SWITZERLAND: AN AMAZING COUNTRY

by Agnieszka (Agnes) Muszynska

Introduction

Since childhood I have developed a very personal impression toward Switzerland. During the First World War my mother, together with her brother, spent four years at the boarding school, Ecole Nouvelle, in Lausanne, the beautiful town at the Geneva Lake, in the west, French-speaking part of Switzerland. My mother used to tell my brother and me a lot of stories about Switzerland, memories from her adolescent years. This way, Switzerland became very familiar to us. Similarly to many things in Switzerland, which "last forever", the school Ecole Nouvelle exists still today. My mother left Switzerland in 1918. In 1956 she had a chance to visit Lausanne and her old school again. At that time she updated her personal data in the school annual book. Every year this book was distributed among all school graduates. As a result of her update, my mother received an avalanche of letters and invitations from her old classmates. During the following years, she indeed visited several of them in Switzerland and in other parts of the world. Once again, we heard more and more about Switzerland, and about the life in this beautiful country.



Lausanne, Switzerland





Geography

Situated in the heart of Europe, Switzerland is the land of the Alps with Ice-Age glaciers, the Jura, and the Central Plateau with multitude of post Ice-Age lakes, streams, and rivers. Over 7 million people (including almost 20% foreigners) live in Switzerland on the area of about 41,000 km^2 (15,830 square miles), creating one of the most densely populated countries in the world. Switzerland contains the central and most beautiful part of the highest chain of the European mountains, the Alps, between Rhone and Rhine river valleys. The highest peak is Mont Blanc in the Monte Rosa massif, 4,634 m (15,203 ft). The average altitude of Switzerland is about 1,700 m (about 5,600 ft).

History, Language, Politics, Character of Swiss People

Continuity, steadiness, and logical growth characterize Switzerland's history. Through the centuries, Switzerland inevitably felt repercussions of turbulent European history. Its mountainous, landlocked location, however, well sheltered the country from the major historical storms. Its independence and neutrality, proclaimed already in the 16th century, which initially was nothing more than a means of self-preservation, continues to this day.

Switzerland's oldest cultural roots lie in various strata, originating from the Paleolithic and Neolithic Ages through Bronze and Iron Ages, then through the Celtic Helvetians, Romans, and then Germanic tribe communes. It is in the period after romanization, with the arrival of waves of Germanic peoples, that the ethnic and linguistic character of modern Switzerland has its roots. Burgundians, who settled in the west land of Switzerland, were quickly assimilated into the Roman population, adopting their language – the

Latin. The same happened with Rhaeto tribes settling in the East, and with Lombard tribes, installing themselves in southern Switzerland. As the time passed, the largest number of immigrants to the Swiss territory was the warlike German Alemannian tribe, who soon dominated in the Central Plateau. So at that time, around the 5th century, the pattern of today's Swiss quadrilinguism was established. In addition to the well-known three Swiss languages, German, French, and Italian, in 1935 the Rhaeto-Roman (Romansh) language was officially established in the Grisons region of Switzerland.

It is hard to believe that actually the today's Swiss democracy started in the 13th century. It was in 1291 when the Swiss Federation of the original three Cantons (Uri, Schwyz, and Unterwalden) was created. This Federation, now embracing twenty-three Cantons and three Half-Cantons, still exists today. The Swiss political system is based on wide autonomy of local Communes within Cantons. The main democracy tools are "initiative" and "referendum".

The official name of the country is "Confederation of Helvetica." It uses a "CH" as abbreviation, which can be seen on Swiss cars, and recently – also on e-mail addresses. [The latter was a source of a funny confusion. Before going to Switzerland in 2000 to work for a half of year on a contract, I asked my Internet provider to forward all the messages to my new Zurich e-mail address at the University (ETH). When I got there, it was evident that they failed to do it. I asked then my son to call the provider again. This time the technician did a good job, and he reassured my son: "Now your mother will be getting her messages in Chechnya." Evidently, he thought that "ch" at the end of my e-mail address meant Chechnya…]

Federal Switzerland continues to maintain its neutrality and independence. Switzerland stays away from the European Community, and only recently, reluctantly, it became a member of the United Nations.

The historical development in Switzerland was most often opposite to the other European countries. When feudalism reigned in Europe, Switzerland was democratic. When in the surrounding countries monarchies ruled, Switzerland was a republic. When the principle "one language – one country" caused wars between other countries, Switzerland practically implemented the opposite rule. When in the mid 19th century revolutions devastated other countries, Switzerland reformed itself and peacefully built the modern country. In the history of Switzerland, which is unique in the world, the prevailing feature of all political maneuvers was an adequate anticipation of consequences and the proverbial Helvetian compromise.

During the Middle Ages, similarly as in the other parts of Europe, the nobility and the clergy were very active in transforming and enriching the Swiss cultural landscapes. New towns were built, and hundreds of castles, imposing fortresses, and monasteries were erected. Some fine examples of them, seemingly untouched by the flow of time, still can be visited today.

Switzerland's most turbulent historical period, which led to the very distinct religious division of the country, started in the 16th century as Reformation and Counter-Reformation. Switzerland was shaken by bloody religious wars. A part of Switzerland became Protestant, with its several denominations. Finally, in 1848, the State accepted the Constitution by popular vote. The Constitution recognized the right of the individual to choose his or her own faith.



Milk soup at Kappel

In 1529, during Reformation war in Switzerland, an interesting and unusual event took place. Two enemy armies – Catholics and Reformers camped on a field near the village Kappel. The Catholics were short of food, but they had cows and milk. So they carried their caldrons full with milk toward the camp of Reformers and invited them to bring bread and to eat together. So all of them had a peaceful supper – just Reformer's bread soaked in Catholic's milk. During the supper, the religious enemies talked over their problems and eventually decided to sign a temporary treaty of arbitration. This historical event is known as the "Milk soup at



Monastery in Kappel

Kappel". It became a symbol of the Swiss pragmatism, the wish to get agreement, and to compromise for self-preservation.

Before the mid 19th century, Switzerland was not a rich country. Very often villages were not able to produce enough food for the habitants. In poor years, the villagers voted which young men should leave the village. These men usually joined the army in a neighbor country. Swiss mercenaries were a prized fighting force in the armies of Europe. (It often happened, however, that they unfortunately fought against each other.) One of the results of that mercenary process is the tradition of the papal Swiss Guard in Vatican, which started in the 15th century and continues to this day.



Traditionally dressed Swiss Guard in Vatican

The 19th century brought industrialization, which started erasing borders between rural and urban areas, while preserving a rich cultural heritage of Switzerland: churches, cathedrals, castles, municipal buildings, patrician's residences, as well as traditional dwellings – wooden, stone or half-timbered old farms and mountain chalets.



Grossmunster Church in Zurich



Church Hofkirche in Lucerne

In the middle of the 19th century more than half the working population was employed in agriculture. The Swiss mountaineer farmer, with its farmer's mentality dominated the country. Today the agriculture employment has dropped to about 4%. The farmer's mentality – the stubbornness, laboriousness, business and commerce orientation with the protestant's honesty, inventiveness, but submissiveness to law, frugality with somewhat penny-pincher attitude, remained governing features of a Swiss person.

At this point, it is necessary to mention that for many centuries Switzerland was a male-dominating country. Since the proclamation of the Constitution, during over 100 years till 1971, only men had the right to vote. The Swiss mountaineer farmers, who traditionally used to vote by raising their sables, resisted for a long time the worldwide woman emancipation trend. (I remembered how often, before 1971, the official propaganda in Poland used this lack of women's rights to demonstrate Communism's superiority…) Still today, the women in Switzerland seem to be suppressed by men, and women still conduct themselves in a rather submissive way. In comparison to other countries, there are very few women in the professional work force, and especially on management positions. The proportion of women taking part in the political activities of the country today is represented by 23% of seats in both Houses, the Council of States (with total 46 persons representing the Cantons) and the National Council (with 200 persons representing the people).



Bellinzona Castle



St. Gallen Catedral



Einsiedeln: Benedictine Monastery. Most important site of pilgrimage

The Swiss institutions and political organizations reflect the experience of the

last centuries. The political conscience of the Swiss is a rare blend of a feeling of national identity and the desire for self-determination, even at the most local political level, where they do not like to be dictated to.



United Nation Palace in Geneva

From the defence of primitive liberties in the 13th century – which was the major reason behind the alliance of the three main valleys, forming the "core" of the Confederation – to present day debates about the federal system, the basic need for the regional autonomy has never been disputed. Recently, Swiss Constitution was updated and came into force in January 2000. The 23 Cantons and 3 Half-Cantons, as Federal States, enjoy a high degree of freedom in their political decisions and administrative autonomy. This autonomy extends also to the local Communities, the lowest and the most important Swiss political institutions. Since 1848, Bern is the federal capital of Switzerland.



Bern, Switzerland



Basel City Hall

The Federal Council (the Government unit elected by both Houses) ensures internal and external security, upholds cantonal constitutions and maintains diplomatic relations with foreign countries. It also controls monetary exchange, roads, railways, postal services, forestry, and hydroelectric power.

It is amazing, however, that with all these ethnic, cultural and religious diversities, the country today is not continuously shaken by disrupting national, religious, or social movements.



A tram in Zurich

Education

Education in Switzerland is obligatory. There are no illiterate people. Teachers receive good salaries and are highly respected.

Several newspapers, free of charge, are available in boxes, often at bus or tram stops. On public transportation you always see people reading newspapers, magazines, or books. Inside trams and busses there are special containers, where you can drop a newspaper or magazine that you do not need anymore, making it available for the other passengers to read.

Swiss Army

Switzerland is a neutral country, staying away from all world military conflicts. However, in case of emergency, in a couple hours Switzerland may get an army that could be larger than those of many other, more populated countries. Every Swiss man of age 20-42 is a well-trained soldier, belonging to a particular troop. These men keep all their military equipment at home (everybody knows famous "Swiss knives", but their military equipment is not limited to knifes). For young Swiss men, the military training starts with 15 weeks of basic training, then continues during 2 or 3 weeks every year, until the age 42 (or 55 for officers). The older citizens belong to the civil militia. All this military training effort is financially supported by businesses.



Swiss Air Force flying over Lugano

I remember one afternoon I visited the town of Rapperswil. It happened that near this place there was a military camp. The soldiers had just finished their 3-week training. On the central market place of Rapperswil, a military orchestra entertained the local population, and happy soldiers were sharing their experiences during the training, while treating the public to wine and appetizers. It was a pleasant surprise to me.

During the Second World War, Switzerland remained neutral. However, the country situated between two aggressive allies, Germany and Italy, was continuously under pressure of an invasion danger. On one side, there were significant pro-German inclinations inside the Swiss Government; on the other side – the country was getting ready to fight the potential invader. All Swiss borders were closed off and garrisoned by Swiss military forces. (The closure of the borders unfortunately prevented many Jews, fleeing from the German-occupied countries, from getting asylum.) The entire Switzerland was armed. The citizens were ordered to build shelters in all dwellings and in every house. I have seen recently a strange construction of anti-tank barrages in the middle of fields, the untouched remnant from the time o the Second World War.

The pro-German sentiments within the Swiss Government surfaced at the beginning of the war, in 1939. After the capitulation of Poland, a part of the Polish Army succeeded in the soldier's escape to France and joined the French Army in their efforts against Germans. When eventually France capitulated as well, this Polish army crossed into Switzerland and laid down arms there. The Polish soldiers were granted internment, and they were dispersed throughout Switzerland. Some of them still live there; I met three veterans during one of the Polish community meetings in Zurich. Guess what happened to the Polish soldier's arms? Switzerland offered these arms to Germans.

Germany apparently did not intend to invade Switzerland at all. This neutral country was a very convenient place for the Germans to store their funds – the money and goods that they robbed from all occupied countries. They took advantage of the famous discrete and reliable service of Swiss banks.

Switzerland Richness

Everybody knows that Switzerland is now a rich country. It has the highest average income per capita in the world. Everything in Switzerland looks rich, beautiful, and well maintained. On the other hand, however, Switzerland is extremely poor in natural resources – no gold, no oil, no uranium, no iron. Only one fifth of the country area qualifies for agriculture. How come this country became so rich? The answer to this question has to be related to the nature of Swiss people. Just the harsh nature forced them to work harder and smarter, and to avoid wars. The most important source of the Switzerland richness is the inventiveness and laboriousness of its people. These are the biggest treasures of the country.



Aerial view of the village Gruyère in Friburg Canton, famous for Gruyere cheese

In time, Swiss industry started playing an important role in the world. While the most famous Swiss products are watches, cheese, and chocolate, currently the main source of Swiss earnings is the exportation of chemical and pharmaceutical products and machinery (including watches!). In the service area of the income, most prominent are Swiss banks. Transportation, tourism, and insurance services provide the balance of the country's budget.



Swiss Bank in Bern

The most important features of the Swiss banks are bank secrecy and confidentiality, including secrecy with regard to the state. With Swiss neutrality, this confidentiality also creates a fertile ground for various financial criminals from around the world.

There is an interesting story related to the Swiss watches. During long decades, the Swiss traditional mechanical, high-accuracy watch industry, dominated the world market. In the years 60s of the last century, Swiss inventors designed an electronic watch. The industry, however, did not treat it seriously. The electronic watch was presented on the World Exhibit in Paris as just an "interesting toy". Some Japanese visitors caught a glimpse of it… and they got the message. A few years later, the Japanese electronic watches conquered the world market! The Swiss watch industry did not notice in time the important paradigm shift and eventually was heavily hurt.



10 gram 999.9 pure gold bullion bar

Controversy of Jewish Funds in Swiss Banks

When in the thirties of the last century, as a wave of fascism swept through Germany, then through other countries, Jewish people used to deposit their money in Swiss banks. Many Jews perished during the Second World War. Their descendants tried eventually to retrieve these funds. The Swiss bankers were rather reluctant. A few years ago this problem reached the mass media. Swiss banks were accused of stealing Jewish money. The problem became annoying. Finally, with typical Swiss pragmatism and honesty, the Swiss banks requested an international committee to be called up. Then they opened their safes and all financial documentation for this committee to investigate. The problem was eventually successfully solved. The rightful claims have been paid.



Swiss banknote: 10 Franks with the picture of L. Euler from Basel, who founded the basis of modern mathematics. Each Swiss banknote commemorates one of the famous Swiss personages.

Red Cross

Red Cross is one of the Swiss-born most noble ideas. Its symbol is a "negative" of the Swiss national flag. The original essence of the Red Cross activities was to bring relief to war victims. Red Cross organization was initiated by Henri Dunant, a Geneva resident, who witnessed the bloody war near Solferino in 1859. He suggested that during the time of peace all countries should work out an international agreement on medical service immunity and on mutual protection of sick and wounded during the war. Eventually, this idea became well structured and later got also extended to the victims of natural disasters. The Red Cross organization successfully operates ever since. In 1910, Dunant received the Peace Nobel Prize for his meritorious initiative.



Henri Dunant



Downtown Geneva. Swiss flag flatters on the left, Geneva flag on the right.

Immigration

Switzerland gladly accepts immigrants, especially those bringing large amounts of funds (apparently there live a lot of rich politicians from Africa, as well as "nouveau rich" ex-communist Russians in most beautiful places of Switzerland). Switzerland also accepts immigrants in order to fill up the lowest positions of labor, as well as the highest positions in professional standards. About 20% of Switzerland population are immigrants. To become a Swiss citizen is, however, very difficult, since the first step to this citizenship a person must be accepted as a "citizen of a particular local Community". Most immigrants do not seek Swiss citizenship at all; they participate in quality consumption of this rich country, without taking responsibility and political obligations of the Swiss citizen.

In the past, Switzerland offered asylum to many political refugees from different countries. In particular, Switzerland accepted a considerable amount of refugees escaping from the communist system in the East European countries. The last big wave of Polish immigrants came in the early eighties, after the defeat of the Solidarity movement in Poland. The immigrants were very well treated. Immediate financial support, free education and jobs were offered to them.

Recycling

As with many other problems of everyday life, the recycling of used materials in Switzerland is well organized. The recycling program is very strict and well enforced. Trash must be deposited in outside bins, and only if it is inside special tied bags, which cost about a dollar apiece. This high price covers the trash removal cost and supports the recycling process. One Power Station in Zurich operates not on coal or oil, but on the local trash. On specific day mornings, bundled newspapers and bundled cardboard pieces deposited on curb sides are seen all over. By noon, they are collected. In many places there are installed special containers for recyclable materials, like wood, metals and glass of various colours. For a stranger, especially the one, who does not speak the local language, it is a bit confusing, though.

Drug Problem

Several years ago Switzerland, like many other countries, faced a serious drug problem. An applied rather expensive solution became eventually a model for other countries.

Drug users and drug dealers continuously invaded a park near the Main Railway Station in Zurich. It was the largest drug market in Europe. Total transactions per day exceeded two million Swiss francs (over US $1.7 million). The Banks around this park profited tremendously. Days and nights the park was full of homeless drug users, sick and dying there. About 5 years ago, the Zurich Government decided to put a solution at work. They created special locations ("fixertube"), where drug addicts were able to get drugs for free, under the supervision of a physician. Those who wanted to be cured from the addiction were given Mentadon instead of heroine. The drug addiction treatment in hospitals has been extended. The therapy was very expensive, but eventually it brought some positive results. The number of AIDS victims dropped considerably, the criminality decreased, and the park, open to the public, became safe.

The drug problem is not, however, totally solved. It still exists in prostitution, as often these way women earned their money for drugs. To alleviate this issue the Government assigned and prepared special locations ("lilibus"), where women could come to get help, food, and shelter.

Soon marihuana will be officially legalized in Switzerland. The National Council has already approved this project. The farmers are happy to found a new source of income by cultivating marihuana. Marihuana cigarettes, marihuana teas, and marihuana cosmetics have already reached the market.



View of Jungfrau from Interlaken area

Tourism in Switzerland

Tourism is a big business in Switzerland. Intensely beautiful countryside of the superb Alps, with their magnificent granite peaks, majestic glaciers, crystal-clear post-glacier lakes, streams and rivers with gorgeous waterfalls, green valleys with picturesque villages, and rich, clean towns, attract nowadays people from all over the world. Oddly enough, not the Swiss, but Englishmen in the 19th century discovered Switzerland as a tourist kingdom and they initiated there mountain hiking, alpinism, skiing, and other sports.



Meadows near Wengen below gorgeous peaks: Eigen, Monch (4107m) and Jungfrau (4158m)



11 mile long Aletsch Glacier. Retreating glaciers supply water for



Gastlosen limestone mountains



Saint Saphorin and Lake Geneva



Matterhorn (4478 m)

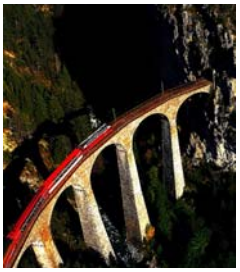


Tamina Gorge

During the following decades, smart and resourceful Swiss people created a tremendous infrastructure to accommodate tourists. The most important part of this infrastructure is now the transportation network. The mountains were pierced by highway and railway tunnels. In such a small country there is a network of over 3,000 miles of electric train railways, over 1,000 miles of freeways, and multitudes of local highways. The



Train in Elgenberg



Train overpass near Graubuenden



One of many gondola lifts

electric railway traffic is very efficient. There exists a rule that from any train station you can get a connecting train within a half an hour. Train individual tickets are rather expensive (for instance, a one way ticket for Zurich – Bern one-hour trip, costs 25 CHF, about $15), but there exist also convenient year passes for all trains within the country, which cost only 150 CHF (less than US $90).

The mountains are well prepared to accommodate tourists all year round. Luxury hotels and restaurants, in a row with modest traditional chalets and fast food stands, a dense network of rack railroads, suspension railway gondola lifts, as well as marked and well maintained hiking trails in the mountains, make tourists feel like they are in a large – but natural – Disneyland. And views in the mountains are always breathtaking!



Snowborading in the Alps

Renewable energy, like wind turbines and solar cells, is often used to power cableways through the year.



Wonderful skiing in the Alps

Swiss Beauty

The famous cleanliness, neatness, and beauty of Swiss towns and villages do not come entirely naturally. There are a lot of regulations, with which the Swiss residents must comply. One of them, for instance, is that they "have to grow flowers on their balconies". If not – they will be fined, with an amount that exceeds a few times the cost of these flowers… The beauty of the country is a rule!



Typical old Swiss house in the country

I have a friend, an old and respectable Frenchman, who owns a visibly old and a bit rusty car. One day he drove on business from France to Switzerland. He intended to park his car on a paid public parking. He entered the parking lot, but before he found a place to park, an employee stopped him. This employee told him to leave. "Why?" "Because you car is not beautiful enough".



Procession of cows adorned with flowers and carrying large bells on their necks: An annual return to Alpine



Cow statues on display in Zurich

Swiss Customs

The homeland, the harvest, and nature inspired the local customs. They are very traditional, and their origins lie centuries ago. Each year starts with carnivals, sledding contests, various parades and processions (like a procession of cows or a parade of fearsome figures or a turnip-lantern parade). The year continues with various summer and fall festivals (like a festival of guilds, flower festivals, or grape harvest and vintage festivals), risotto feasts, sheep sharing and bullfights, various country fairs, often accompanied by yodeling and alphorn playing contests. These traditional cultural events also attract tourists from all over the world.



A concert on alphorns



Rheinfall, Switzerland

The most important national holiday, celebrated with various festivals during over 700 years, is the anniversary of the creation of the Swiss Federation. Every year on August 1, it is celebrated with ferries of lights: lanterns, floodlights, and fireworks. The largest firework spectacle takes place at the Rheinfall, the largest waterfall in Switzerland.

The Swiss Sport Concept

The far-reaching political changes in Switzerland since 1990s, imposing clarification and implementation of responsibilities, aims, and measures, had direct repercussions on Swiss sport. The aim is to create the prerequisites and the incentive for the whole of the population to enjoy an adequate level health-promoting physical activity and sport. The two main thrusts are "Health through Sport" and "Education through Sport". Seven million Swiss people should be motivated to get moving!

New Trends

Life in Switzerland is very well organized, regulated, and stable. Throughout the history, the world violent events seem to pass by, non-perturbing this country. Recently, however, the situation has somewhat changed. The bankruptcy of Swiss Air, a large, rich, and respected company, was a big shock to everybody in the country. Later on, one of reputable banks also declared bankruptcy. Swiss people, who deeply believed in their healthy economy and trusted their Government, are now facing a situation they are unfamiliar with.



Davos: a village, which at the beginning of 20-th century started evolving to a tuberculosis convalescent centre, then to a reputable ski resort, and to the solemn site of the World Economic Forum

In addition, some another unusual events took place. When well guarded by the Swiss police the World Economic Summit had a meeting in Davos in 2001, the environmentalists organized a violent protesting demonstration – not in Davos, but at the Main Railway Station in Zurich. For their causes, they succeeded in demolishing the station building, and burning a few private cars. There was no police to react, as the major forces were sent to Davos.

Another unfortunate happening occurred one sunny Sunday afternoon during the last holiday season, when the main and richest street in Zurich, Banhoffstrasse, was full of promenading people. Suddenly, the routine was broken by a motorcycle with two masked individuals, which ran into a jewelry shop show window. These individuals broke the glass, grabbed everything what was on display, and packed it into their bags. In just a couple of minutes, they disappeared on their motorcycle. The big crowd in the street remained with widely open mouths. Such things never had happened before in Switzerland!



River Limmat crossing Zurich

Swiss people are still in a state of shock. They are not accustomed to such events and to the fast changes in their stable life style. They seem not to know yet how to react and how to adjust to this new and very unpleasant trend.



A flourishing meadow below Jungfrau (4158 m). Edelweiss still grows in Switzerland as one of protected species.

Minden, March 2002
Revised January 2006



The author in her office at the Zurich Polytechnic University (ETH); March 2001