

My Swiss Adventure

Switzerland is an insular and reserved place where insular and reserved people live. While this is not the only image of Switzerland that its neighbors to the north have of the country, it is a widely held one based on ignorance and inexperience, or on decades-old perceptions that have long been adopted by the Swiss themselves. When I moved to Switzerland, I was a confused immigrant inclined to draw different conclusions. But not infrequently, it was my experience that the locals wanted to convince me of their insularity and reserve, their provincial innocence, stuffy traditionalism, egotism, and indifference to bureaucracy. The émigré in me not only never wanted to go along with it, but also mistrusted such a self-image. Unlike the self-hatred of the Germans, which really is self-hatred based on a desire (as understandable as it is impossible) to get away from themselves and their tragic history, the self-deprecation of the Swiss is a shrewd disguise. Now that the mountains, the army, the hard Swiss franc, and possibly even Swiss neutrality have in effect lost their protective function, there appears to be tacit pan-Swiss agreement that hiding behind the stereotype, as peddled by foreigners, is the *au courant* way for the Swiss to remain sufficiently aloof—culturally and politically—from those abroad.

It is obvious that public life in Switzerland is more lightly regulated, that government departments and officials are less inclined to treat people like children, and that community life is essentially characterized by a liberal constitution that imposes a more reasonable measure of responsibility on individuals than almost anywhere else in Europe. Put simply, politics maybe economics by other means, and consensus politics may necessitate a slower rate of change, yet political practice next door in France, Germany, and Italy shows how representative democracy, like a bulldozer, keeps pushing decisions on growing problems from one leg-

islative period to the next until it is in danger of being buried beneath them. Particularly in Germany, Swissification is an expression of political contempt: it stands for provincialism and egocentricity. It is my impression that many Swiss now think so as well; it is also my impression that they are wrong to do so. Stereotypes—starting with one's own—are best demolished by experiencing something at first hand.

Immigrants ought to learn to speak the language of their host country, but are Germans who move to Switzerland “immigrants” exactly? If they are, is it really advisable—out of respect for the Swiss and the immigrants—that foreigners from Germany speak Swiss German; the German as spoken in the cantons of Bern or Appenzell?

I, myself, am staunchly against it. Perhaps the Swiss do not want foreigners who to be their equals. This is only a theory, but it might be they insist on monopolizing integrity, taciturnity, their language, and their silence. The Swiss take an impartial view to phony—or at least comical—imitations, but of course their illegitimacy and presumptuousness get through to them. Any German who has reached a certain age before being confronted with Swiss German is well advised to keep his or her hands—and tongue—off. You are what you are, and if you're from Germany, at worst you're a *Sauschwob* (bloody Swabian), and, as a rule, you can live with that.

There is no getting away from the fact that the methods of communicating in Swiss German are incompatible. As Oscar Wilde said: “They use an unpronounceable language that makes it sound as if they are crunching scree. If a Swiss is tempted to speak, no one will understand him—with the possible exception of a geologist.” That's a bit strong, even for satire! Unfortunately, the Swiss themselves encourage this stereotype. It is impossible to communicate with them in their own language. The Swiss

Attempting a Declaration of Love

seem to feel bad about it somehow, and often apologize to Germans for their allegedly “coarse gibberish.” It is just embarrassing: the minute they detect a German in their midst, they switch, even among themselves, to an artificial language they call *Schriftdeutsch* (Swiss Standard German). With its Helvetic lilt it makes almost every Swiss sound like a model student when they speak it. It took me a long time before I could keep a straight face as I observed the translation process that locals went through every time I addressed them. It was normally an anxious few seconds before the reply came—translated into *Schriftdeutsch*. I eventually gave up “hinting” to my interlocutors that they should feel free to stick to their own language: I knew they would instinctively switch the minute I opened my mouth.

What has gone wrong? The Swiss lack the courage to use their own language. In place of written Swiss German, *Schriftdeutsch* has emerged. This situation cannot be rectified by means of the hip, new advertising employing dialect and local idioms, which is aimed at the young. Is it any wonder that German is trailing in the popularity stakes? Basically, High German is used when things get uncomfortable: at school (if at all), in the military, and in the evening news. High German symbolizes hierarchy, power, and order, things for which the Swiss—appealingly—do not have much time. Of course, this means that a German immigrant about to open his mouth is off to a poor start: he sounds different from what people want to hear.

Swiss society over the past two centuries has undeniably been influenced by pietism of one sort or another. The following rule of conduct had to be—and still is—followed: work hard, prosper, spend your wealth on you and yours, and and distribute your wealth among others in a way that serves them best. Of course, it is unclear how to interpret this rule of conduct. Some people have no kids, pay no taxes, and they own a home in the heart of the city, a chalet in the mountains, and a villa in Sardinia. It is probably easier for a school teacher from Lucerne to strike what is widely accepted as the “right balance” than it is for a CEO like Daniel Vasella or sports star like Roger Federer. By and large, the Swiss gave me the impression that most of them take this business of altruism relatively seriously. It is noticeable that Switzerland is a country where a lot is given away. It is widely known that there are thousands of charitable foundations there, some of which have been doing benevolent work for decades. There are anecdotes about generous individuals, too. There was a young woman in Kleinbasel who, for the six months she lived in a tenement, would carry a helpless old lady’s milk up to her small and dingy fourth-floor apartment. The young woman was later left several millions for her trouble, although the old woman never knew her name.

The most recent and amusing anecdote goes back to the launch of the Roger Federer Foundation, which benefits disadvantaged children in South Africa, among others, during the Swiss Indoors tennis competition, in 2004. Bank Sarasin had invited about sixty guests to a marquee in Basel’s exhibition center. They were all very proud of their hometown boy and his willingness, along with a few other champions who were dispersed around the place, to attend an auction of a number of his personal effects.



Peter Fischli/David Weiss, *Ohne Titel* (Venedig Tapes), film stills

A representative of the bank welcomed Federer who, in his now well-known unpretentious manner, announced the aims of his foundation. He did so standing on a small platform, holding a racket in his hand and smiling rather expectantly at the guests seated in front of him. Among those present were the Oeris (of the Roche pharmaceutical group), the performer Roberto Blanco, Martina Hingis, and collector Ulla Dreyfus. Federer's mother was at the far end of the marquee, feverishly awaiting the auction. Eventually, Federer and the man from the bank had talked enough. Simon de Pury climbed onto the platform, and without further ado seized Federer's racket and swept the tennis player off the stage.

A dashing mysterious air always surrounds Geneva's celebrity auctioneer. He reminds me of the Count of Monte Cristo or one of the Three Musketeers. As is generally known, auctioneering is for those with gambling in their blood. Where should the opening bid be pitched? How quickly and how high should bids go? How do you know if all the bids have been made or whether there is still something to be had? On this particular Sunday morning, de Pury was all over the place. Praising each of the trophies—"This is the towel Roger threw at Agashi, or, what's his name, Aggrassi?"—he stalked from table to table, and with a sure eye determined who in each party had money, and who did not. Anyone worth badgering until he made a bid could see how de Pury handled this event like a child's birthday party among the city's best families. From time to time, Roberto Blanco could be seen being spurred on by de Pury to bid 30,000 francs for the racket, and for a couple of horrible moments, it looked as if he had actually bought the thing. Ulla Dreyfus then threw a napkin over her head as de Pury whispered higher and higher bids into her ear. At the end of it all, the boy wonder of the tennis

world and his mother raked in a fair sum of money for a youth sports project in South Africa—sheer luxury.

Christoph Marthaler is a Swiss theater director of a type rarely found. He is regarded as the man who discovered slowness and who created post-dramatic theater, but these two things are of little interest to him, and he might not even understand them. According to conventional measures, his characters rarely behave normally on stage, and his performances are inspired by his conviction that conventional measures are the last things that can be classified as normal. Like almost every recognized Swiss artist, he kicked against the pricks and early on established his position as a critic of his native country. When Zurich unwittingly put him in charge of its theaters, he repaid the city for its naïveté.

Marthaler is nonetheless a patriot, albeit against his will. His plays are concerned with the inner conflict of the Swiss psyche, their collective fear of the world and obsession with it. They show us fussy, ridiculous individuals who—through their fussiness and ridiculousness—move us even more than Romeo and Juliet. His work takes us to gloomy places where even the few lights that are on start yawning. The basic scenario for his nights at the theater involves that melting pot, that meeting place of all classes, ages, eras, and dialects, the restaurant at the railway station in Olten (in the of canton Solothurn).

A station restaurant is never seen on stage (or almost never—he has occasionally turned the station restaurant in Basel into a stage). Instead he prefers the more abstract form of the waiting room. You might think that Marthaler has a "station"-ary image of Switzerland: the world comes and goes, but the Swiss themselves sit around dozing, caught motionless in a time warp. If you look closely, you'll see that the waiting rooms and



their residents—the figures on stage really do look as if they always live there—have certainly been endowed with a great deal of warmth by their master, just as if he were the waiting room attendant sitting in the midst of his ensemble. Looking more closely still, you will notice that the inactivity of those in the waiting room is not inactivity at all, but is instead a subtle, deliberate, and only on first sight ridiculous-seeming, pendulum movement that draws attention to itself exactly because it is incidental, slow, subtle, and to the fact that it is actually something of a wonder that people are waiting here. Suddenly there is movement.

Swiss artists do not say much as a rule, perhaps because they have to endure so much that is hidden—and hidden so well. The surprising and eruptive force with which they sometimes unearth their creations leads one to suppose as much. The unspoken is a powerful force for Swiss artists: dazzling conversation is rarely their forte. Even Max Frisch seems taciturn compared with his contemporaries of similar stature.

Just liken him to the German Alfred Andersch, writer and the king of the conversationalists, who was his neighbor in Ticino. Nowadays if you watch old television footage of Friedrich Dürrenmatt, you always have the feeling that something really dreadful is about to happen when he opens his mouth. When Swiss artists *do* speak up, strange associations come to mind. It must have been the same in the nineteenth century.

The diplomat Sir William Haller implies so in his journal: "The renunciation of a civilized language by the Swiss is a wise political decision against subversion, rabble-rousing and socialism. Rather than dialectic, the Swiss prefer dialect."²

The Swiss artist is metaphysical. Perhaps centuries of living among such a strange landscape means that even the inner world of the Swiss is composed of towering peaks and dark, ice-cold mountain lakes. It is an

isolated life on the shores of mountain lakes. Under their surface, things bubble away gently, sometimes infinitely so, until some fairy being lifts its horned head out of the water—the moment when an artist experiences a creative outburst. When at his best, Christoph Marthaler is known to have spent up to two weeks before an opening night with his actors in bars, drinking and sharing jokes. The result was three hours of sensational theater.

More recently, it was Thomas Hirschhorn's turn to experience a creative outburst when he was in Paris preparing his *Swiss-Swiss Democracy* exhibition for the Centre Culturel Suisse. What suddenly emerged from the mountain lake this time was a goblin in the form of Christoph Blocher. It is no surprise that Hirschhorn's installation was designed as an exercise in "exorcising" Blocher. Not for Hirschhorn the polite dialectic of democratic discourse!

The astonishing careers of Swiss artists over the past century can be understood, I think, only in relation to their proximity to supernatural beings and metaphysics. Not being masters of language, Swiss artists are prevented from adding subtle nuances to the zeitgeist. Swiss art and language usually sit uncomfortably together anyway, eloquence being regarded as a denial of character. The subversive attitude that characterizes this type of artistic genius is present in the forefather of the Swiss, Wilhelm Tell: I disobey, therefore I am.

Swiss art is also rich in great nonconformists: think of Arnold Böcklin, Robert Walser, and Blaise Cendrars as the mountain lake's response to modernism. Eruptions, the order of the day in Swiss art, cause collateral damage, and not only in art. From time to time, the art is barely discernible behind the debris of collateral damage (Adolf Wölfli and Ludwig Hohl come to mind). If Swiss artists say so little anyway, they certainly

do not talk about themselves. One might share the view of Romain Rolland in his novel cycle *John Christopher*:

*Every now and then there would arise some individual in revolt, some vigorous artist or unbridled thinker who would brutally break his bonds and set the city fathers by the ears. They were so clever that, if the rebel had not been stifled in the embryo, and became the stronger, they never troubled to fight him—a fight might have produced all sorts of scandalous outbreaks—they bought him up. If he were a painter, they sent him to the museum, if he were a thinker, to the libraries. It was quite useless for him to roar out all sorts of outrageous things: they pretended not to hear him. It was in vain for him to protest his independence: they incorporated him as one of themselves. ... But such cases were rare, most of the rebellions never reached the light of day. Their peaceful houses concealed unsuspected tragedies.*³

Notwithstanding city fathers or rebels, the “inner world” of the Swiss “outer world” is composed of mountain lakes and supernatural beings—and no one should underestimate them either.

At times, the country made things easy for immigrants, at other times not. During the nineteenth century and up until World War I, foreign workers were welcome productive resources. It was not unknown for Italians to be “hunted down” in Bern and Zurich. After World War I, 150,000 fewer foreigners lived in Switzerland than before it. To avoid upsetting Mussolini, thorough searches were conducted for Italian anti-fascists in the 1920s. In the thirties and forties, Germans with the letter “J” stamped in their passport were turned back at the Swiss border—to their death. In mid-1945, there were said to be 60,000 refugees in Switzerland. The way the country isolated itself during the years the Nazis were in power in Germany was an understandable reaction to the tightening grip of totalitarianism. Germans have to concede that much. Even if Switzerland did dirty its hands between 1933 and 1945, there were many Swiss men and women who showed their solidarity. Later Switzerland became more tolerant and allowed tens of thousands of exiled Hungarians, Czechs, and Tibetans into the country. New migrant laborers arrived, and this time they stayed.

Although the number of foreigners in Switzerland is relatively high—often higher per capita than in other western countries—it is still deemed a closed society. In discussions I have had abroad, I tried at first to promote understanding for this policy. Later on I realized that this image is not necessarily a damaging one. Reality looked different anyway: whether it was asylum-seeking Kosovo Albanians or German dentists seeking to set themselves up in practice, there was—usually—room for everyone.

The liberal-mindedness that can make a society seem petty—but which is often also sincerely generous—has been experienced even by those who pour scorn on that society. One of the most notable cases for me is that of Friedrich Nietzsche:



*Practically all have been denied grace and artistic inspiration by Nature. Even my close acquaintance Jakob Burckhardt, a man of means, lives in shabby surroundings in the worst of taste, and spends every evening in the tavern with the philistines of Basel. Add to this their absurd Swiss patriotism which, like Swiss cheese, also comes from sheep and has the same jaundiced color; the air of superiority with which they regard German attitudes, and occasionally Germans themselves: it is enough to make one inclined to lead the life of a hermit.*¹

It may be assumed that even face-to-face with Burckhardt, the Professor made no secret of his views. The Philistines did not resent him for it. Since his youth, Nietzsche had suffered from an undiagnosed syphilitic infection; aged thirty-five, his end seemed near. "My condition is akin to cruelty to animals and purgatory ... Oh, despicable, pernicious Basel where I have lost my health and will lose my life!"² He was mistaken, however.

Nietzsche tendered his letter of resignation to the Board of Education on May 2, 1879; the governing council of the canton of Basel City issued his letter of dismissal on June 14. Expressing his thanks and regret, the education councillor handed the letter over to Nietzsche on June 16. His retirement pension amounted to 3,000 francs a year: one thousand from the governing council, one thousand from the University, and one thousand from the Academic Society. His salary at the time of his resignation had been 4,500 francs.

It sounds terribly sentimental, but I'll say it anyway: I will forever remember the citizens of Basel for what they did. Here was a grouchy professor from Saxony, unfit for service, infirm even as a young man, who maybe had three students at his lectures (after he arrived in Basel, students took even less interest in the classics), and still they paid him a pension amounting

to two thirds of his annual salary. Purely incidentally, this produced the material conditions that allowed the professor to mark a momentous watershed in modern western thought—and not only thought.

Until his mental breakdown ten years later, Nietzsche—albeit somewhat wretchedly, but nevertheless as free as Zarathustra—was able to travel through Switzerland and Italy, a restless and driven man haunted by unspeakable fears and terrible pain. At least he had a modicum of security thanks to his pension from Basel. *Zarathustra*, *Daybreak*, his writings on morals, *Ecce Homo*: all of these went unheeded by contemporary intellectuals and the media.

Nietzsche had a reliable source of patronage. The splendid thing about it was that its source was not even aware of its role, it simply gave what it had undertaken to give: sheer luxury.

This is an edited extract from *Mein Abenteuer Schweiz*, published by Echtzeit-Verlag, Basel, 2007.

¹ From a fictitious speech attributed to Oscar Wilde, NZZ-Folio (March 1997), p. 69.

² Ibid.

³ Rolland, Romain. John Christopher, vol. 4, *The Burning Bush*, trans. Gilbert Cannan (London, 1913), p. 290.

⁴ Nietzsche, Friedrich. *Kritische Studienausgabe*, vol. V, eds. Giorgio Colli and Mazzino Montinari (Berlin, 1980), p. 14.

⁵ Ibid., p. 194.