

# SWISS REVIEW

The magazine for the Swiss Abroad  
APRIL 2021

**Clean drinking water –  
a luxury under threat**

**The mountain farmers of Grisons –  
Switzerland's organic champions**

**Psychoanalyst Peter Schneider:  
"You cannot negotiate with a virus"**



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# Disquiet in the reservoir of Europe

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Some are big, take Lake Geneva for example. Others are tiny, nameless pools in the high Alps. All told, Switzerland has over 6,000 different lakes. In addition, our country boasts 65,000 kilometres’ worth of rivers and streams. These waterways are our physical link to the sea – much of the water that trickles or cascades from our mountainsides eventually ends up in the North

Sea, the Mediterranean, the Adriatic, or even the Black Sea. It all has to flow somewhere. This aquatic wealth influences our national psyche. Switzerland likes to call itself the “reservoir of Europe”. And our drinking water is, it goes without saying, perfectly clean. Or is it? Recent indications give cause for concern.

Levels of chlorothalonil in drinking water are over the permitted threshold in many parts of the country. Switzerland’s greatest natural resource is less pure than we thought. Chlorothalonil is a fungicide suspected of having a carcinogenic and mutagenic effect. It was banned in Switzerland at the end of 2019. Many water companies now dilute the contaminated water with clean water. Diluting water to make it drinkable? Not the most palatable thought.

Swiss farmers who used chlorothalonil (legally) to protect their crops before 2020 feel like they are being unjustly criticised. Indeed, it would be wrong to view their role in isolation. Ultimately, “more efficient” farming and its associated fallout owe much to the loss of arable land due to urban encroachment as well as our insatiable consumer appetite for cheap food. What type of agriculture does Switzerland want? This is also a question dominating the contentious debate on two initiatives that will be put to the Swiss electorate on 13 June (see page 6).

Incidentally, hydrologists have given us another reason to be concerned about the future of Swiss water. From a climate change perspective, they say that Switzerland is set to become both wetter and drier. Our winters will be rainier. Snow will melt earlier, glaciers quicker. Consequently, more water will flow down into our valleys over a shorter time instead of being naturally retained at higher altitudes. On the other hand, summer precipitation will decline. Water shortages will become more common, particularly in regions of intensive farming. Droughts will become more frequent too. Meanwhile, water temperatures will continue to rise, endangering fish populations as a result. Lac des Brenets in the canton of Neuchâtel dried out completely in late summer 2018 – possibly a harbinger of Swiss summers to come.

MARC LETTAU, EDITOR-IN-CHIEF

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## Fifty years of women's suffrage in Switzerland



Thank you for this splendid article. I still marvel at Hanna Sahlfeld's courage and dedication. Her husband also deserves a mention. I followed the debate about women's suffrage in Zurich when I was young. My family used to play down or make fun of the issue.

EVA-REGINA BODEMANN, BERLIN, GERMANY

Women quite rightly got the vote, and we now take female suffrage as a given. But revisiting the issue just for the sake of upsetting the apple cart is actually unnecessary.

NICK DURRER, AUSTRALIA

Hanna Sahlfeld and co. certainly did their bit, but equality in Switzerland is still a myth. For example, why is the state pension lower for women than it is for men? I have paid my contributions just like everyone else. I have brought up children to become decent, law-abiding, tax-paying Swiss citizens – together with my husband, I hasten to add. If they want to raise the retirement age for women to 65 or beyond, women should receive the same amount of state pension as men – even on a retroactive basis. Women do more than just pay their way. They are mothers to children who are Switzerland's future!

RITA SCHNEIDER, AZAMBUJA, PORTUGAL

Not for a single minute in human history has depriving women of the political and civil rights enjoyed by men been justifiable. This injustice was and is deliberate, serving the selfish interests of the few.

URS KRAM, MEXICO

## Mitholz – Switzerland's most explosive village



Well, I might be all wrong, but, wouldn't it be possible to evacuate the inhabitants of Mitholz for one week. Say, take them on a vacation. Then let the army go into the bunker, wire rig everything to explode, then move 10 kilometers away and enjoy the fireworks. It may blow up the whole village, or not entirely. Then re-

build it! It seems to me this would be the cheapest and fastest way to get rid of a huge problem.

MATHEW BUNDI, CANADA

First, the Swiss army reneges on its responsibility and decides to look the other way. Then the same army comes up with a bright idea – and suddenly we have a problem, and quite a big one at that! Time to keep these men on a tight rein, I think – just like Switzerland did when it gave women the vote.

MARKUS REICHER, PÖRTSCHACH, AUSTRIA

## Betty Bossi, the timeless influencer



What? Betty Bossi doesn't exist? Like William Tell? What a surprise! Joking aside, every year for four generations, we have made our Christmas cakes as a family using the recipes of Betty B. A gourmet link with Switzerland.

CORINNE MAGNE-EGGER, PARIS, FRANCE

Betty Bossi is a firm fixture in my cooking here in London – and my “home from home” almost on a daily basis. My British husband sometimes makes fun of her surname, referring to the bossy cook in the kitchen. Nevertheless, even he has warmed to Betty over the years. Long live Betty “Bossy”!

CHRISTINA NIEDERBERGER, LONDON, UK

I have fond memories of my mother reading the Betty Bossi newspapers in Zurich. She was, for her time, an adventurous cook and enjoyed a new challenge. Since living in Australia I have lost touch with old Betty, we have our own food heroes here but I still make the soaked lemon cake and even converted some really accomplished bakers to using this recipe as their favourite! Thank you for this great article.

JEANNETTE JOSEPHS, BALLINA, AUSTRALIA

**Correction:** In the article entitled “The timeless influencer” (edition 1/2021 of “Swiss Review”), we incorrectly stated that Betty Bossi AG generated net sales of 89 million Swiss francs in 2019. The correct figure was in fact 81 million Swiss francs.

(MUL)

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## Tainted waters

Switzerland has huge water reserves. Every household in the country can access clean drinking water at all times. Or can they? Not all is as it seems.

THEODORA PETER

Water flows in abundance in Switzerland – a place where natural resources are otherwise scarce. There is a reason why our country is known as the reservoir of Europe. Not only do the Rhine and Rhône begin their journey here to the Atlantic and Mediterranean respectively, but Swiss streams and rivers also feed the major European rivers Po, Danube and Adige. Switzerland's enormous reserves of

“the blue gold” extend to lakes and groundwater too. Climate change has brought drier summers, causing glaciers to melt and reducing local springs to a mere trickle. Yet rain will continue to be Switzerland's most important water resource, feeding the country's groundwater particularly during the winter months. On average, 60 billion cubic metres of precious water falls from the sky each year in Switzerland – equal to the volume of Lake

Constance and Lake Lucerne put together. Switzerland looks unlikely to run dry any time soon. However, the quality of Swiss water is another issue altogether.

### Pesticide by-products in drinking water

Some 80 per cent of Swiss drinking water comes from springs and groundwater, 20 per cent from lakes.



**A subterranean aquatic temple – the Lyren drinking water reservoir in Zurich-Altstetten.**

Photo: Keystone

Groundwater is at its most abundant under the valley floors and fertile plains of the Central Plateau – the epicentre of Swiss vegetable and cereal cultivation. Pesticides have been used for decades in this intensively farmed region, and not without controversy. The latest furore surrounds the fungicide chlorothalonil – an active ingredient in crop protection products used on farmland since the 1970s to prevent fungus.

Chlorothalonil was banned at the end of 2019, after the federal government determined that the substance had a potentially damaging effect on health. Manufacturer Syngenta vehemently disputes the assertion that

the substance is probably carcinogenic. The agrochemical company took legal action forcing the Federal Office for Agriculture to remove this claim from its website until the Federal Supreme Court had given its definitive judgement on the matter.

However, the chlorothalonil ban is not the end of the problem, because by-products of the fungicide, known as metabolites, will continue to pollute the groundwater for years to come. The maximum legal value for toxicologically relevant substances such as these in Swiss drinking water is 0.1 micrograms per litre. Yet this limit is exceeded in intensively farmed parts of the Central

Plateau, such as the canton of Solothurn: “There are excess metabolites in nearly all water catchments situated in the valley plains – up to 20 times higher than the maximum acceptable limit in some cases,” says Martin Würsten, the former head of Solothurn’s environmental office. Since retiring, Würsten has been playing an active role in 4aqua – a group comprising dozens of experts and scientists who, in their own words, wish to give water a “political voice grounded in facts”.

### One million inhabitants affected

Würsten believes this voice has not been given enough attention in recent decades. “While we have made leaps and bounds in waste water purification, we have hardly made any progress in reducing the significant levels of water pollution caused by agriculture over the past 20 years,” he says. Würsten is also concerned that nowhere near all pesticides used on fields have been studied as closely as chlorothalonil was recently. In his view, “Something may not be seen as a health risk today, but it could well be in future”. This is why 4aqua wants the approval of synthetic pesticides to be subject to greater transparency and scrutiny. Some 370 substances are currently in use in Switzerland.

Higher-than-recommended levels of pesticide have been found in the drinking water supplies of around one million people in the Central Plateau region. The government has given drinking water suppliers a two-year deadline to bring chlorothalonil levels below the per-

# The water taster

For connoisseurs like Werner Koch, water is more than just a thirst quencher. The 57-year-old gerontologist is one of Switzerland's first-ever "water sommeliers".

INTERVIEW: THEODORA PETER

## Werner Koch, what does water taste of?

The mains water we drink at home from a tap is essentially odourless. However, untreated mineral water bottled at source will have a mineral character. Sodium, magnesium and calcium have their own distinctive taste. Hydrogen carbonate, for example, leaves a slightly furry taste in the mouth. It also aids digestion. The type of rock strata from which the water originated plays a key role. Calcareous water from the Jura smells a bit like plaster. Mineral water sourced from granite springs contains fewer dissolved minerals and always tastes to me like I have just licked a rock.

## You can drink the tap water in Switzerland, so why buy mineral water in the first place?

You shouldn't play tap water off against mineral water, or vice versa. Both have their place. We have an enormous variety of water resources in Switzerland, and we should be proud that Swiss tap water is perfectly fine to drink. This is a privilege when you look at other countries. Mineral water offers something different to normal tap water. If you choose the right type, it can be the perfect accompaniment to round off a heavy red wine.

## Does still water taste better than sparkling water?

All that carbon dioxide bubbles do is amplify the character of the water. Whether you prefer water with or without bubbles is a question of taste. Many people prefer only lightly sparkling water. A chemical reaction in your mouth turns the CO<sub>2</sub> into carbonic acid, so more bubbles mean more acidity.

## Do you recommend drinking water cold or at room temperature?

Again, it depends on what you prefer. It is fine to serve still mineral water a few degrees warmer with food. Sparkling water is very refreshing – by all means drink it cold. The water should also be cold if it comes from your kitchen tap – not many like it lukewarm.

## How much water should a person drink every day?

The recommended amount is at least 1.5 litres of water or 30 millilitres of water per kilogram of body weight. People are less inclined to drink water, the older they get. At our centre for the elderly, we try to get the residents to drink more by seasoning our water with herbs, fruits and vegetables. It is worth experimenting with things like celery sticks, which we leave to infuse in the water. Basil and strawberry are a particularly refreshing combination. Our residents enjoy these new flavours – and drink more as a result.

## Water is a precious commodity. Has your attitude to it changed?

I am more conscious of the need to save water and I never leave the tap on unnecessarily. We should do everything we can to ensure that water remains accessible to future generations everywhere – always fresh as nature intended. Water is life, after all.



Gerontologist Werner Koch is head of the Stampfenbach retirement home in Zurich. He studied to become a "water sommelier" at Gastrosuisse for his own personal fulfilment. Apart from being an accomplished mineral water taster, Koch is fascinated by the different facets and origins of drinking water.





Both initiatives specifically take aim at agriculture and its use of pesticides. Crop production would fall by at least 30 per cent without pesticides, says the Swiss Farmers' Union. Photo: Keystone

mitted threshold. One way to reduce the chlorothalonil is to dilute it with uncontaminated water, while a water cooperative in the Bernese Seeland region aims to eliminate it using an innovative filter. This only goes part of the way towards solving this serious problem, says Würsten, because it works against the principle that groundwater in Switzerland should not undergo complex treatment processes.

## Voters to decide on two initiatives

Würsten and his colleagues from the 4aqua group therefore support the Clean Drinking Water initiative that will be put to the people on 13 June. According to the proposal, submitted by a non-party pressure group, government subsidies should in future only go to farmers who refrain from using pesticides and administering antibiotics to livestock. Voters in June will also decide on an initiative called "For a Switzerland free of synthetic pesticides", which wants to ban the use of pesticides in Switzerland completely. The ban would also apply to the import of food produced using pesticides.

According to the Swiss Farmers' Union (SFU), both initiatives go way

too far. The SFU says that they would make domestic and regional farming more difficult if not impossible. If farmers were forced to stop using pesticides altogether, production would fall by at least 30 per cent. The SFU even warns that Swiss crops like potato, rapeseed, and sugar beet could almost become a thing of the past. Not all farmers share these fears. The federation of Swiss organic farmers, Bio Suisse, supports the pesticide initiative because it says the initiative reflects the core values of organic farming. It is more sceptical of the Clean Drinking Water initiative, which also states that farmers should only be permitted to keep as many animals as they can feed with self-produced fodder. Small organic producers could suffer as a result, says Bio Suisse.

The Federal Council and a majority in parliament recommend that voters reject both initiatives. In their view, the initiatives are damaging to agriculture and jeopardise Switzerland's food security. The government has set out a new, greener agricultural policy to tackle pesticides from 2022. However, the Council of States blocked the strategy and prefers a softly-softly approach to delivering better groundwater protec-

tion, thereby seeking to take the wind out of the sails of the initiatives ahead of an emotive voting campaign. In any case, the votes taking place on 13 June already look like a referendum on the future of Swiss agriculture, regardless of whether Swiss drinking water is clean or not.

Clean Drinking Water initiative:

<https://www.initiative-sauberes-trinkwasser.ch/>

Pesticide initiative:

<https://lebenstattgift.ch/>

Campaign opposing both initiatives:

<https://www.extreme-agrarinitiativen-nein.ch/>



## Our daily water

One hundred and forty-two litres. This is the average volume of drinking water that a single-person household in Switzerland consumes per day – of which more than half is used for showering, bathing, and flushing the toilet. Total per capita water consumption – encompassing the agricultural, industrial and commercial sectors – has been falling steadily over the past decades: from 500 litres per person per day in the 1970s, to around 300 litres today. Water-saving household appliances have played a role in this regard, as has the relocation of manufacturing facilities to other countries. Swiss water companies supply around a billion cubic metres of water per year. (TP)



## Another “Super Sunday” at the polls

The Covid-19 pandemic has failed to thwart direct democracy. On 13 June, voters will give their verdict on five more proposals – two initiatives and three referendums. Here are the issues at stake.

### Clean Drinking Water initiative:

According to this initiative (brought by citizens with no affiliation to any political party), subsidies should only go to farmers who refrain from using pesticides, antibiotics and bought-in fodder. Furthermore, the federal government should only fund agricultural research and education that meets these criteria. **(More on pages 6–8)**

### Pesticide initiative:

This initiative seeks to ban synthetic pesticides in Switzerland – not only in agriculture, but in soil and land management too. The import of food containing pesticides or produced using pesticides would also be banned. A non-party pressure group is behind this proposal as well. **(More on pages 6–8)**

### CO<sub>2</sub> Act:

The Federal Act on the Reduction of Greenhouse Gas Emissions (CO<sub>2</sub> Act) tightens the CO<sub>2</sub> emission limits for vehicles and increases tax on petrol and fuel. An SVP-backed campaign group representing affected industries opposes the CO<sub>2</sub> Act. Climate strike activists in French-speaking Switzerland have also voiced their dissent, saying the measures do not go far enough in the fight against climate change. **(More on page 11)**

## Acid test for Swiss climate policy

Switzerland is aiming to be carbon-neutral by 2050. The CO<sub>2</sub> Act is the first step towards this goal – provided voters give their approval on 13 June.

THEODORA PETER

As a signatory of the Paris Agreement, Switzerland is committed to combating global warming. To achieve this objective, parties to the agreement must significantly reduce harmful greenhouse gas emissions by the middle of this century. The Federal Council defined Switzerland’s long-term climate strategy at the beginning of this year, setting out guidelines for reaching the net-zero emissions target by 2050, i.e. the stage where Switzerland no longer emits more greenhouse gases than can be absorbed naturally or by technical means. The country’s building and transport sectors are to be emission-free. This will require more clean energy, of which greater amounts – namely geothermal, solar, wind and wood – will be produced domestically.

### Higher tax on petrol and fuel

The CO<sub>2</sub> Act, which parliament approved last autumn, provides the initial basis for a climate-neutral Switzerland. “We are laying the groundwork for Switzerland to achieve the net-zero target,” says environment and energy minister Simonetta Sommaruga (SP). Specific elements in the CO<sub>2</sub> Act include tighter CO<sub>2</sub> emission limits for vehicles as well as tax increases on petrol and fuel. Air passengers will also be obliged to pay a CO<sub>2</sub> tax on airline tickets. The car and petroleum industries are particularly opposed to these green measures. A campaign group representing various economic, transport and energy interests, with the backing of the SVP, consequently forced a referendum opposing the CO<sub>2</sub> Act.



Two “climate angels” in front of the Federal Palace, showing their support for a climate tax on airline tickets. If voters approve the CO<sub>2</sub> Act, this levy will be one of the measures implemented. Photo: Keystone

### Anti-Terror Act:

Under the Federal Act on Police Counterterrorism Measures, the courts are permitted to place people aged 15 or over under house arrest. The police may also take action to restrict the movements of children aged 12 or over. A number of party youth wings across the political spectrum are opposed to the legislation, calling it a “brazen attack on the rule of law”.

### Covid-19 Act:

The legal framework for emergency measures by the Federal Council to tackle the Covid-19 pandemic is already in force and will apply until the end of 2021. However, the Friends of the Constitution have called a referendum to repeal the Covid-19 Act, saying that the legislation is unnecessary, unethical and dangerous. Activists fear that the Covid-19 Act will set a precedent for further “government diktats”. TP

According to the group, the CO<sub>2</sub> Act is “costly and ineffectual”. Taxpayers, business and industry should not be forced to pick up the tab again, it says. But the powerful business federation *economiesuisse* is in favour of the CO<sub>2</sub> Act. It has drawn up its own climate master plan for the Swiss economy to show that innovation and efficient technology are key in helping businesses to be “part of the solution”. Many companies hope that investment in renewable energy will boost their order books. The federal government expects investments of up to 1,400 billion Swiss francs over the next 30 years.

### Criticism from the green lobby

However, the CO<sub>2</sub> Act has attracted criticism from climate campaigners in French-speaking Switzerland who say that measures to cut greenhouse gases do not go anywhere near far enough. In their view, the legislation even perpetuates the “environmentally destructive and inequitable structures” that already exist. But

the group was only able to collect 7,000 signatures for a referendum opposing the CO<sub>2</sub> Act. This was due to a lack of support from the national climate strike movement, which is reluctant to jeopardise the CO<sub>2</sub> Act’s “baby steps” but continues to advocate net-zero emissions by 2030 – 20 years in advance of the Federal Council’s own deadline.

According to Sommaruga, Switzerland will lose further precious time in the race against climate change if voters reject the CO<sub>2</sub> Act. The government would then have to take even more drastic action in future to meet the climate goals agreed in Paris.

## Switzerland in figures

### The Matterhorn continues to grow – but is not getting any higher

# 1.5

The Matterhorn is currently 4,478 m high and is growing around 1.5 cm each year. Its summit would already be 12,000 m above sea level by now, were it not for the elements continually eroding the iconic peak by – you’ve guessed it – some 1.5 cm each year.

# 62 000 000 000 000

But why is the Matterhorn growing in the first place? Mainly because the thick ice sheet that used to cover the Alps melted 18,000 years ago. With this 62-billion-tonne ice cap now gone, the entire mountain range is lighter as the earth’s crust rebounds. That is why the Alps are growing fastest in places where the ice cap was at its thickest.

# 6

On the list of the most attractive business locations, Switzerland has not quite scaled the summit. In a new study by the Leibniz Centre for European Economic Research (ZEW) in Mannheim, Switzerland fell in the rankings to sixth out of the 21 industrial nations surveyed – after occupying second place a decade ago. Areas such as regulation density were rated as our Achilles heel.

# 2

But a nation’s business-friendly credentials are not the sole factor on which quality of life depends. Take another study – the Human Freedom Index jointly published by the Cato Institute (USA) and the Fraser Institute (CAN), which ranks Switzerland second out of 162 countries. New Zealand is the only country rated higher. Syria is at the bottom of the list. The study also shows that there is indeed a link between personal freedom and economic prosperity.

# 0

Talking of prosperity – around a quarter of all Swiss households have zero wealth. Around half of all households have assets worth up to 50,000 Swiss francs. The super-rich help to feed the “wealthy Switzerland” narrative: 0.38 per cent of all households own assets worth 10 million francs or more. Added together, this accounts for around 30 per cent of Switzerland’s total wealth. The Covid-19 pandemic has only accentuated the gap between rich and poor.

FIGURES COMPILED BY MARC LETTAU

## Lonely freedom

Few other authors – and certainly no female authors – have been studied as much as Annemarie Schwarzenbach or had as much written or published about them in the last 100 years of Swiss literature as she has. There is an enduring fascination with the Zurich-born travel journalist, writer, and photographer who toured the globe in the 1930s – on account of her extraordinary, tragic life, her difficult family history, her exotic itineraries, her homosexuality and her drug addiction. Whereas literary friends such as Erika and Klaus Mann sought exile in America from 1933 onwards, Schwarzenbach left home in the opposite direction to visit countries that included Afghanistan, Iran, Turkey, the Soviet Union, and Belgian Congo. Her travels were frequently an attempt to escape from her bourgeois, Nazi-sympathising family, from traditional gender roles, and from drugs and depression. Although Schwarzenbach saw herself primarily as a writer (she penned around 300 journalistic, feuilleton-style pieces documenting the social and political upheaval and unrest of the period leading up to World War II), the “Departure without Destination” exhibition at the Paul Klee Centre in Berne is dedicated to her previously unknown photographic work. The Rolleiflex camera, known for its square-format photography, was Schwarzenbach’s faithful travel companion, taking pictures that depict her view of the world back then.

EVA HIRSCHI

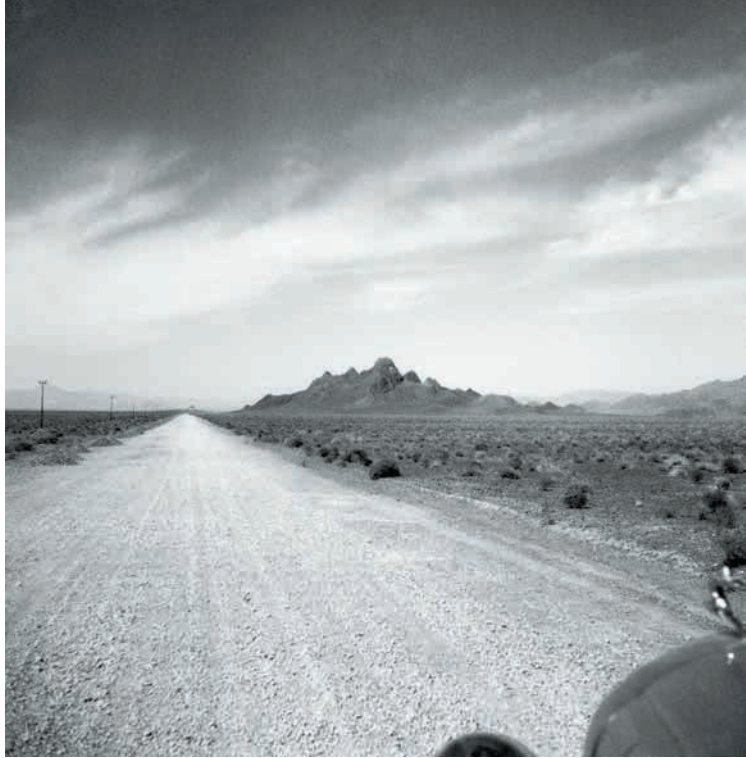
Photos taken from the Swiss Literary Archives of the Swiss National Library in Berne; estate of Annemarie Schwarzenbach



1



2



3



4

1) On her American travels (1936), Schwarzenbach portrayed a society still affected by the 1929 economic crisis.

2) Schwarzenbach took photos of European settlers who managed plantations in Belgian Congo (1941–42).

3) The barren wilderness of Iran (1935). Schwarzenbach's writings were almost as vivid as her photos, often betraying her emotional and physical state.

4) Marriage of convenience – Schwarzenbach, a lesbian, married the homosexual French diplomat Claude Clarac in Tehran in 1935.

5) Schwarzenbach travelled – in her Ford – to Afghanistan via Istanbul and Tehran with Genevan travel writer Ella Maillart in 1939.

6) On a ship between two places: the past and the future. Third-class passengers on the crossing to America (1936–38).

7) Annemarie Schwarzenbach, born in 1908 in Zurich, died on 15 November 1942 as a result of a bicycle accident in Engadine. © Esther Gambaro, estate of Marie-Luise Bodmer-Preiswerk



5



6



7

# How Grisons became the Swiss champion of the organic sector

Over 65 percent of farming in the canton of Grisons is organic. A Swiss record. Mountain agriculture and tourism have sped up the transition. Going organic is both ideologically and economically motivated.

STÉPHANE HERZOG

On this January morning, the Heinrich family farm is in the shade. Marcel and his wife Sabina are counting the days until the sun returns. Only one week left to wait. Welcome to Las Sorts, a hamlet in the Albula valley, perched at an altitude of 1,000 metres, not far from the famous Landwasser railway viaduct.

The Las Sorts farm – the name means “destiny” in Romansh – is similar to many of the holdings in Grisons. The transition to organic began through milk sales, thanks to pastures free from synthetic fertilizers. “My father was one of the first farmers to take this step in the valley,” recalls Marcel, who started out working as a woodsman. The move was not a simple one. To start with, the milk produced by these pioneers of the organic sector went unnoticed. But then, in the 1990s the retail giant Coop began to contact cheese dairies in search of organic produce. “As this milk sells for a better price and the nature of the farming is already close to being organic, a lot of farmers make that transition,” explains Claudio Gregori, President of Bio Grisons. “The open-mindedness of the farmers in Grisons contributed to this development,” adds Martin Roth, advisor at the canton’s agricultural training centre.

The leading product at Las Sorts is the mountain potato. Every year, the Heinrich family produces almost 70 tonnes of potatoes, of over 40 varieties, ranging from the black Vitelotte potato, red in colour and with a taste of chestnuts, to the delicate Belgian variety, the Corne de Gatte. This cul-

tivation requires a lot of manual labour on small plots, where crops are grown in rotation. “It’s a demanding choice, which leads to an understanding of the cycles of nature. In the organic sector, we see things it would be impossible to spot sat atop a tractor,” explains Marcel. Just at that moment, a fox appears in front of the house, provoking a slight panic because of the chicken coop. The valley also has wolves. “We sometimes hear them howling near the farm and we find deer carcasses, but they haven’t caused us any problems so far,” Marcel assures us.

## The mountain potato: a niche product

In these high lands, where the ground is mown late, the organic farmers have to create niche products and show a knack for marketing. For example, the Heinrich family participated in the launch of a potato academy, which brings together fans of rare varieties. “Organic potatoes have a very distinctive taste. Chefs tell me that they are four times more nutritious than a conventionally grown potato,” enthuses Marcel, who counts among his clients Michelin-starred chefs such as Sven Wassmer in Bad Ragaz and Heiko Nieder in Zurich. The famer likes to share his knowledge, but is not out to convert everyone to organic farming. His latest project is the cultivation of an ancient variety of beans, launched with the help of the association Pro Specie Rara. The operation has taken five years of trials. In 2020, the harvest of these beans, which can withstand the

cold weather, came to 1,500 kilograms.

At Las Sorts, approximately 65 percent of the revenue is generated through direct sales. The rest comes from subsidies from the Confederation, where what counts is the number of hectares. “The proportion of our revenue that comes from sales is high for a mountain region,” states Marcel. He has stopped selling to major distributors, a system that he considers “precarious, and which leaves farmers with their hands tied”. We leave the convivial warmth of the Heinrich home, its stove with bundles of wood piled up in the bathroom, and head for Filisur.

## The decision to slaughter calves on the farm

Further north, we meet Georg Blunier and his wife Claudia. Their farm, leased from another farmer, offers a magnificent view of the Rhine. The cold is biting and the sun burns your eyes. Welcome to Dusch, situated at an altitude of 850 metres. The couple began their life together living in a town, but after spending two summers in alpine pastures in the cantons of Valais and Grisons, they decided to take the plunge into farming. Georg Blunier worked as a graphist and artist in Biel. Now, here he is with his feet caked in mud, working 70-hour week after 70-hour week. “With art, you create problems to find solutions. In farming, you follow the rhythm nature imposes on you and you see the tangible results of your work,” he says. The Dusch farmers, who have cultivated their land organically since 1989, grow cereals and



Higher, further, faster, more beautiful? In search of the somewhat different Swiss records. This edition: The canton with the highest proportion of organic farmers.



Potatoes are the leading product at the Las Sorts farm run by Sabina and Marcel Heinrich (left). The couple grow over 40 different varieties. This cultivation requires a lot of manual labour. Photos: Mayk Wendt

The Dusch organic farm, run by Georg Blunier (below) and his family, has been growing cereals since 1989. However, the farm's niche product is its Rhaetian grey cattle meat. Photos: Mayk Wendt



## Grisons's organic sector in figures

At the end of 2019, the canton of Grisons counted 1,291 organic farms, including 1,255 bearing the Bio Bourgeon label, out of a total of 2,067 farms overall. This means that 62.5% of farms are organic. This is the Swiss record both in percentage and in absolute terms. In Switzerland, organic produce represents approximately 10% of the food market. (SH)

fruits. But the farm's niche product is its Rhaetian grey cattle meat, which represents around 30 percent of their revenue. In 2018, Georg was granted the right to have his calves slaughtered on the farm, which was a first for Switzerland. The animals are killed and bled out on site by a butcher. This practice avoids the stress generated by transporting them to the abattoir. Here, the calves feed on their mother's milk for 12 months and are killed at the age of two. The packaged meat is home delivered.

### Malans: a farm for male chicks

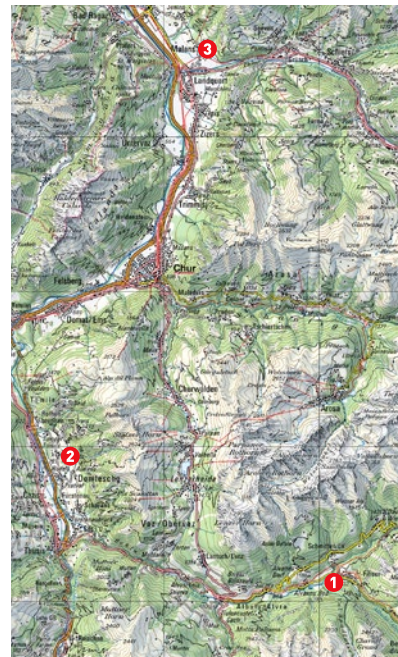
Further down the Rhine, we arrive in Malans with its south-facing vines. The snow has vanished from the orchards here. In an area where a square metre of land is worth its weight in gold, Valérie Cavin, born in the canton of Vaud and raised in Zurich, cultivates half a hectare of vines with her partner, Roman Clavadetscher, from the canton of Grisons. Their bottles of pinot noir are in great demand, but the niche product here comes in the form of male chicks, not killed upon hatching, but raised alongside the females in four little mobile huts, each housing 500 birds. "High-class restaurants buy the male chickens from us, which means they can tell a story to their clients about the dishes. Other



Valérie Calvin and Roman Clavadetscher tend to their sun-drenched vines in Malans. Photo: Mayk Wendt

customers make this choice for ethical reasons and they pay a higher price for our eggs in order to help support the farm," explains Valérie Cavin. Another niche is the production of organic garlic, which requires intensive manual labour. In 2020, the Malans farm produced three tonnes. Both graduates in agronomy, this farmer and her husband state that only 10 percent of their revenue comes from public subsidies. Because here, crop cultivation does not depend on the same subsidies as mountain pastures. Having arrived in Malans in 2003, the couple have retained external positions: she is a teacher in the agriculture sector and he is an organic advisor. "This choice grants us more freedom and security, in case we lose our potatoes to the frost, for example," explains Valérie.

Buoyed by the increased support of the Confederation, the organic movement is spreading from valley to valley. "But the choice to make this transition remains one of the heart," believes Claudio Gregori. At least the farmers we met in Grisons seem to think so. The use of chemicals is effec-



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An organic farming tour of Grisons:

- 1 the Las Sorts farm and its potato fields in the Albula valley;
- 2 cereals and Rhaetian grey cattle on the Dusch organic farm near Paspels;
- 3 the sunny vineyards of Malans – our final, mostly northerly stop.

tively cutting off the hand that feeds. Land cultivated organically is more resilient. What's more, the real cost of organic farming would be lower if the external costs of intensive farming – the waste products – were factored in. "In the end, it is the food choices of Swiss consumers that will set the pace of this transition," concludes Georg Blunier.



# Honduras and Venezuela in Romansh

Luisa Famos's poignant, inspiring works evoke memories of her Engadine homeland as well as her encounters in Latin America

CHARLES LINSMAYER

“Trais randulinas / Battan lur alas / Vi dal tschêl d'instà // Minchatant tremblan / Trais sumbrivas / Sülla fatschad' alba / Da ma chà.” This is a Romansch poem called “Lügl a Ramosch” (July in Ramosch), which reads like this in English: “Three swallows / open their wings / into the summer sky // Three shadows / quiver sometimes / on the white facade / of my house.”

It was in Ramosch, a village in deepest Engadine, that the poem's author Luisa Famos was born in 1930. Famos chose the most attractive career path for girls of that era: gaining her qualifications in Chur to become a teacher in Sertig (near Davos) and in Guarda (near Scuol). Yet her childhood memories of Ramosch remained with her forever. Once she began to put pen to paper in 1959 while studying literature in Paris, she soon realised that the fields, pines, flowers and swallows of Engadine only made sense to her in her native language, Romansch.

Famos had a genuine talent for words. With an innate sense of piety and a longing for love and endearment, she lent brilliant, long-lasting intensity to these memories – the fluffy clouds of summer, the sound of church bells, stars twinkling in the night sky – without ever descending into kitsch. In 1960, she published the widely acclaimed “Mumaints” (Moments) – a collection of poems – following her literary debut in the “Chalender Ladin” almanac. (Famos had returned to Switzerland by then and was teaching at a school in the canton of Zurich.)

But Famos had no wish to become Engadine's resident poet. Instead, she chose to work in television from 1962, where she presented the first-ever Romansch programme “Il balcon tort”. However, Famos moved to Honduras in 1969 with engineer Jürg Pünter, with whom she was now married, and her two children. She went on to Venezuela in 1971. During a three-year sojourn, Famos showed that her poetic range was by no means limited to Grisons, but that her Romansh lyrics were also very well suited to describing the landscapes and people of Latin America – and, indeed, breaking away from the environment of white colonial privilege to bring the plight of indigenous populations into heart-rending focus.

Her memorable poem “Pitschna indiana” (Little Amerindian), which tells of an indigenous Amerindian girl who is run over by a truck, is like a plaintive cry for help. At the end of the poem, the red ribbon in the girl's hair

comes to rest next to her hand: “Pitschna indiana / cul bindè cotschen / Dasper teis man brün” (“Little Amerindian / with the red ribbon / next to your brown skin”). The effortless quality of Famos's vernacular poetry is astonishing both here and in the context of the Engadine Alps.

Famos also addressed the theme of death relatively early in her life – and most movingly in the 1972 poem “L'Ala de la mort” (The wing of death), written after her return to Switzerland, which ends as follows: “Davo ais gnüda la not / Sainza gnir s-chür / Stailas han cumanzà lur gir / E Tü o Dieu / Am d'eirast sten dastrusch” (“Then night fell / without warning / Stars began their nocturnal dance / And you, my God / were next to me.”). These are the farewell verses of a poet eternally remembered as a beautiful young woman. Before they appeared in “Inscunters” (Encounters), Famos had lost her battle to cancer on 28 June 1974, aged 43.

BIBLIOGRAPHY: Luisa Famos's poems (in the original Romansh with German translations) are available in “Unterwegs / In viadi”; Limmat-Verlag, Zurich.

CHARLES LINSMAYER IS A LITERARY SCHOLAR AND JOURNALIST IN ZÜRICH



D'ingionder ch'eu vegn

Where I am coming from

Ingio ch'eu gjarà

Where I am going

Chi'm sa dir

Who can tell me

Sch'eu sun

Whether I am

Sch'eu sun stat

Whether I was

Sch'eu sarà

Whether I will be

Chi'm sa dir

Who can tell me

Porta'm vent

Carry me wind

Sün ti' ala

On your wing

Bütta'm flüm

Throw me river

A la riva

On to the bank

## “As much as it pains me to say it, you cannot negotiate with a virus”

The Covid-19 pandemic began a year ago. Time to set the record straight on the Swiss response. Psychoanalyst Peter Schneider tells us about his misguided belief in Switzerland’s invincibility, lost confidence, and his own form of Covid fatigue.



INTERVIEW: SUSANNE WENGER

Peter Schneider is a busy man – our video call with him took place on a Sunday in February. Switzerland was still in its second nationwide lockdown, after restaurants, shops, and cultural and leisure venues had shut in mid-January. Months of government prevarication had preceded the restrictions, which ended up being less strict than those in neighbouring countries. Ski resorts and mountain railways remained open to everyone, including tourists. The biggest vaccination campaign that the country has ever seen had also begun. Case numbers were falling, but infections from new variants of the virus were increasing – a source of anxiety for the authorities. Despite this, centre-right and right-wing politicians were clamouring for an end to the lockdown and trying to force the government’s hand on the issue. There had been almost 9,000 Covid deaths by February, mostly as a result of the second wave. Zurich-based psychoanalyst Peter Schneider, 63, is a university lecturer, book author, satirist, and columnist known in Switzerland for hitting a nerve. He smoked a cigar during the interview.

**Peter Schneider on Switzerland’s “middle course” during the pandemic: “We certainly saw the worst aspects of federalism come to the fore, but we cannot blame federalism for everything.”**

Photo: Ursula Markus

“The first lockdown had somewhat of a scouts-and-guides feel to it, didn’t it?”

**Swiss Review: Hello Mr Schneider. The pandemic began almost one year ago.**

**How are you doing?**

Peter Schneider: Not too bad, but that is mostly down to luck. I no longer do face-to-face appointments and have been giving my lectures online – which is better than it sounds, as it saves me from having to travel around. Essentially, I am just as busy as before, and I can still choose when and what to write. The restrictions have not affected me that much, given that I tend to stay at home anyway.

**And how is Switzerland doing?**

Which Switzerland do you mean? My fortunate circumstances are different from the experiences of people who are on short-time working hours, have lost their jobs or are fearing for their livelihoods. Their situations are of course a far cry from mine. I don’t want to imply that the country is split between the fortunate and less fortunate, but we cannot think that everyone is the same. We need to look at why some people are having a particularly hard time and who those people are.

**After bringing the first wave of the pandemic under control, Switzerland became a European Covid hotspot during the second wave – to many people’s surprise. Yours too?**

Yes, I was surprised. The first wave and lockdown had somewhat of a scouts-and-guides feel to it, didn’t it? We saw people clapping for carers and playing music on their balconies on the evening news. There was something

adventuresome about it, at least here in Switzerland. We watched the Federal Council press conferences and felt in good hands. The public appreciated this calm, considered approach to dealing with the pandemic – but then things unravelled.

**How?**

So many things went wrong. It turns out we made some serious mistakes during the first wave. The authorities questioned the effectiveness of protective masks – an expedient line to take because there were not enough masks available in the first place. From summer onwards, you could sense that the opinions of a self-serving lobby were beginning to drown out scientific logic. There was not enough testing. Track and trace was inconsistent. Politicians were at loggerheads. It is not only the myriad restrictions that people currently resent, but also the lack of clarity. They feel disoriented. I think a great deal of public confidence has been lost.

**Ostensibly, Switzerland is well placed to fight any pandemic – with its world-class healthcare system, its stable system of government, and its widespread prosperity.**

Yes, and during the first lockdown I still believed in our own invincibility. I thought Switzerland would come out smelling of roses once again – unfair, I know, but reassuring nonetheless. I was at a loss for words for what hap-

pened thereafter. I often defend my country when people start criticising, because some of the arguments are quite facile. They moan but have little idea of how the political cogs turn. But I cannot disagree with them this time.

**Why was the Swiss response so inept at times?**

I really don’t know. We certainly saw the worst aspects of federalism come to the fore, but we cannot blame federalism for everything. Most politicians spoke of the importance of individual responsibility, even though it made no sense. It is for governments to fight pandemics. If I drive from Zurich to Berne, it is not my job to build the roads that take me there.

**The Federal Council tried to strike its own middle course. Is that not a legitimate way of going about things?**

There are many Swiss approaches that I like, even if some of the political outcomes leave something to be desired. At least our system establishes broad support for the decisions that are made. Even in a pandemic, it is not all about restrictions. There are political intricacies to take into account. But to think that a virus will be more amenable to us because we are Swiss? As much as it pains me to say it, you cannot negotiate with a virus.

**Do you think economic interests were prioritised ahead of people’s lives, as critics are suggesting? Does the pandemic show that society has its priorities wrong?**

It is a mystery to me why we have to pit the economy against human lives

“It is not only the myriad restrictions that people currently resent, but also the lack of clarity. They feel disoriented.”

in the first place. Do you really think the economy will flourish if the population is sick and mortality rates soar? Does the economy exist in some sort of parallel universe in which other laws apply? It does not. Even now people are still at it, saying that we should open up the economy as soon as possible. I am sick of hearing the same fact-denying arguments over and over again. You can call it my own form of Covid fatigue.

It is as if certain politicians and a proportion of the population have turned into whiny teenagers who won't take no for an answer. There comes a point when you want to say: “Go out this evening if you must. Drink as much as you like. Here are the car keys. Now clear off.”

**For a long time, the high mortality rate was less of a public concern. How come?**

It took a while for us to realise that care homes had basically turned into death traps. I thought the consequent rhetoric was awfully callous. We had the beard-stroking brigade telling us via the media that we all have to die sooner or later. The elderly were urged to make out living wills, so that intensive-care units would not have to resort to triage. Why go through the ordeal of being put on oxygen? Let them all die peacefully of Covid instead. By the way, I caved in myself and filled out my own living will.

**Dare we ask what you wrote?**

I said I wanted to be kept alive at all costs and not treated by someone infected with Covid. Ironically, it does

not hurt at all to think about your own mortality now and again. Anyway, the fact that the authorities failed to act earlier to counteract a second wave is the real scandal. They said the public would not swallow a second lockdown, yet there was no lack of solidarity within the population during the first lockdown. No one said, “Covid is only dangerous for old people and heavy smokers, why penalise us?” Then the debate about Covid deaths was turned on its head at Christmas. Suddenly everyone wanted to hug granny and grandad again but couldn't. It was over all the newspapers. I have never read so much drivel.

**Switzerland was nowhere near as good at fighting the pandemic as many thought.**

**Does this change our opinion of Switzerland, where everything is meant to go like clockwork?**

Not really. If you have an inflated view of Switzerland, you are probably not that concerned. Actually, you are more likely to think that the middle course was terribly un-Swiss. And the rest of us are probably too realistic or fatalistic to have been incredibly surprised. But this means it could be hard to restore confidence when future cri-

ses come around. It certainly will not be the last pandemic we have.

**Will Covid-19 change Swiss society?**

No. The pandemic and its sub-plots provide more than enough fuel for everyone to feel vindicated. The best we can hope for is that the powers that be get their act together. Developing a better track-and-trace app would be a good start. Sobering it might be, but Switzerland never was and never will be a special case. But nor is everything bad here either. We can wallow in self-criticism if we are not careful. Admittedly, Switzerland has not covered itself in glory over the past year or so. Nevertheless, many things have functioned very well. And to be fair, other countries that were doing better than us at one stage are also experiencing their second or third wave.

A dossier containing every “Swiss Review” article on the Covid-19 pandemic can be found at [www.revue.ch](http://www.revue.ch)

Direct link to dossier: [revue.link/covid19](https://www.revue.ch/link/covid19)

## Fundamental rights for primates?

The voters of Basel-Stadt are to decide whether all primates in their canton should have fundamental rights. Is this just monkey business, or is there more at stake?



**Humans granting primates a “right to life”? An initiative in Basel-Stadt wants to achieve just that.**

Photo: iStockphoto

JÜRIG STEINER

Imagine the scene. A primate is sitting in court. Its lawyer is summing up her argument in a case that has been brought because the primate feels its life has been put in danger. Will it soon be possible – in Basel at least – for primates to bring their own “human rights cases” to court? Will interpreters have to specialise in monkey speak? Will we be providing apes with legal support? Will child and adult protection agencies have to extend their area of responsibility to include the 300 species of non-human primates?

Campaigners in the canton of Basel-Stadt want to push through a popular initiative that would grant primates “fundamental rights to life as well as physical and mental integrity”. In biological terms, humans also belong to the primate family – reason enough for the “primate initiative” to provoke some eye-catching responses and questions since it was launched in 2016. What is certain is that the shock waves will reverberate abroad if the voters of

Basel-Stadt approve the initiative (set to be put to the electorate in 2022). Never before will animals anywhere in the world have been awarded fundamental rights as a result of direct democracy.

From the outset, the authors of the initiative have denied that they are trying to extend all human rights to non-human primates or suggesting that we should be humanising primates or putting them on an equal footing with humans. For example, they say it would be absurd to give primates other basic rights such as freedom of expression, freedom of assembly or religious freedom, because primates would never be able to exercise these. On the other hand, they insist that there is neuroscientific and behavioural evidence to show that primates are communicative, sensitive, empathic, social creatures, and that a constitutional article to protect primates from violent death as well as physical and psychological suffering is completely justified, given that current laws fall far short of achieving this.

## “Damage to property”

According to University of Berne law professor Peter V. Kunz, animals are regarded as property under Swiss law: “Hence, when we kill an animal, this does not constitute killing in the legal sense, but damage to property.” It would be a paradigm shift if fundamental rights for primates were enshrined in the constitution, Kunz says, because non-humans would be recognised as legal entities for the first time.

Giving primates fundamental rights is an idea that is rejected by those who believe that it undermines animal testing in the pharmaceutical industry as well as primate captivity at Basel Zoo. The primate initiative was launched by Sentience Politics, a “political organisation that fights for the rights of non-human animals”, as its executive director Silvano Lieger puts it. The animal rights NGO also campaigns for a better choice of vegetarian and vegan food in public-sector canteens in Swiss cities and was responsible for a federal popular initiative to abolish factory farming. By advocating constitutional rights for primates, Sentience Politics has taken up a cause first championed by such figures as the Australian philosopher and ethicist Peter Singer, who wrote the 1975 bestseller “Animal Liberation”.

## No direct consequences for zoos or the pharmaceutical sector

The cantonal parliament of Basel-Stadt ruled the primate initiative unacceptable because it feared the initiative would contravene federal law if enacted into the cantonal constitution. However, the Federal Supreme Court corrected Basel-Stadt on this point in autumn 2020 and decided to give the canton’s electorate the opportunity to vote on the contentious issue – with one important caveat: only the canton’s public organisations and institutions would be bound by the resultant amendment to the cantonal constitution if the initiative was accepted. A yes vote would therefore only have indirect consequences for private entities, such as pharmaceutical companies or Basel Zoo.

Does this mean granting primates fundamental rights simply boils down to semantics and has no tangible impact? “The initiative has more than just symbolic value,” counters renowned animal and climate law specialist Charlotte Blattner, who is a senior researcher at the Institute of Public Law of the University of Berne. Blattner has been studying the ethical and legal aspects of the primate initiative for a number of years. “The key issue is whether society manages to find a means of truly respecting and safeguarding the fundamental interests of animals, i.e. their right to life and to physical and psychological integrity,” she says.

## Animal use instead of animal protection?

In 1992, Switzerland became the first country in the world to enshrine the notion of animal dignity in its constitution. Its Animal Welfare Act is strict compared to similar legislation in other countries. However, statistics show only around 2,000 violations being punished each year, mostly with fines of up to a few hundred francs. Blattner believes that animal welfare in Switzerland is only at a superficial level, because human interests are ultimately always given precedence over animal interests. For example, federal acts and ordinances define the permitted methods of killing animals in minute detail. “Basically, the Animal Welfare Act could also be referred to as the Animal Use Act,” she says.

Therefore, Blattner regards the primate initiative as the first step towards a wider social debate about a more equitable relationship between humans and animals – including animals less similar to humans. “What about pigs?” she asks. “They also want to live and not feel pain.” Blattner is at pains to stress that granting animals fundamental rights will not result in fewer fundamental rights for humans. On the contrary. “Animal welfare standards are commonly poor in places where humans are also treated badly,” she adds. Take factory farms, where working conditions are often difficult. Conversely, new studies have shown that countries promoting animal rights also treat their citizens better and are committed to improving the lives of vulnerable people.

The real challenge arises when we take a long-term view. Will we reach a tipping point where fundamental rights for animals spell the end of animal use as we know it? Will veganism become the only possible alternative? This is the subject of heated academic debate, says Blattner, although the majority of her colleagues endorse the vegan option. Professor Markus Wild, who specialises in animal philosophy, has taken the issue further and applied it to climate change. Given the dramatic decline in biodiversity, humans have no other option but to rethink their relationship with animals if they are to save themselves, he argues. In this respect, the primate initiative could prove to be a meaningful beginning.

[sentience-politics.org](http://sentience-politics.org)

# E-voting gets a second chance

Switzerland's cantons are now allowed to offer e-voting again. But it will take some time before voters can use a rebooted version of the technology.

EVELINE RUTZ

Swiss voters will again be able to vote in elections and referendums at the click of a mouse. After grinding to a halt one-and-a-half years ago, e-voting has been resurrected by the federal authorities. Cantons will be allowed to offer it on a trial basis to a limited number of people. Thurgau, Fribourg and St. Gallen have already expressed interest. They will be able to start as soon as the statutory framework has been adapted accordingly – probably in 2022.

Electronic voting has been debated for years in Switzerland. The federal government has been trying to develop and establish a secure system since 2004. It had authorised over 300 trials in 15 cantons by the time it brought matters to a halt in mid-2019, after the two most important e-voting providers decided to recall their software. The pioneering canton of

Geneva bailed out for financial reasons, while Swiss Post took its solution out of service after external experts discovered security flaws. Deprived of a digital means of voting, democratic participation among the Swiss Abroad has plummeted. This was evident in the 2019 national elections, when voter turnout within the “Fifth Switzerland” fell by up to a third in cantons that had offered e-voting back in 2015. The Swiss diaspora are anything but amused.

## Postal voting scuppered by the pandemic

Many Swiss Abroad complain that they are being prevented from exercising their political rights, adding that policymakers lack the will to do anything about it. Meanwhile, the Covid-19 pandemic has made it even harder to vote by post. Postal services have been working at the limit of their capacity at times, with voting papers arriving even later than they used to in many parts of the world. Expatriates living overseas are basically no longer able to vote in their home country.

Their hopes of e-voting are high. “Expats no longer have to fear losing their vote because it takes too long to send their voting papers back by post,” said Federal Chancellor Walter Thurnherr in December when he announced the government’s decision to reintroduce e-voting. The visually impaired would benefit particularly from e-voting, he added, as they would be able to fill in their voting papers without the help of a sighted person. Thurnherr said there was a need for e-voting because more and more of us are manag-

ing our lives online, but that the federal government still believed security comes before speed. It wanted to go about things the right way. “E-voting in elections and popular votes will only work if citizens trust the process,” he said.

## Continually monitored and improved

The Federal Council now wants stricter security, saying that it will only approve fully verifiable systems in future. Such systems allow users to check whether their votes have been registered correctly. They also ensure that systemic malfunctions and cases of voter fraud are identified. E-voting solutions will be more closely monitored and continually improved. The government will rely on independent specialists to do this job, but will also remunerate members of the public who can provide useful tip-offs. Current law already stipulates that the source code and documentation of any e-voting platform must be disclosed. Open-source criteria will now apply.

The statutory framework still needs to be adapted before testing can restart. Consultations on that are scheduled for this year. E-voting could then be up and running again in 2022. Meanwhile, Swiss Post unveiled its new, improved e-voting platform in January.

## Cantons criticise restrictions and costs

However, e-voting – the third regular voting channel alongside ballot-box voting and postal voting – will be available to no more than 30 per cent



Federal Chancellor Walter Thurnherr:

“E-voting in elections and popular votes will only work if citizens trust the process.”

Photo: Danielle Liniger

of voters at cantonal level and no more than 10 per cent of the electorate at national level. “These limits are a considerable blow to cantons that were banking on an extensive rollout,” says Barbara Schüpbach-Guggenbühl, State Chancellor of the canton of Basel-Stadt and chair of the Swiss Conference of Cantonal Chancellors. Such cantons include Glarus, Grisons and Basel-Stadt, for example. According to Schüpbach-Guggenbühl, cantonal parliaments are likely to balk at the significant costs involved in implementing e-voting. “We cannot cover these costs on our own,” she says. “Finding solutions to this problem is a matter of urgency. The federal government needs to work with us.” Security concerns are also likely to complicate matters. Motions to this effect are pending in a number of cantons.

We quizzed the canton of Geneva, but the response from Switzerland’s e-voting pioneers was guarded. According to its cantonal chancellery, Geneva has no plans to offer e-voting any time soon. The canton of Berne used to rely on Geneva’s old e-voting system and has yet to decide on how to proceed. Stefan Wyler of the Berne cantonal chancellery said that his cantonal government would review the



President of the Organisation of the Swiss Abroad, Remo Gysin  
“Cantons shouldn’t have to do it all themselves.”

situation in the first quarter of 2021. The canton of Berne currently has no contract with Swiss Post, so 2023 is conceivably the earliest it can relaunch e-voting.

The Federal Council is reluctant to take the lead, unfortunately, according to Remo Gysin, president of the Organisation of the Swiss Abroad (OSA). “Cantons shouldn’t have to do it all themselves,” he says. Gysin thinks the federal government should contribute much more, and that includes financially. And it also needs to hurry up. “Ideally, we need to have established an e-voting system before the next national elections in 2023.” The OSA issued a resolution to this effect back in 2019. Referring to Thurnherr’s “security over speed” mantra, Gysin is keen to stress that the OSA supports efforts to make e-voting watertight. Nevertheless, ensuring that as many people as possible can exercise their political rights matters just as much, in his opinion.

### Scepticism across the political spectrum

A broad alliance of politicians and experts say that potential hacker attacks

could erode public faith in e-voting. All systems have loopholes, they argue. The sceptics lobbied in parliament for an e-voting moratorium. They also launched a popular initiative, but abandoned the signature collection process in summer 2020 due to Covid restrictions.

There is no such thing as complete security, says Eric Dubuis, information technology professor at the Berne University of Applied Sciences. “It is like flying: people still board planes in the knowledge that planes can crash.” But after 30 years of research, he adds, individual and universal verification means that e-voting is subject to a high level of security. We can now check whether a vote has been properly recorded, whether all votes are from eligible voters, whether all valid votes have been counted in the result, etc. “We can now design e-voting systems in such a way that allows us to clearly identify voter fraud.” Ultimately, it is up to society to decide whether e-voting has a place in our democracy, he concludes.

### Speeding up postal voting

Using diplomatic bags to send voting papers would give Swiss domiciled abroad a better chance of exercising their political rights, Zurich FDP National Councillor Andri Silberschmidt has said in a parliamentary motion. Silberschmidt has suggested that voting papers for elections and popular votes could be sent in bundles to the Swiss representations, with local post services then forwarding the papers individually to voters. In turn, embassies and consulates could collect completed voting papers and transport them back to Switzerland all together. (ER)



Barbara Schüpbach-Guggenbühl on the restrictive nature of the e-voting rollout:

“A considerable blow.”



## A break in Switzerland for expatriate children

Every year, the Foundation for Young Swiss Abroad (FYSA) offers over 300 young Swiss expatriates the chance to visit Switzerland in the summertime and make friends with children of the same age from around the world. Despite the uncertainty surrounding the Covid-19 pandemic, we will continue to try our best to offer you a varied selection of holiday camps this year. We have had to downsize our range of camps a little, but we remain as motivated as ever to showcase Switzerland to as many Swiss expatriate children as possible. Organising the camps poses particular challenges to the FYSA this year, while parents are naturally also asking questions. For that reason we have produced a document called "Holiday Camp Covid Information 2021", available on our website, which contains useful information that will help parents to plan ahead.

We have already received many bookings for this year's summer season. Late bookers who would like to know which camps still have free spots should visit our website: <https://sjas.ch/en/>.

This year, the FYSA is again offering discounts on travel and/or camp costs to families who would otherwise find it hard to



afford sending their children to our camps. We urge such families to apply for these discounts when making bookings. Our donors will be pleased to know that the discounts they help fund have given children the gift of a carefree couple of weeks in Switzerland, even in difficult times. If you wish to make a donation yourself, visit <https://sjas.ch/en/about-us/donations/>.

LOÏC ROTH

## New offers 2021: online language courses

Alongside other young Swiss Abroad, participants will have the chance to study one of the Swiss national languages from their own home, thereby maintaining a connection with their country of origin, even from the other side of the world.

This new offer from SwissCommunity enables young people aged 15 to 25 to follow two weeks of intensive lessons in French or German. The online lessons will give participants the chance to learn or improve their linguistic knowledge along with other young Swiss people from around the world. While learning you will also have fun and share some unforgettable experiences. The language lessons will be based around the central theme of

"Switzerland" and will be delivered by qualified and enthusiastic teachers.

For further information and the registration form, go to our website: [www.SwissCommunity.org](http://www.SwissCommunity.org) > Youth offers.

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MARIE BLOCH, OSA YOUTH SERVICE



## What challenges does our democracy face?

This year, the Annual Congress of the Swiss Abroad will focus on key questions for the future. It will be held in the Mediterranean atmosphere of the southern town of Lugano.

Pandemics like the one that we have been experiencing for over a year – or immigration, data protection, digital challenges, and exercising our political rights: how is the Swiss democratic system meeting today's challenges? Where does it need to change? How can we guarantee respect for the basic democratic rights in Switzerland, unique in the world, in a time of increasing autocracy? Should Swiss political rights be granted to second generation immigrants or to young people from the age of 16?

These are just some of the questions that speakers at the 2021 Congress will be asked to answer or debate. If you are interested in these topical issues and keen to discover (or rediscover) the incredibly varied Ticino landscapes and architectural heritage that is unique in Switzerland, reserve the weekend of 20–22 August 2021 and join us in Lugano, an Italian Swiss town with a Mediterranean atmosphere.

(JF)

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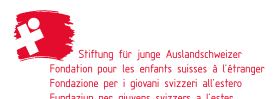
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## Voluntary OASI made easier

If you live abroad and make voluntary old-age and survivors' insurance (OASI) payments, you now have more time to submit documents.

Good news for all Swiss Abroad who make voluntary OASI payments. An updated version of the Federal Ordinance on Voluntary Old-Age, Survivors and Invalidity Insurance (VOASIO) came into force on 1 January 2021. Its new terms include an extension to the deadline for submitting documents. The documents required for determining contributions can now be submitted until 31 March. Previously, the deadline was 31 January.

This deadline extension takes account of specific circumstances abroad. Considerable distances, difficulties in procuring documents, and limited, slow postal deliveries – these are some of the factors that caused the deadline to be changed. The deadline for submitting tax statements has also been extended as a consequence – to 31 August.

### Voluntary OASI now also possible in the UK

Brexit – the United Kingdom leaving the European Union – also has implications regarding pension provision for Swiss Abroad. Anyone who emigrates from Switzerland to the UK can now join the voluntary OASI scheme as well. The conditions for joining are the same as those that apply to other non-EU countries. There are no changes for people who were already living in the UK before 1 January 2021.

STEFANIE MATHIS-ZERFASS

## “Be open to new experiences and ideas”

Swiss Abroad Angela Meraviglia on the opportunities and challenges of studying in Switzerland.

INTERVIEW: RUTH VON GUNTEN, EDUCATIONSUISSE

### Angela Meraviglia you are Swiss and grew up in Australia. Why did you decide to study in Switzerland?

In Australia, I completed my training as a florist but I always knew I wanted to study. I just never found the right subject. During a holiday stay in Switzerland, I discovered the study programme in Design Management at the Lucerne University of Applied Sciences and Arts. Initially, it was just an exciting idea that I had and not a firm plan. However, I applied. Thanks to my application dossier including my work, my high school diploma and my professional experience, I was accepted. Only when I received the official confirmation did I realise that my life would change completely within a few months.

### Tell us more specifically about your Design Management degree programme at the Lucerne University of Applied Sciences and Arts.

The degree programme is entirely in English. I am now in my third and final Bachelor's year. I particularly love the breadth of the field of study. It is not just about creating physical things or designing them, but it is always about the whole mind-set. That helps to understand complex problems, to communicate with people and to create solutions that are better for people and our environment.

### What language do you speak when you are not in class? And how have you settled in in Switzerland?

I speak a mixture of English and Swiss German with my university friends and Swiss German, which I learned at home, with my relatives. Now I also want to attend a German course at university. Building up a good group of friends in Switzerland was



Angela Meraviglia grew up in Australia, but is now studying in Switzerland.

Photo donated

more difficult than I thought. However, a small job in the hospitality industry helped me to get to know the local way of life and to make new friends.

### Was the “small job” alongside your studies enough to cover the high Swiss cost of living?

I have always worked alongside my studies, in hospitality and now at a design agency in Zurich. However, the intensive studies do not allow me to work enough to be financially independent. I have been fortunate to receive a scholarship from my home canton of Zurich, which makes my life a lot easier. I also benefit from a reduced health insurance premium. Switzerland is expensive, but it also has quite a fair social support system.

### How is the Corona pandemic affecting your studies?

I studied online for most of last year and it will probably stay that way for my last semester. Studying online works relatively well, but it has significantly changed my university experience. There are both ad-

vantages and disadvantages. For example, I can follow lectures from up in the mountains and save travel time. However, a lot of social interaction gets lost. Furthermore, a full day of lectures in front of a laptop feels twice as long as one in a classroom. Physical teaching and learning cannot be translated one-to-one into online learning. I believe it is even more important to actively engage students in the online format so that concentration remains constant.

#### What are your plans for the future?

At this stage I am not planning too far into the future, because the world is so uncertain at the moment. In the next few months I will focus on my Bachelor thesis and afterwards look for a job in the design field here in Switzerland.

#### What tips would you give to young Swiss people abroad who want to study in Switzerland?

I encourage them all to inform themselves about financial support. And to live in a shared apartment, as this is not only a more

affordable way of living but also a great way to get more in touch with Swiss culture. If your studies allow it, you should also look for a part-time job. I also advise spending as much free time as possible exploring this incredibly diverse country. Stay curious, be humble, be open to new experiences and ideas, actively pursue your goal and give yourself time to integrate and ask for support when you need it.

Educatiosuisse offers young Swiss Abroad specific counselling around the theme of "education in Switzerland".

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www.fdfa.admin.ch Quito (2021)

© Patricia Gnädinger

## Federal votes

The Federal Council determines voting proposals at least four months before the voting date.

Everything you need to know about voting proposals (voting pamphlets, committees, recommendations by Parliament and the Federal Council etc.) is available at [www.admin.ch/votes](http://www.admin.ch/votes) or via the Federal Chancellery's VoteInfo app.

## Popular initiatives

The following federal popular initiative had already been launched at the time of going to press (deadline for the collection of signatures in brackets):

- Federal Popular Initiative "For freedom and physical integrity" (01.06.2022)

The list of pending popular initiatives is available in German at

[www.bk.admin.ch](http://www.bk.admin.ch)

- > Politische Rechte
- > Volksinitiativen
- > Hängige Volksinitiativen

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## Travel Admin

Online-Registrierung von Auslandsreisen  
 Enregistrement en ligne de voyages à l'étranger  
 Registrazione quando si viaggia all'estero  
 Online Registration when travelling abroad

# “A Swiss citizen remains a Swiss citizen, wherever they live in the world”

An interview with Federal Councillor Ignazio Cassis on the consequences of the Covid-19 pandemic for the Swiss Abroad and the projects for the future which meet the unique requirements of this heterogeneous community. “We are always focused on their needs,” affirms the head of the Federal Department of Foreign Affairs.

**Federal Councillor, the Covid crisis and the associated travel restrictions have left the Swiss Abroad isolated and have, in some instances, even placed them in a precarious personal or financial situation. What support does the Federal Department of Foreign Affairs (FDFA) offer?**

The pandemic has presented us all with new challenges, in Switzerland and abroad. However, we have made a point of keeping all of our representations open and at the service of our citizens. I have asked my services to pay particular attention to requests for assistance received and to earmark the necessary funds to deal with the long-term consequences. In that regard, I am thinking primarily of welfare benefits for those who are no longer able to support themselves.

**And aside from the pandemic?**

The FDFA carried out an extensive survey of our network in 2018 as well as a survey of the Swiss Abroad in 2019, for which we received more than 52,000 replies. This enabled us to identify several action points on which we are already working. To give an example, the first notification that a Swiss citizen is living abroad can now be made online, without the need to submit original documents to the representa-



Mingling with expats – Federal Councillor Ignazio Cassis, together with the President of the Organisation of the Swiss Abroad Remo Gysin (left), surrounded by young Swiss Abroad at the Vevey Wine Festival in July 2019. Photo provided

**Is this process ongoing?**

Yes: for 2021, it is a question of considering whether the formal framework, notably the Swiss Abroad Ordinance, is still pertinent to today’s requirements and if the principles defined are efficiently applied. We remain attentive to our community.

**Another recurring theme: political rights. At the last federal vote even greater difficulties than usual were noted regarding the delivery of voting material. What can be done?**

Some 210,000 people are on the electoral register. The majority of these people live in Europe or North America, where few problems regarding such postal deliveries were recorded. There are problems with

sending voting materials for a proportion of the remaining electorate. With the Covid-19 crisis, which limited international postal delivery, these problems were further accentuated. However, although the Federal Chancellery is the coordinating body at federal level, the exercising of political rights remains the responsibility of the cantons, particularly regarding the delivery of voting material.

**So, what can the FDFA do specifically?**

It is important to me to contribute to any action enabling the Swiss Abroad to be able to participate actively in public life. A pilot project with the Federal Chancellery is therefore planned for the June 2021



Problems with postal deliveries have made it impossible for many in the "Fifth Switzerland" to vote. The use of diplomatic couriers will therefore be trialled in June, says Cassis. Photo: Marco Zanoni

vote, where the use of diplomatic mail and representations abroad will be tested. Based on that, we will establish whether further steps can be taken.

**Three quarters of Swiss Abroad also hold at least one other nationality. What is the message that you would like to send them?**

That a Swiss citizen remains a Swiss citizen, wherever they are in the world! And that is true regardless of the other nationality or nationalities that they may have.

**But there are still some problems?**

Yes. Particularly regarding consular protection. Possibilities for intervention are sometimes limited, notably if the person holds the na-

tionality of the country in which they are living. In this case, the local authorities consider the person as one of their own nationals only. This makes it even more difficult for us to act. But there is nothing surprising about that; it's the same in Switzerland.

**And what if members of the same family have different or multiple nationalities?**

We will never limit ourselves to just supporting one Swiss citizen. The family unit represents one of the paradigms of our work, as much when registering individuals with our representations as when we are acting on behalf of one of our citizens.

**Questions linked to multiple nationalities are not just specific to Switzerland, are they?**

No. And it is also important to highlight that these questions are sometimes brought up with an ulterior motive. For example, when a person is arbitrarily incarcerated in order to put pressure on the authorities of their country of origin. This is akin to a hostage situation, and I find it unacceptable. I personally participated in a virtual ministerial conference organised by Canada last February in order to launch an international initiative against the arbitrary detention of foreign citizens, notably those with multiple nationalities.

**Has the FDFA's Travel Admin app played a key role in handling the coronavirus crisis?**

This application, launched in 2019, indeed proved to be very useful last spring, both for informing us of our citizens stranded abroad and for

supporting and locating them. Suggestions made by users have enabled us to identify certain points for improvement. These improvements have already been integrated in the new version of the app, for example the possibility of updating travel information.

**On that subject, are you also working to modernise the channels of communication with the "Fifth Switzerland"?**

Travel Admin is also for the Swiss Abroad when they are travelling or on holiday. In this sense, we have already taken an important step for them, too. Another success was the virtual celebration of 1 August, which saw great popularity in a number of countries. That said, I share your view about the importance of ensuring a modern and efficient means of communication, both between and with the Swiss Abroad. I have mandated the Consular Directorate to create a specific mobile interface, for example an app, in order to facilitate contact and information exchange. This application should become available in 2022.

**To close, do you have anything to add on the importance of the Swiss Abroad in Switzerland's bilateral relations?**

The defence of the interests of Swiss citizens, wherever they live, represents one of the fundamental aspects of the Confederation's work. I can assure you that this dimension is taken into account during our international negotiations. A recent example is the "Mind the gap" policy. This strategy enabled us to assure the continuity of our relationship with the United Kingdom, despite Brexit, in particular for the Swiss Abroad.

(FDFA)

## Longing for freedom



CILETTE OFAIRE  
 "Ismé"  
 German edition:  
 Th. Gut Verlag, Zurich, 2020  
 560 pages, CHF 39

French edition:  
 Éditions de l'Aire, Vevey,  
 2020, 549 pages, CHF 39

– now consisting solely of Ettore and his pregnant wife – to seek refuge on the island. In December 1936, all three are unexpectedly forced to leave Spain. With a heavy heart, they must abandon the boat.

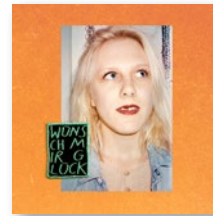
Ofaire calls "Ismé", the book that she wrote about the journey, a novelistic report. "Ismé" was first published in Lausanne in 1940, and later in France. It soon became a bestseller and was translated into various languages. The poignant human kindness and longing for freedom that pervade the story, as well as the author's humorous tone, were welcome respite to readers during the Second World War. Written in a refreshing, unembellished style, this maritime novel was – and is – a fascinating account of life and adventures on the high seas.

The new edition of "Ismé" has been published by the Swiss publisher and literary critic Charles Linsmayer, whose excellent biography of the author is included alongside the work. Photographs documenting Ofaire's life as well as extracts from the author's diary sketches also grace the book, which is available both in French and German.

Cilette Ofaire, who was born in 1891 in the canton of Neuchâtel, trained as a glass painter. She sailed through Europe on rivers and canals with her husband, the artist Charles Hofer. After their marriage fell apart, Ofaire bought the steamboat "Ismé". She had to give up painting due to an eye disorder and later moved to the south of France, where she wrote a handful of other novels. After her death in 1964, the author fell into oblivion before being rediscovered in the late 1980s.

RUTH VON GUNTEN

## Biting but plaintive at the same time



STEINER & MADLAINA:  
 "Wünsch mir Glück"  
 Glitterhouse/Irascible 2021

Nora Steiner and Madlaina Pollina get straight to the point in their new single "Heile Welt" (Perfect world): "Wenn viel zu viele gern mit dem Feuer spielen, in Hass losgerannt und Hoffnung verbrannt, haben wir versagt" (Too many of us have played with fire. We've set off in rage and burned our wings. We've failed.) Donald Trump, plastic waste on a beach, refugees, despots and the Mexican border wall – the video pulls no punches either. "Today's world is dividing humanity," they lament, before breaking into a memorable, melancholic chorus. Theirs is a rueful longing for a perfect world, embellished with images of a bucolic childhood in Switzerland.

The song has a charming pop melody combined with biting lyrics. Yet "Heile Welt" is just one facet of the duo's eclectic new album

"Wünsch mir Glück" (Wish me luck). "Denk was du willst" (Think what you want) is an acoustic singer-songwriter number about self-destructive lust and longing, while title track "Wünsch mir Glück" is a disarmingly plaintive love song: "Warst du gestern, als ich blieb, auch kurz verliebt?" (Were you briefly in love yesterday when I stayed?) The lingering emotion is solitude. "Wenn ich ein Junge wäre" (If I were a boy), on the other hand, is an indie rock piece with edgy guitars, expansive synths and a driving beat. "Wenn ich ein Junge wäre, würde man mir mehr zutrauen. Wer bestimmt das Rollenbild der Frauen?" (If I were a boy, they'd trust me more. Who gets to decide what a girl can and cannot do?)

Zurich-based Steiner & Madlaina recently celebrated a successful debut in Germany. They had only just finished their follow-up when the pandemic struck.

But now the duo's second album is finally out. "Wünsch mir Glück" is a refreshing record by two young women who epitomise the current zeitgeist of youth activism. The songs have lost none of their relevance since the enforced hiatus – even with Donald Trump no longer in office. Steiner & Madlaina's observations are not very groundbreaking and are too direct to be poetic, but at least their political and social critiques are forthright and not just skin-deep. They can be forgiven for sounding a little preachy at times.

MARKO LEHTINEN

# Gerhard Pfister



Swiss politics welcomed a new party at the beginning of 2021 after the merger between the Christian Democrat People's Party (CVP) and the Conservative Democratic Party (BDP). The party's new name, "The Centre", sounds a bit lame. History is in the making nonetheless, because the Catholic Conservative movement, once a political force in Switzerland, has now consigned its religious ties to the past. Top Christian Democrat Gerhard Pfister, who was educated at convent school, is behind this radical break. Pfister (canton of Zug) highlighted his conservative values when he took over the party leadership in 2016. Now he has moved the CVP away from its traditional Catholic roots because the party has been losing voters for almost 40 years. It is even touch and go whether it will hold on to its seat in the Federal Council. Pfister is trying to attract new voters who would otherwise be put off by the "C" in CVP. "I want to talk politics with people, but end up having to talk religion with them," he says. Pfister, 58, is regarded as a clever strategist who is by no means averse to political manoeuvring and power. Eloquent and erudite, he appears just as comfortable talking about art and culture as he is about politics. Pfister has sold the merger as a "fresh opportunity", seeing potential for a new centre power with a social conscience to counteract the polarisation between left and right. Reaction from commentators has been mixed, ranging from praise ("an original solution") to scepticism ("final humiliation for the CVP"). Will Pfister's plan work? We will find out after the next federal elections in 2023.

SUSANNE WENGER

## Military service – from home

It was an unconventional start to training for 5,000 of the 12,000 or so recruits who joined the Swiss Armed Forces at the end of January, as the Covid-19 pandemic meant they were confined to their homes for the first few weeks. Instead of courtyard drills and long marches in the wind and rain, the recruits did e-learning and wore in their new combat boots from the comfort of their sitting room. However, this gentle introduction was eventually followed by the inevitable summons to barracks. (MUL)

## The Swiss Air Force is now open all hours

Since the beginning of the year, the Swiss Air Force's air policing activities over Switzerland now extend to all hours and days of the week, with two armed combat aircraft ready for operations round the clock. Nothing unusual about that, you may think. However, until 2015 fighter jets used to be only on stand-by on workdays during office hours. This attracted a lot of public ridicule at the time. Since then, air policing capability has been gradually expanded. (MUL)

## No exit from "Exit" for the Swiss Abroad

The Swiss organisation for physician-assisted suicide, Exit, has decided not to exclude Swiss members domiciled abroad and will continue to make its services available to the "Fifth Switzerland". Exit announced in summer 2020 that, in future, it would only be open to members who lived in Switzerland and would delete existing members who moved abroad. It eventually backtracked after members voiced their opposition. (MUL)

## The Federal Council wants to privatise PostFinance

The Federal Council wishes to privatise Swiss Post subsidiary PostFinance completely, so as to allow PostFinance to enter into the mortgage business. The planned privatisation is a contentious issue. Opponents fear it would weaken Swiss Post. It is thanks in part to PostFinance's profits that Swiss Post is able to fund its nationwide service in the first place. (MUL)

## The FDFA wants to enhance its embassy network

Switzerland wants to strengthen its representations abroad. According to Swiss radio (SRF) sources, the Federal Department of Foreign Affairs (FDFA) is planning to relocate some 35 Berne-based positions abroad in order to bolster its smaller offices around the world. The Federal Council believes that the FDFA's close-knit foreign network has proved particularly valuable during the Covid-19 pandemic. However, some Swiss representations are "understaffed", it wrote in its latest foreign policy report. (MUL)

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