

NZZ Libro **E-Book**

Watch the Swiss⁺

Insights and outlooks from abroad

Gerhard Schwarz and Karen Horn (Editors)

l'avenir | suisse |

Neue Zürcher Zeitung Publishing

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Preface

The essence of Switzerland

In an address to the Swiss ambassadors, Frank-Walter Steinmeier, the German Minister for Foreign Affairs, recently pointed out with a smile that the task entrusted to them is one that certainly arouses a lot of envy among their foreign colleagues: “You represent Switzerland in the world and, according to a recent study, the happiest people on earth!”

But is it really possible to be happy in today’s world with the growing uncertainties that we all feel? And if the Swiss were indeed happier than other people, what might be the reason for this? Federalism, direct democracy, small government, the diversity of Switzerland’s multicultural society and a liberal tradition that goes hand in hand with a strong protection of privacy – these are the answers put forward by the authors whose contributions are collected in the present volume.

All of this is certainly true. But I think that another reason why many people feel very much at ease in this country is that Switzerland is a large family. And like any large family, to preserve its unity Switzerland must find agreement on a small number of shared values. If I were to name only three, I would say that what unites the Swiss regardless of their linguistic, religious or political differences is the search for independence, well-being and security.

These are values we have inherited from our parents. They remain valid today, and Switzerland will continue to prosper if we succeed in passing them on to our children. To create prospects for our children and for young people in Switzerland is probably our most important task.

I believe that Switzerland can be proud of the results it has achieved in this respect, too. Few young people stray from the road to prosperity in our education system that rests on its two pillars of academic and vocational education. And the system provides Swiss companies with the young talent they need to compete successfully in global markets.

Shared values, young people who are taken seriously, and an economy in good shape – the recipe for happiness is not so complicated after all!

Didier Burkhalter

Swiss Federal Councillor and
Head of the Swiss Federal Department of Foreign Affairs

“The political structure of Switzerland in its democratic, multinational and federal character has attracted the attention of those who are looking for a model ... Why should we not similarly regard the economic and social constitution of this country as a model at least as useful?”

Wilhelm Röpke

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Introduction

Watch the Swiss

Karen Horn and Gerhard Schwarz



Watch the Swiss

Karen Horn and Gerhard Schwarz

Watch the Swiss: the pun is of course intended. Switzerland is indeed world-famous for her watches. The Swiss watch has become a synonym for the virtue of precision and punctuality. It also stands for longevity in perfect shape and features a sound mixture of robustness and elegance. Happily, all this just fits too well with the standard perception of Switzerland as a country that works admirably well, where people are extremely reliable, a community that has managed to preserve and adapt its important inherited institutions and traditions, and that combines a very down-to-earth peasantry with some of the highest degrees of well-being, culture and luxury. Like with all clichés, there is a considerable amount of truth in this perception, while the reality is of course a little more complicated.

Nobody knows this as well as the Swiss themselves. The Swiss people spend a sizable amount of time, reflection and energy on self-analysis – presumably much more than other nations. In 1992, Switzerland was presented at the Expo in Seville under the slogan “Suiza no existe”: there is no such thing as Switzerland. Or is there? The debate still goes on: Who are the Swiss? What is the core of their identity? What unites them, and how can they overcome what potentially divides them? What are the institutions that they should preserve no matter what? How exactly do they work and how can they be kept intact without becoming inflexible? How can the Swiss strike a balance between their old-fashioned inheritance and their tremendously innovative skills and prospects? What are the developments the Swiss should protect themselves from, and how can they do that? What is their place within Europe?

In its daily work as a major think tank, Avenir Suisse is dedicated to keeping Switzerland economically strong and free. As its name already indicates, it casts its eyes on the future and attempts to develop policy solutions for tomorrow and after. Preparing the ground for Switzerland’s future in a truly sustainable way requires that one starts here and now, with a profound analysis of the given situation. It is necessary to recognise the nation’s strengths, to maintain and foster them, as much as to enable them to develop and adapt. But it is also necessary to understand the nation’s weaknesses and to suggest ways how these can be overcome.

Inspired by Jonathan Steinberg's admirable book "Why Switzerland?", currently sold in its 3rd edition (2015), we have found it useful to step back a little and to leave things to scrutiny from a distance. What began as a successful summer series for our website (www.avenir-suisse.ch) then eventually turned into a book project on the occasion of Avenir Suisse's 15th anniversary. We have asked a group of high-ranking and knowledgeable outside observers to cast a friendly, albeit not uncritical eye on Switzerland, and to write down for us in a brief essay what they see: "Watch the Swiss".

Wolfgang Schüssel, former Austrian Chancellor; Helen Zille, Premier of the Western Cape, South Africa; Udo Di Fabio, law professor and former judge of the German Constitutional Court; Lim Siong Guan, Group President of GIC, the Government of Singapore Investment Corporation; Ottmar Hitzfeld, the former coach of the Swiss football team, holding a German passport; and other eminent politicians, scholars, journalists and think tank people from around the globe – they are all foreigners, while some of them are more, some less deeply familiar with current life in Switzerland. Some have spent years living and working here, others have only travelled through ever so briefly. But they all have their own notion of what Switzerland is about and why it is the way they perceive it to be.

We have encouraged them to tell their own personal story, which is typically more accessible and authentic than facts and figures (though some provided these as well). Without guiding them toward any specific topic to stress, we simply asked them to tell us what it is that they like, or even admire about Switzerland, and what, if anything, they dislike or deplore. What we have harvested from our contributors is a rich collection of valuable insights about Switzerland, and a wealth of wise and mostly encouraging outlooks for the future.

It has been a moving experience for us to gather just how much Switzerland means to people around the world, and to what extent political reforms elsewhere have been guided by the inspiration that the leaders of other countries have drawn and are still drawing from what they perceive as the Swiss example. Their esteem, however, stresses the point that the Swiss

should not take for granted what they have, but should rather open their own eyes to its worth; treasure, preserve and strengthen it.

We sincerely thank each of our kind and generous contributors, who very spontaneously agreed to engage in this venture, including of course Didier Burkhalter, head of the Swiss Department of Foreign Affairs and former President of the Swiss Confederation, who has honoured us with some very thoughtful opening remarks. We also wish to thank Verena Parzer Epp, Carmen Sopi and Nadine Jäger from Avenir Suisse for their valuable support, creativity and lovely spirit.

We have gathered these contributions, some of which have already been made available online, in a total of ten chapters. Each of them opens with a cartoon or caricature that might seem a bit provocative and should, we hope, trigger first thoughts. As they do not come from the same artist, they differ in style as much as in their ironic thrust – which very appropriately reflects Swiss diversity. For the most part, these are the winning illustrations from a public contest that we held last spring. We had asked students at art colleges and established artists alike to send in their sketches, dealing with typical Swiss topics such as federalism and direct democracy. We were happy to receive a load of drawings to choose from, and we awarded the first prize to Caroline Rutz (“Carotoons”).

Put together, the short essays assembled in this book tell the following story: Switzerland is going through rather tough times. International relations are no piece of cake. The interaction with the European Union is difficult, and the United States have been putting the Swiss legal system under stress. Some of these conflicts might imperil the Swiss model altogether, if creative solutions aren’t found – for example regarding immigration, a bone of contention with the EU. Regardless of these challenges, Switzerland does gain a lot of strength from her smallness and her system of direct democracy which turns every citizen into an important stake-holder, strengthens social cohesion and allows for learning. Without her federalism and non-centralisation, Swiss diversity would be difficult to sustain. There is also a deeply rooted commitment to liberty, which combines well with the general economic wisdom and reliability of the