

Swiss youth in the 700th anniversary year : a generation between Bahnhofstrasse and "Platzspitz"

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Swiss youth in the 700th anniversary year

A Generation between Bahnhofstrasse and "Platzspitz"

"And now take a walk from Bahnhofstrasse to the Platzspitz – it's sick, it's rotten; yes, Switzerland, these too are your children!", sings Tinu Heiniger, singer/songwriter from Thun, in his "Schwitzerlied", his "Swiss Song". As the nineties get underway, these children, Switzerland's youth, have strayed towards extremes – into apolitical consumer mania on the one hand, and into the misery of the drug scene, such as Zurich's "Platzspitz", or into the disillusioned despair of the extreme political left or the blind fanaticism of the radical right on the other. Here is a non-festive look at the youth of '91 in this festive year for Switzerland.

20-year-old Anne won't be voting in October's parliamentary elections. Anne, a trained hairdresser, is not interested in politics: "I'll have plenty of time to bother with that later", she says. For the time being she prefers to drive to a disco in Neuchâtel in her new VW Golf GTI, where she can show off her new clothes, bought in an Italian fashion boutique. "Expensive clothes", Anne says cheekily, "are my hobby – after all, I can afford them." She can also afford a holiday in Ibiza, a weekend trip to go bridge-jumping in the south of France, a paragliding course in Canton Valais, and new skiing gear for her holiday in St. Moritz.

Franco, who is 24, has "had it up to here" with politics, because it's no use anyway. In fact Franco tried it himself: he got involved in a party locally and even served on the local council as its youngest member for four years. In vain: there, at best, he was the "statutory" young person, so to speak, nobody really took him seriously. Franco has lost his faith in the political system. Now he can often be found rioting at demonstrations, "because I almost despair over this system's injustice, against which I have to use violence!"

21-year-old Peter complains about "the big bugs up in Berne". Because, in his view, politicians have failed, Peter has taken it into his own hands to fight against alleged threats. A few weeks ago his gang set fire to a shelter for asylum-seekers in his commune. It was only through luck that no one was killed in the incident. However, from time to time Peter and his gang beat up Tamils at night, "because those parasites have no right to be here", as Peter puts it.

Anne, Franco, Peter – three aspects of Swiss youth in 1991. Three emblematic faces of a generation drifting towards extremes.

The youth centres are deserted

The meeting-places and youth centres built in the seventies and the beginning of the eighties are now largely deserted. The table football

ivities that swallow up large amounts of money. Rock music alone, once a form of rebellion, generates millions of francs in turnover from young Swiss every year. In summer



Becoming an adult too early: still a child...

games, the discussion rooms and the board games are not being used. Where are the young Swiss?

More and more Swiss youngsters experience early affluence, which makes the old youth centres superfluous. Singled out as an ideal target audience by advertising strategists, many young people drift into an excessive consumer behaviour. Instead of developing their own initiative, they spend money on expensive, stylish clothes, their own cars, video recorders, stereos and costly leisure-time act-

1991, thousands of mainly 15 to 20-year-olds streamed to open-air concerts and festivals at Frauenfeld, Basle, Leysin, Nyon, Berne, Gampel, Zurich and St. Gall, to mention only the biggest ones. The "Out In The Green" festival in Frauenfeld alone attracted an audience of up to 70,000 young people who each paid Sfr. 110 to get in – plus what they spent on travel and food. In this 700th anniversary year, young Swiss are treating themselves to quite a bit, and by doing so are filling the pockets of the organisers, who, for example



...yet already plunged completely into the beauty...

made some Sfr. 3 million out of the Frauenfeld event.

Repression and "I want to live!"

The consumer mania of young people is also a form of escape: they repress their fear of often intangible, complex problems, such as pollution, the hole in the ozone layer, the threatening collapse of the ecosystem, dying forests and AIDS, knowing that as young persons they can hardly cope with these creeping threats.

The consumer attitude of young people in Switzerland, who can afford an extravagant life with their wages as trainees or Daddy's money, is therefore an act of repression and an expression of the outcry: "I want to live!" Young people who have not yet lost the courage to change things increasingly find themselves being pushed towards the fringes of society and are regarded as criminals, like the movement that emerged around Berne's youth and cultural centre "Reitschule". As a member of the generation of '68, Zurich's mayor, Josef Estermann, remembers that at that time young people were taken seriously. "We were a force needed by society, people took notice of our new ideas." Estermann wonders whether today's young people still have that kind of solid base. Many, like Franco, certainly don't. Young people who still want to live according to their own pattern can expect years of hassle with authorities and the police, like the young people of "Zaffaraya", an alternative tent and caravan town on the outskirts of Berne.

Young people pushed to the fringe

Young people find little room to manoeuvre, and due to frustration over this some of those who have been pushed to the fringe allow themselves to become radicals and go about damaging property, because they feel powerless faced with a state they believe does not take them seriously.

Others drift into the misery of drugs – Zurich's "Platzspitz", Berne's "Kocherpark", and the open drug scenes in Basle, Olten,

St. Gall and Langenthal bear distressing witness to this.

However, young people do not only choose the extreme left-wing margin of society, Right-wing radicalism also came to the fore among young people in 1991, particularly in the form of xenophobia. A man working with asylum-seekers in a Berne suburb recently received an anonymous letter signed "village youth" that said: "Switzerland belongs to the Swiss and in no way to the dirty asylum seekers!" Therefore: "Deploy the army along the frontiers! We have no more room for others! The boat is full to the brim!" The young people wrote that if hutments were built to accommodate refugees in the village, "we shall not hesitate to use violence!" Elsewhere, there were more than just threats: on 3 August young people aged between 17 and 21 set fire to a reception centre for asylum-seekers in Thun with Molotov cocktails. Motive: xenophobia.

Violence as an expression of helplessness

Violence as an expression of the inability to cope with the present also exists among Zurich's child and youth gangs: muggings, stabbings and attempted rapes are everyday occurrences – the culprits are young people. So don't youngsters in Switzerland also have new values of their own? The "Switzerland Without An Army" group, based on a poll conducted after the vote on the initiative on abolishing the army, thinks it has discovered a shift in values: 60 per cent of voters aged between 20 and 30 accepted the initiative, and, according to a survey carried out by the Re-



...and fashion cults. (Photos: Michael von Graffenried)



search Centre for Swiss Politics at Berne University, as many as 72 per cent of soldiers under 32 voted against the army. This majority of young people in favour of a comprehensive peace policy, which the initiative also called for, could be interpreted as a new form of self-assurance of a generation, but for the time being this result stands somewhat in isolation as an example of a distinctive political consciousness.

Young people do not take part in politics
Young people will hardly be represented in the forthcoming parliamentary elections of 20 October. Jean-Pierre Bonny, a Radical Party

National Councillor, supports the candidature of Martin Weber, captain of Berne's football team, Young Boys, "because with people like him we can prove that not all young people are left-wing." However, although Weber is standing for the Young Radicals, he too is already 34. Why paint such a gloomy picture of Swiss youth in this anniversary year? "They have everything they want!" This could be the very reason for the desperate attempts to break out of society, whether into extreme consumerism, excessive violence or extreme right-wing acts. We've seen it all before, young people forced

to try out increasingly extreme ways of life in a society in which nothing is sacred any longer. Drug addicts especially try desperately to dissociate themselves from the competitive and consumer society, and are thus doing nothing else but trying out its extreme forms. To attract attention, to stand out – in short: to have an identity – is infinitely more difficult for a boy or girl nowadays than it was 20 years ago for Josef Estermann, now Zurich's mayor, and his generation... "What do they want, they've got everything!" But whether Anne, Franco or Peter, there's one thing that many young Swiss haven't got: a real belief in the future. *Bänz Friedli*

What do young people think about their elders? A survey

"They Should be a Bit More Laid Back"

Older people are pig-headed, set in their ways and blinkered, say young Swiss. Nine young people give their views on the generation conflict.

Barbara (18), office worker
I get on well with my parents. We never had more than the usual friction like when I used to have to be home before midnight. I think adults could be a bit more laid back. Recently I was standing in a queue and when someone – a foreigner at that – pushed forward a bit, there was suddenly a lot of fuss. Young people aren't so narrow-minded about such things. I'm not scared of becoming old – I'll just let things take their course.

Patrice (23) student
My grandparents sometimes think they can boss me about. They're dreadfully authoritarian – you just can't argue about anything with them. Most people aged 50 and over think we should obey them straightaway. I think we should talk to each other more. And if parents want their children to do something they could explain the reason. All in all I think older people shouldn't be so pigheaded.

Pascale (21) trainee construction draughtsman
I don't like the narrow-mindedness you often find in older people. You want to stage a party and you immediately get complaints from neighbours about the noise. Maybe young

people are doing things their elders would like to have done when they were young but weren't allowed to. What I like about being young is that you don't have any ties.



The difficulty of finding oneself. Bored consumerism.

Still, I'm not bothered about getting older. The thing is to keep trying something new.

Andrina (23) secretary
I can't say I have any problems with people older than me. My best friend is 38. I also res-



pect older people's experience. Only I get fed up when 70-year-olds forget that for young people now the world looks quite different from what it did for them when they were young. Other demands are made on us and we face other problems. Besides, the world we were born into was made by previous generations, not by us.

Eveline (19), trainee radiography assistant
I'm glad I get on well with my parents. We go to concerts together, for instance. But I think it's wrong that my father expects me to wait on him hand and foot. For me my grandparents are the ideal old people. They've stayed young in heart and are always doing something or other. I'd be glad if I could talk with all other people the way I can with them.

Geraldine (19), clerk
My father is a typical Italian. He finds it difficult to come to terms with the fact that I'm growing up. For instance, I always have to be home for the evening meal, and if I want to eat out occasionally I have to tell him a week in advance. Of course I put up a fight against this sort of thing, and I've learned how to



Hostility to foreigners. (Photos: Michael von Graffenried)

stand up to him. That's probably the reason why my younger sister now has things a bit easier. What I dislike about older people is that they give you idiotic looks in the tram if they don't happen to like your clothes. We're not hippies just because we put on something comfortable.

Jan (20), electronics technician
Older people are very often in a rut. They've become inflexible, no longer live according to their feelings. I've just been to France. It was different there – the old and the young talk to each other. In Switzerland there's a fear of meeting one another. But I'm looking forward to being older. I think that at 35 I'll have achieved things I still have to work on in the near future. Still, I hope that I'll stay open-minded and also that in later life I'll still be able to do things together with young people.

Sven (22), student
I don't have great problems with my parents. Sometimes my father comes into my room and turns my stereo set down. He's also not come to terms with my riding a motorbike and keeps quoting accident figures to me. Generally speaking I think older people wear blinkers and can only look pigheadedly straight in front of them. A lot of things would be different if they were a bit more open-minded and tolerant. They ought to cast their minds back a bit more and remember

what it was like when they were young. And ask themselves whether the mistakes that were made then shouldn't be avoided today.

Gottfried Honegger

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