1 Why Switzerland?

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

If the book is odd, so is its subject. There is no place like Switzerland and hence any attempt to catch its meaning must be pretty odd too. The sheer variety of Swiss life, what I think of as its 'cellular' character, makes it hard to write a coherent account of the place. Then there are the various institutions, habits and customs unique to Switzerland: its unbelievably complicated electoral procedures, its referenda and initiatives, its specialised economy with its banks and watches, its cheese and chocolates, its complicated federalism of central government, cantons and communes, its three official and four national languages, its neutral status, its astonishing wealth per head, its huge proportion of foreign workers, its efficient public services, and its religious divisions. For most of the twentieth century, Switzerland had an enormous number of small newspapers.

It was extremely common to meet people, even journalists stationed in Bern, the capital, who got a hometown paper delivered every day. In 1950, there were 368 newspapers in the country with an average circulation of 1692 per day. By 1993, when I did the research for the second edition, that number had shrunk to 248 with a daily circulation of 2533, but by 2012 the number had fallen to 189. As the Statistical Service puts it, 'total circulation and the average daily circulation grew until 1986 continuously . . . From 2003 the total circulation has been steadily going down'.[2] Free newspapers, newspapers on-line and the huge number of websites and blogs make it less likely that many people ever have a hard copy in their hands. Here too Switzerland's intense local identity has been eroded.

Even as late as the mid-1990s, strikes formed part of the industrial landscape but not in Switzerland. The *Statistisches Jahrbuch der Schweiz* 1995 reported that between 1975 and 1993 there was a grand total of twenty-seven strikes or lockouts that lasted for at least twenty-four hours or more, or just under three a year. In 1987 and 1993 there were no strikes at all and in 1986 and 1991 only one.[3] By 2008 Switzerland still had one of the lowest rates of strikes per 1000 workers, 3.1 per 1000, but Germany was close with 3.7, and admittedly the 'wild' strike of railroad works at the Bellinzona facility pushed up the totals.[4] Austria, where a similar 'labour peace' had been established, frequently had fewer strikes than Switzerland. Here too we note the Swiss special feature is no longer uniquely Swiss.

Most people know that Switzerland is a country of many languages. There are in fact four national languages: German, French, Italian and Raeto-Romansch. The first three are official languages, which means that all official documents, railway time-tables or postal notices must be published in each. According to the 1990 census, 63.6% of the population spoke German, 19.2% French, 7.5% Italian, 0.6% Rhaeto-Romansch and 8.9% 'other languages'.[5] By 2012, there had been some interesting changes. While 64.9% spoke German, 22.6% French, 8.3% Italian, 0.5% Romansch, the number of those speaking other languages had risen to 21.4%, of which the highest of the 'other languages' was English at 4.6%. With typical Swiss perfectionism, from 2010 those asked could name up to three languages. Hence the totals amount to more than 100%.[6]

The operation of a country so constituted would be fascinating enough if that were the whole story. The reality is much more complicated, indeed bewilderingly so. Here are some facts about language in Switzerland. The 27,038 (14%) people who speak Romansch as their mother-tongue divide into those who speak the Ladino of the Upper Engadin and that of the Lower Engadin – each of which has its own

written language – the Surselva of the Upper Rhine valley also with a literary tradition, and the non-literary dialects of Surmeirisch and Sutselvisch. The attempt to introduce a standard, the so-called *Rumantsch Grischun* or the Romansch of Graubünden has not been successful. The Canton of Graubünden (or in the other national languages: *Grisons, Grigioni* or *Grizhun*) has allowed communes to experiment with their own language models for a decade, and the results have been very encouraging. Romansch as a second language has revived. In the chapter on language, I will say a bit more about this.

The 63.6% who speak 'German' are actually *diglossic*. The Oxford Dictionary of Linguistics defines *diglossia* as 'a situation in which two languages (or two varieties of the same language) are used under different conditions within a community, often by the same speakers. The term is usually applied to languages with distinct "high" and "low" (colloquial) varieties.'[7]

Peter von Matt in a recent essay explains the situation in this way:

> The mother tongue of the Swiss Germans is German. The mother tongue of the German Swiss is not the Alemannic dialect nor the Swiss version of High German, but both together. The mother tongue of the Swiss Germans is thus German in two forms.[8]

This sharp analysis, which goes against the general view, describes for this outside observer exactly what happens in practice. I had the privilege to attend the regular Friday editorial conference at *Die Weltwoche*, the most provocative and controversial weekly in Switzerland. As a foreigner I had to notice how the journalists and publisher himself glided from dialect into the Swiss version of High German without noticing it and without any indicator for the outsider why the switch took place. The usage varied among the speakers and again according to criteria that a foreigner will never understand.

The language of the Swiss Germans, *Schwyzerdütsch*, divides itself into almost as many versions as there are valleys in the Alps, some of which, such as those of the Bernese Oberland and Oberwallis, are incomprehensible to most *Schwyzerdütsch* speakers. There is one canton, Ticino, where Italian is the official language and another, Graubünden, in which three valleys and a few communes also use it as the official tongue. What sort of Italian? Let me cite a passage from Fritz René Allemann's *25 mal die Schweiz*, where he described the village of Bivio in Canton Graubünden:

> The census of 1960 recorded a total of 188 inhabitants for Bivio . . . with an Italian majority (it is the only commune north of the main chain of the Alps which belongs to the Italian linguistic area), an old-established Raeto-Romansch

minority and also some German enclaves, with a Catholic and a Protestant Church, which have co-existed in 'parity' for centuries. (Both pastors look at the congregation first before deciding which language to preach in.) But that is not all. If one listens closely, one can hear three different dialects of Italian: the native dialect which is closely related to the Raetolombardic used in the Bregaglia; the Bergamasco dialect spoken by shepherd families who during the centuries wandered over the Alps from Northern Italy; and written, 'High', Italian.[9]

Today this quaint linguistic situation has disappeared. German is the only official language in municipal proceedings. Most of the population (as of 2000) speaks German (55.4%), with Italian being second most common (29.4%) and Romansch being third (12.3%). About 15% of the population of roughly 200 are foreigners.[10]

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

A Catholic might be born in a Catholic hospital, attend Catholic schools from kindergarten to university, read Catholic newspapers and magazines, vote for the Catholic party and take part in Catholic clubs or associations. It was not unusual for a Catholic to insure himself against sickness or accident with a Catholic company and put his savings in a Catholic savings bank.[11]

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

Today – and this matters – the old religious divisions have practically disappeared in urban Switzerland. I was told by many that nobody knows or cares any more who is what, but, as we shall see, party political identity (there is still a 'Catholic party') makes a difference in representation in the national parliament.

Here then are three bits of Swiss reality, chosen more or less randomly from the thickets of Helvetic specialness. A close look at any aspect of Swiss public life illustrates the extreme particularism, the divisions within divisions or the 'cellular' quality of Swiss life. On the other hand, the Swiss keep streets clean in an entirely uniform way from north to south and from east to west. There are a dozen government regulations on how to dispose of waste, and they are obeyed. The Swiss ballot must be the most complicated anywhere. The voter can strike out names, vote for the same person twice and borrow names from a different party to include in her list. How can a place so varied

have national behaviour patterns? How are the complex layers of identity (language, region, creed, party, class, occupation, age) reconciled in Swiss heads? The question has become more important as the rapid changes in the surrounding world have had an impact on the complexities of Swiss practice. The changes raise doubts about the survival of Swiss identity, which some call *Sonderfall Schweiz* (the Swiss special case), a term itself now bitterly contested in public life.

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

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

Part of this is sheer prejudice, and not new either. In 1797 the exiled French aristocrat Chateaubriand observed bitterly: 'Neutral in the grand revolutions of the states which surround them, they enrich themselves by the misfortunes of others and found a bank on human

calamities.'[12] The following year French troops swept away the old Swiss Confederation and the Swiss revolution began. Chateaubriand should have waited a little. Like so many foreigners he was tempted to generalise because Switzerland sometimes seems changeless. How many of those who say flatly that nothing ever happens in Switzerland would recognise this picture of the country, taken from a letter of Prince Metternich, the Austrian Chancellor, in 1845?

> Switzerland presents the most perfect image of a state in the process of social disintegration ... Switzerland stands alone today in Europe as a republic and serves troublemakers of every sort as a free haven. Instead of improving its situation by appropriate means, the Confederation staggers from evils into upheavals and represents for itself and for its neighbours an inexhaustible spring of unrest and disturbance.[13]

Another reason why Switzerland is unknown abroad is that it is hard to know. Centuries of tourism have left a mark. The Swiss simply do not reveal themselves easily to foreigners. An alien can live in some Swiss cities for years and never be invited to a Swiss home. Geneva is notorious for this but not unique. There are barriers everywhere to easy contact. It is also hard to know intellectually. There are so many puzzles and difficulties. Take the problem of frontiers. How does an artificial line drawn through a continuous stretch of countryside or marked on a bridge make everything change: table silver, foods, smells, customs, appearance of the buildings and so on? For the frontier watcher, Switzerland is a paradise. Cross the language border in Canton Fribourg (this is one not even marked by an outward sign) on the road from Bern to the city of Fribourg, and the streets look different. It is Francophone territory. How can one make sense of the invisible barriers which seem to divide otherwise identical settlements? The answers to such questions are extremely difficult to devise; it is not always clear what the question is.

Understanding Switzerland is so hard that few ever try but it matters today more than it did twenty years ago. Switzerland was the first European country to repudiate the European Union by its popular initiative against mass immigration of 9 February 2014, which violates the freedom of persons inside the European Union and the bilateral treaty of 1999 between Switzerland and the EU. This stunning reversal of policy took place several months before the shocking emergence of anti-European parties in the election to the European Parliament and is much more radical than anything UK Independence Party or other anti-European parties can do. In effect, the Sovereign People have pushed Switzerland into a serious crisis.

On 29 June 2014, Bunderätin (Federal Councillor) Simonetta Sommaruga held a press conference to explain the Federal Council's formal decision. The Federal Council itself is a Swiss oddity, an American constitutional structure with a seven-person presidency of which more in Chapter 3: the executive of the Confederation is a council of seven persons. The newspaper of record, the *Neue Zürcher Zeitung*, quoted her remarks in these words:

> Justice Minister Sommaruga emphasized to the media that constitutional provision which on 9 February had been approved [50.3% yes to 49.7% no –JS] must without question take effect. While there may be a certain flexibility in its application, one cannot do anything we want. If the citizen cannot rely on the fact that the results of a vote will be taken seriously, one threatens democracy itself. Therefore the initiative must be as literal in its implementation as possible. Thus a revision of the agreement on freedom of movement will be necessary. Sommaruga declared that the domestic and European process now begun is full of imponderables. 'If we are honest, than we don't know where we will land', she said.[14]

This crisis arises because of the remarkable apparatus of popular participation in the making of the Swiss Constitution, which I shall try to explain later in the book. I found the remarks very moving. Here was a united Federal Council carrying out the will of the people. When I offered this rather patriotic reading of the announcement at a lunch at l'Avenir Suisse (a very important think tank), the majority of the participants looked at me with pity. Did I not understand that this is all tactics? Well, I did not.

Switzerland has become important in a way I had not imagined when I began this revision. The sheer complexity of Swiss institutions means that they offer laboratory conditions in which to see whether a democracy can survive the stresses that a changed world imposes. In order to understand Switzerland, we must begin with its history, for in that history lie clues to its robustness and complexity. There are some rewards for anybody who takes the case of Switzerland seriously, as Dr Johnson pointed out:

> Let those who despise the capacity of the Swiss, tell us by what wonderful policy or by what happy conciliation of interests, it is brought to pass, that in a body made up of different communities and different religions, there should be no civil commotions, though the people are so warlike, that to nominate and raise an army is the same.[15]

2 History

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

Part of the key to the puzzle is what did not happen in Switzerland, rather than what did. The Swiss escaped the full consequences of three characteristic European trends: the trend towards rational centralisation,

the growth of nationalism and the violence of religious conflict. Let us look at each in turn.

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

The Swiss themselves had other ideas. At the time that unity was being proclaimed, the formerly subject communities of the old Confederation were asserting their diversity. In the area of the modern Canton St Gallen alone, eight independent republics had sprung up ranging in size from the Toggenburg valley with 50,000 citizens to the tiny republic of Sax with 1000.[2] The mountain cantons rejected the Helvetic Republic emphatically. The case of Italian Switzerland sheds a peculiarly interesting light on this question. In 2012, Stephen Hughes published an article which sums up much new research on this issue. Hughes writes:

> the French General Chevalier in March 1798 decided to assign all of Ticino (with the possible exception of Mendrisio) to the nascent (Swiss) Helvetian Republic. If he had annexed Ticino immediately to the Cisalpine Republic – as he did with the areas of Chiavenna, Bernia and the Valtellina from the Graubünden region to the east – then it might well have shared the same Italian future as those former Swiss holdings.[3]

Meanwhile the new Helvetic Republic began the great transformation of backward, superstitious, peasant communities into modern citizens. Elsewhere in Europe French armies swept aside petty sovereignties and abolished the lingering traces of 'feudalism'. In Switzerland they were preserved. Why were Swiss institutions tougher than those elsewhere in resisting French reforms? In *The New History of Switzerland*, edited by Georg Kreis, Irène Herrman argues convincingly that the conditions

under foreign occupation and constant warfare simply undid the best of reforms.

> Under those circumstances it was understandable why a large part of the reforms planned in the period had to be abandoned. The Helvetic authorities had trouble keeping the chaos under control, as is often the case with incomplete reforms. Many reforms were simply rescinded. That was precisely what happened to freedom of the press decreed in November 1798 only to be revoked a few months later. The same thing occurred with the hated feudal dues. Because they needed the money, the government on 15 September 1800 reintroduced them and, worse, backdated them to cover the two previous years.[4]

None of this made the Helvetic Republic popular with the Swiss but in 1799 things changed when Napoleon Bonaparte and two other Directors seized power. Within a short period, Napoleon had banished his co-conspirators and established a dictatorship. The Swiss were a nuisance, as he wrote,

> You have fought among yourselves for three years without agreeing on anything: If one leaves you to yourselves, you will murder each other for another three years still without agreeing. History proves that your intestine wars have never been able to be terminated without effective intervention from France.[5]

Napoleon needed stability along the approaches to the great Alpine passes, and he saw the armed resistance of the Swiss as a military nuisance. The Helvetic Republic existed on paper; the reality was chaos. In 1802 he summoned the representatives of the cantons and the Helvetic Senate to Paris and, speaking to them as a man 'born in a land of mountains who understands how mountain people think', he charged them to work out a new constitution.[6]

These deliberations resulted in what was called the Act of Mediation of 19 February 1803, which effectively restored political sovereignty to the old cantons under a loose, federal constitution. Napoleon, who had been much impressed by the *Landsgemeinden*, the popular assemblies of the mountain cantons, believed them to be the characteristic Swiss institution and insisted that they be restored. The *Landsgemeinden* were conservative but democratic, though not in the modern sense. Rousseau's 'general will' was not quite what emerged from the deliberations of the *Landsgemeinden* where *Praktizieren und Trölen* (electoral bribery and corruption) were the rule, and where the *Hintersässen* (residents who lacked full civic rights) had no vote at all but, if that was the system the mountaineers wanted, Napoleon was prepared to return it to them, together with traditional Swiss federalism. The *Mediationsverfassung*, the constitution which he proposed, elevated many of the previously subject or allied (*zugewandte*) territories to