

WHY SWITZERLAND?

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

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



Cartoon from *Revue économique franco-suisse*, 1991

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WHY SWITZERLAND?

Second edition

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For
Matthew, Daniel and Peter

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

Francesco Chiesa

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

Johannes von Müller

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

Denis de Rougemont

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Preface to the second edition

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

Trinity Hall, Cambridge

JONATHAN STEINBERG

Preface to the first edition

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

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

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

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

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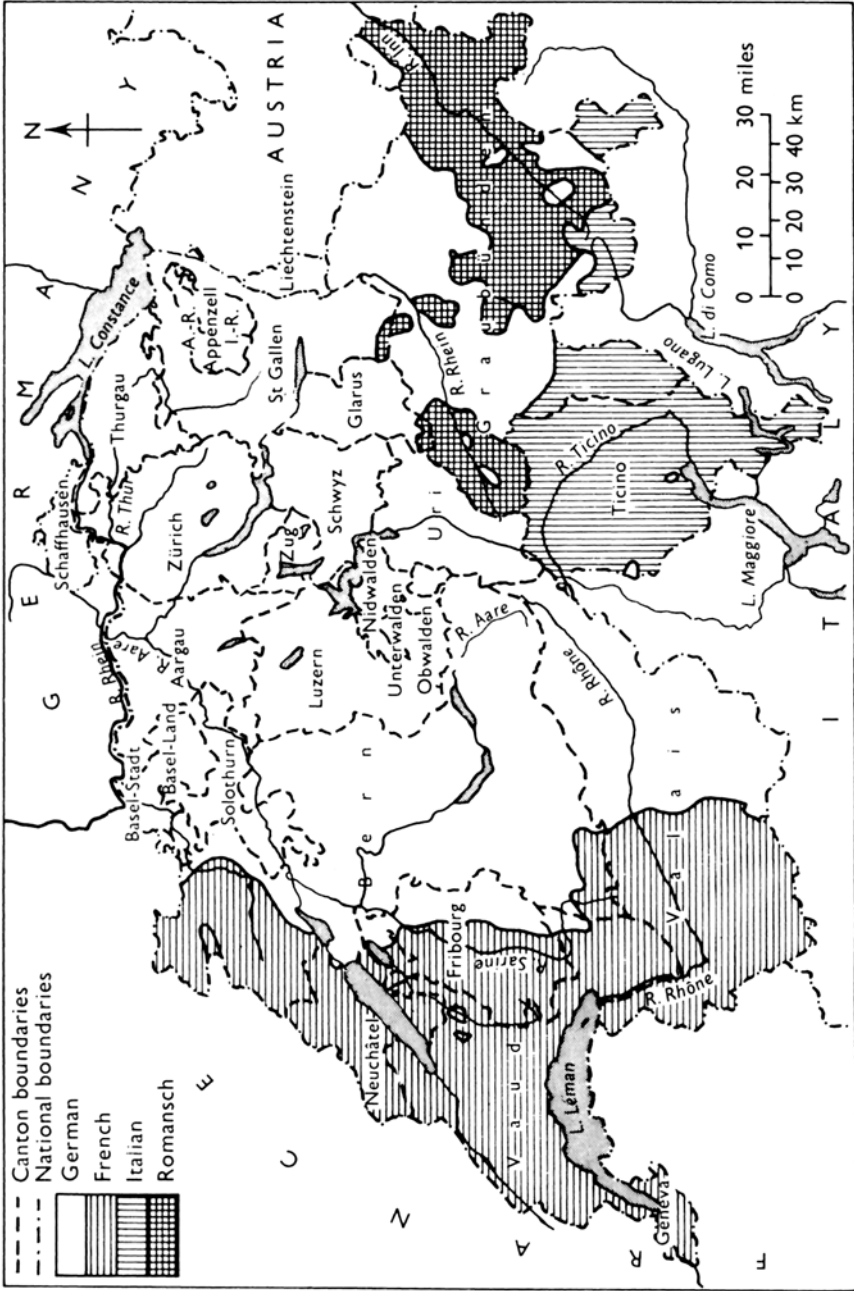
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dei Lavoratori edili e del legno, Zürich; Herr Otto Bättig, Kreisförster, Schüpfheim, Luzern.

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Map 1 Cantons and languages in contemporary Switzerland