiss cantons. Constance, the 'natural' capital of the Thurgau, is German, partly because the Swiss Diet lacked the nerve in 1510 to accept another city-state into the Federation for fear of upsetting the urban–rural balance. Canton Schaffhausen contains one parcel of 41 hectares in its midst which is, in fact, German territory, and has three substantial enclaves, which cannot be reached without passing through German territory. Nor is the picture more coherent within Switzerland. Boundaries between cantons wander irregularly and unexpectedly over the landscape. Bits and pieces of Canton Solothurn lie embedded in Canton Bern, two of which, Kleinlützel and Mariastein, have borders with France as well. In Kleinlützel when people go shopping in one of the neighbouring larger towns, they tend to say 'we're going up to Switzerland'. Campione d'Italia on the eastern shore of Lago di Lugano is a chip of Italy, precisely 2.1 kilometres long and just over 1 kilometre deep at its widest point. The territory, much of which is actually lake surface, is entirely surrounded by the Swiss Canton Ticino. The complex overlapping of political authority, the jagged nonsense of frontiers and boundaries, the bits and pieces of territory lying about the map, resemble a jigsaw puzzle constructed

by a whimsical providence. Part of the key to the puzzle is what did not happen in Switzerland, rather than what did. The Swiss escaped the full consequences of three characteristic European trends: the trend toward rational centralisation, the growth of nationalism and the violence of religious conflict. Let us look at each in turn.

The French and their fellow travellers tried to make sense of Switzerland in the period between 1798 and 1802. During those years in Switzerland and other parts of Europe, the French installed enlightened, rational, benevolent, centralised, puppet governments. The Helvetic Republic, as the Swiss version was called, introduced the latest achievements of the French Revolution: equality before the law, uniformity of weights and measures, and a uniform code of justice. It liberated large tracts of subject territory in Ticino, Vaud, Aargau and Thurgau and raised former subjects to the dignity of citizens. The French and their supporters intended to put an end to the fantastic array of tiny republics, prince–bishoprics, princely abbeys, counties, free cities, sovereign cloisters and monasteries, free valleys, overlapping jurisdictions, guilds, oligarchies and city aristocracies. On 12 April 1798, Switzerland received a new, modern constitution. Article 1 declared it to be 'a unitary and indivisible Republic. There are no longer any borders between cantons and formerly subject territories nor between cantons.'[1]

The Swiss themselves had other ideas. At the time that unity was being proclaimed, the formerly subject communities of the old Confederation were asserting their diversity. In the area of the modern Canton St Gallen alone, eight independent republics had sprung up ranging in size from the Toggenburg valley with 50,000 citizens to the tiny republic of Sax with 1,000.[2] The mountain cantons rejected the Helvetic Republic emphatically. Napoleon needed stability along the approaches to the great Alpine passes, and he saw the armed resistance of the Swiss as a military nuisance. The Helvetic Republic existed on paper; the reality was chaos. In 1802 he summoned the representatives of the cantons and the Helvetic Senate to Paris and, speaking to them as a man 'born in a land of mountains who understands how mountain people think', he charged them to work out a new constitution.[3]

These deliberations resulted in what was called the Act of Mediation of 19 February 1803, which effectively restored political sovereignty to the old cantons under a loose, federal constitution.

Napoleon, who had been much impressed by the *Landsgemeinden*, the popular assemblies of the mountain cantons, believed them to be the characteristic Swiss institution and insisted that they be restored. The *Landsgemeinden* were conservative but democratic, though not in the modern sense. Rousseau's 'general will' was not quite what emerged from the deliberations of the *Landsgemeinden* where *Praktizieren und Trölen* (electoral bribery and corruption) were the rule, and where the *Hintersässen* (residents who lacked full civic rights) had no vote at all but, if that was the system the mountaineers wanted, Napoleon was prepared to return it to them, together with traditional Swiss federalism. The *Mediationsverfassung*, the constitution which he proposed, elevated many of the previously subject or allied (*zugewandte*) territories to full cantonal equality, and St Gallen, Graubünden, Aargau, Thurgau, Ticino and the Vaud took their places as full members of a federal union of nineteen cantons. Neuchâtel, which together with the prince–bishopric of Basel and the princely abbey of St Gallen had been one of the *zugewandte Monarchien* (allied monarchies) of the old Confederation, was not returned to it and, indeed, after the battle of Jena in 1806, Napoleon deposed the King of Prussia as Count of Neuchâtel-Valangin altogether. Geneva and the republic of Valais were annexed to France. Napoleon's intervention had paradoxical consequences. Elsewhere in Europe French armies swept aside petty sovereignties and abolished the lingering traces of 'feudalism'. In Switzerland they were preserved. Why were Swiss institutions tougher than those elsewhere in resisting French reforms?

Why was Switzerland not destroyed by another, more violent, child of the French Revolution, nationalism? Take the case of the Italian-speaking Canton Ticino, whose links to the Swiss began in 1478 when the German-speaking canton of Uri, the Gotthard Pass canton, annexed the Valle Leventina on the other side of the pass. The move brought both slopes approaching the Gotthard under one political authority and provided a base for further military expansion. Together with Schwyz and Nidwalden, the Urner extended their control during the following thirty years into the Riviera, Val Blenio and the city of Bellinzona, which remained under a tri-dominium of the three cantons until 1798. The rest of what is today Ticino, the cities of Lugano, Locarno, and the valleys around them, became joint property of twelve of the thirteen

Plate 3 St Gotthard's Pass, 1801

cantons of the old Confederation. (Appenzell got nothing because, by 1513 when it joined the Confederation, all these territories had been conquered.)

For more than 250 years these Italian-speaking communities were subject to alien rule by ignorant, corrupt, German-speaking bailiffs. Karl Viktor von Bonstetten, a Bern patrician, who made an official inspection of the areas of Ticino ruled by the twelve cantons in 1795–6, was appalled by a regime which seemed to him to be 'organised ideally for evil, where the good is impossible. If a common meadow or a common field will be badly tended, how much more a commonly held, subject territory.'[4] It is hardly surprising that many Ticinese, organised into groups called *i Patriotti*, welcomed the French intervention which put an end to centuries of misrule. Liberty, the rights of man and the citizen, the liberation of their ethnic identity as Italian-speakers, all seemed to lie in union with the new Napoleonic Cisalpine Republic, an Italian-speaking sister of the Helvetic. On 15 February 1798, the Patriots attempted a *coup d'état* and proclaimed the union of Ticino and the Cisalpine Republic. A huge and surprisingly unfriendly crowd

gathered in the Piazza Grande in Lugano. The insurgents who had seized the representatives of Unterwalden as hostages, in the face of the hostility of the crowd, were forced to release them. In exchange for a promise of free passage out of Lugano, the Patriots withdrew in confusion. That evening two lawyers from Ponte Tresa, Annibale Pellegrini and Angelo Stoppani, led a group of armed men to the representatives from Unterwalden whose presence had forced the hands of the Patriots and demanded 'Swiss Liberty': 'We demand our sacred rights; we desire Swiss liberty; finally, after centuries of subjection, we are mature enough to govern ourselves.' The delegates from Unterwalden announced that they would support the request and left Lugano. In a delirium of popular celebration, the people planted a liberty tree with a William Tell hat on it and proclaimed themselves 'Liberi e Svizzeri'. During the next few days all the other subject territories in the area followed the Lugano example and declared themselves 'Free and Swiss'.[5]

Why were former subjects so loyal to former masters? Against the powerful trends toward unified national communities why was Switzerland able to remain a multilingual exception? Throughout the nineteenth century, as passions stirred during the heroic days of Italian nationalism, the Ticinese remained overwhelmingly loyal to the Confederation. How 'unnatural' this was may be seen in the evidence of two very different sorts of witnesses. The first of these, the greatest Swiss historian of his time, Jacob Burckhardt, offers us a vivid glimpse into the mind of a cultivated nineteenth-century observer. In a letter to a friend, written in 1845, Burckhardt argued:

> Among better educated, thinking, German-speaking Swiss, if only quietly for the moment, the feeling of belonging to Germany, of our inner, original unity, is spreading as they are less and less able to convince themselves sincerely of the existence of Swiss nationality. They consider themselves lucky that no dialect raised to the dignity of a written language separates them from Germany as the Dutch are . . . Are we really one nation with the Genevese or Ticinese as is repeatedly asserted?[6]

Very similar sentiments were expressed by Teresina Bontempi, the fiercely irredentist editor of *L'Àdula*, the leading Italianising journal in Ticino, on the eve of the first world war. In a leader entitled 'Una Sintesi' of 18 April 1914, Miss Bontempi wrote: 'We are Italians by soil and by soul, even if from the one we are divided by a customs barrier and from the other by the blindness which it creates.'[7]