

**Zeitschrift:** Swiss review : the magazine for the Swiss abroad  
**Herausgeber:** Organisation of the Swiss Abroad  
**Band:** 30 (2003)  
**Heft:** 2

**Artikel:** Home country : bittersweet memories of the homeland  
**Autor:** Keller, Gabrielle  
**DOI:** <https://doi.org/10.5169/seals-907370>

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# Bittersweet memories of the



Patrick Lüthy / Imagopress

Music stirs emotions. Sounds of the home country trigger nostalgia in many a Swiss living abroad. The picture shows Werner Aeschbacher of Langenthal playing the Swiss accordion.

*Not even the most successful among us is immune to homesickness. It can strike even in the most beautiful corner of the world and is such a painful nostalgia that at times it causes mental and physical suffering.*

**GABRIELLE KELLER**

**BARBARA AND KARL B.\*** – a successful doctor and a radiant young mother – emigrated to New York five years ago. Whenever they talked about their home country, it was only in passing and without much emotion – until friends from Switzerland presented them with a CD of cowbells. Barbara and

Karl B. are both city-dwellers and bear not the slightest trace of an idyllic alpine upbringing. Yet the sound brought tears to their eyes. These are the first symptoms of an ailment called homesickness.

Swiss around the world are particularly vulnerable to this complaint: witness the two million Swiss mercenaries, bakers, confectioners, craftsmen, impoverished farmers

and adventurers who have left our country for other shores. Medical ethnologist Corina Salis Gross of the Grisons, a Senior Assistant at Berne University's Institute for Ethnology, attributes this predisposition towards homesickness not so much to our nation's psychological makeup, but rather to the fact that the Swiss have traditionally been a nation of emigrants.

## **Loving your home country enriches your life**

Love for one's home country is an admirable characteristic. "Swiss Abroad have a wider perspective than Swiss who have lived their whole lives in the same environment", says Gertrud K.\*, who recently returned to Gene-

# homeland

va after living in France for 40 years. Experiencing another culture broadens the horizons and improves their understanding of Switzerland as well as their host country.

It's true to say that love for one's home country is not necessarily manifested in homesickness: it need not cause pain or illness. Discussions with Swiss Abroad clearly show how the absorption of different worlds and experiences can add an inestimable quality to life. Swiss Abroad are often more creative and open-minded than those at home – especially when they recognise the imperfections of their own country and willingly admit to them rather than subscribe to a rigid image which is far removed from reality. "A healthy love of the home country leaves room for criticism," says Gertrud K. "On the other hand, people who pine for their home country often take criticism of it very personally and respond with anger and consternation."

## Remembrance of things past

Homesickness is a nostalgic pining for the home country. People suffering from this complaint tend to have a distorted sense of perception. For those affected, the home country is not just a favoured territory, but also a collection of symbols of a lost paradise. The home country is indelibly associated with a dialect or a favourite face. According to Corina Salis Gross, a psychological shift takes place: "Symbols become real objects. So a national flag is suddenly perceived as the object it symbolises, i.e. the home country."

Such shifts in perception are often observed in Swiss nationals living abroad. Switzerland is trying to rid itself of clichés like chocolate, cheese and mountains in order to project a differentiated image of itself. Meanwhile, what do Swiss nationals do after a few years of living abroad? Most of them start to miss good Swiss chocolate, good Swiss cheese and their beautiful Swiss mountains. Swiss folk lore, to which they paid no heed at home, often evokes powerful emotions. "That's normal," says Salis Gross. "Everyone needs symbols. There's nothing wrong with that until they start to trigger an acute nostalgia for the home country."

## Patriotic symbols

In her work entitled "Über das Heimweh..." ("About homesickness", Bündner Monatsblatt, 1989), the medical ethnologist writes that the concept of a "home country" is closely linked with the social community and shared traditions. For a country as rich in diversity as Switzerland, such factors are difficult to pin down.

Because the home country is such an abstract and intangible concept, people fasten on objects which symbolise it. Thus moun-

quently satisfy fundamental needs (as do national dishes) and emotional components (as does music). Homesick Swiss, for example, could respond in a highly emotional way to fondue and yodelling, French nationals to the accordion, and Serbians to bean soup.

## Homesickness can be an illness

According to Salis Gross, "Homesickness is a fervent desire to make up for an affective loss. But desires are what make us human.

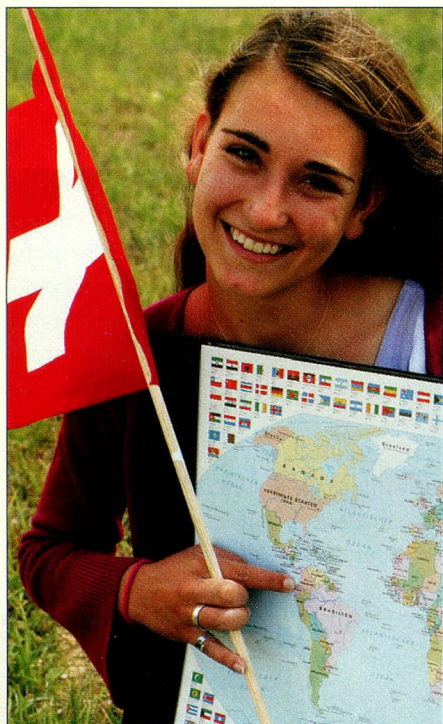


Agda Sunberrie (81) and Ernesto Freuler (84) are proud of their Swiss roots. Their great-grandparents emigrated to Argentina from Brüten near Winterthur and Rüti (ZH).

ains, childhood nurseries and apple rösti take on a patriotic dimension and frequently give rise to a yearning for long-lost happiness. In his essay on "Le Mythe d'aujourd'hui" the French philosopher Roland Barthes explains how such distortions come about: symbols of a shared tradition (for example, folk music or a national flag) are imbued with subjective content or collective ideologies (for example, a happy childhood or the inviolable unity of the state). According to Salis Gross, such myths fre-

Depending on the approach, they can be a source of creative motivation or a source of illness." Since nostalgia tends to become absolute, its dangerous components must be identified. Thus we often observe how people blossom in a new environment, only to recognise the ambivalence of their situation after five years or more. Those who fail to learn how to cope with this dynamic are prone to self-destructive behaviour, which may even cause psychological suffering. Salis Gross cites depressive moods, migraines, →

Latinphoto/Patrick Lüthy



Nadine Rieder, a smiling Swiss from Ecuador.

back and stomach problems and psychosomatic ailments (pain symptoms) as common manifestations of ineptly managed homesickness.

### Culturally acceptable complaint

If it is true that homesickness is merely the projection of a psychological sense of loss onto a spatial and cultural dimension, and if – as Salis Gross claims – their sense of loss can also be expressed as homesickness or even a death wish, this begs the question of why so many people project this emotional sense of loss onto a country. Salis Gross responds that “Homesickness is socially and culturally acceptable. One can use it to give expression to a wide range of complaints.” The main problem, unfortunately, is the failure of the homesick person to recognise the real reason behind his suffering. Thomas L.\* lived with his partner in Latin America for twelve years. He had absolutely no problems with homesickness until his long-term relationship broke up. From then on he began to think longingly about his home country. Instead of straightening his emotions out, he returned to Switzerland. But happiness still eluded him. “In this case the origins of the malaise which Thomas L. interpreted as homesickness were clear. That’s not always the case,” says Salis Gross. Swiss dramatist Thomas Hürlimann is another who believes that homesickness is not necessarily cured, nor unalloyed happiness found, by return-

ing home. In a recent interview he explained that “When I returned to Switzerland to assuage my homesickness, I found it just as hard to find as Gottfried Keller’s ‘Green Harry,’ Salander or Stiller.”

### Intertwining worlds

Swiss Abroad enjoy a variety of experiences. Most of them love their country of origin as well as their chosen country of residence. “It’s normal and healthy that they sometimes feel torn,” says Salis Gross.

Latinphoto/Oscar Navarrete



Gerard Trendle (40) works as a baker in Nicaragua.

### IRENE POLLAK-REIN (52)

Jerusalem, Israel



Irene Pollak-Rein was born in Zurich in 1950 and emigrated to Israel in 1969. She gained her Master of Arts in history from the Hebrew University and now works as departmental head for German-speaking countries at the Jerusalem Foundation, an institution founded by ex-mayor Teddy Kollek to promote the welfare of the city’s residents.

As part of her job, Irene Pollak-Rein has to travel to Switzerland four times a year, where she enjoys being pampered by her mother. The main objective, however, is to promote a number of projects in Jerusalem in conjunction with the board of the Jerusalem Foundation of Zurich (chaired by ex-mayor Josef Estermann), with special attention on co-existence education.

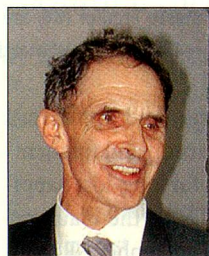
What Irene Pollak appreciates most about Switzerland are “the excellent rail and tram

networks”, the likes of which, she says, are only at the planning stage in Jerusalem. She misses Switzerland’s lakes and rivers. “That’s why we really appreciate a rainy winter in Israel”.

Added to this, she fervently wishes that Israel would adopt Switzerland’s attitude to cleanliness and conscientious recycling. *gk*

### WILLI BÖHI (64)

Taipei, Taiwan



Willi Böhi grew up on a farm in Au/Fischingen (Thurgau) as the eldest of ten children. In 1969 he was sent to Taiwan by the Bethlehem Mission Immensee. After two years spent in Hsinchu studying the Chinese language, he moved to the capital, Taipei, a metropolis of 3 million where he has been living for the past 30 years.

Originally Böhi was commissioned to write reports on the country and people of this little-known island for various publica-

tions. Things began to get difficult around 1980, as the democratic movement began to gain strength and the Kuomintang party responded to any form of opposition with strict censoring of the press and is even alleged to be responsible for murders which to this day remain unsolved. Willi Böhi’s papers were confiscated and for the next eleven years he was unable to obtain an exit visa: “Due to the added isolation imposed by the secret services, my homesickness manifested itself through skin rashes and a persistent back problem which is still not fully cured.”

For more than ten years Böhi has been responsible for providing legal aid to migrants and has to contend with homesickness on a daily basis. “What else can one do,” he asks, “but in some small way create a homeland oasis and a little corner of Switzerland?” As he puts it, “I now value my home country more than ever before and look on my rare, brief visits to Switzerland virtually as a dream trip to paradise. Take care of Switzerland and its incomparable mountains!”

What does the missionary miss? “First and foremost, what makes me really happy is

But what can they do if their chosen country of residence begins to feel too big and they suddenly feel lost, secretly yearning for the security of their home country? Salis Gross: "In this case it can help to talk to

other emigrants who are experiencing the same feelings. Exchanging experiences and perhaps sharing a typical Swiss meal can give people renewed strength to tackle their second habitat." Some 750 Swiss clubs

abroad can offer such oases. Not to mention the thousands of Swiss restaurants where, even in South Africa, you can get together with friends over an authentic cheese fondue.

At times like this, cheese and rösti are a recipe for happiness!

\* Names known to the editor

Translated from German.



Even in Nicaragua a little piece of them remains Swiss: Patrick Sackmann (38) with his Nicaraguan wife Yolanda (37) and children.

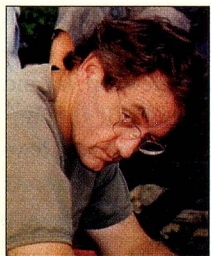
#### ADDITIONAL READING

"Über das Heimweh...", Corina Salis Gross: <http://www.buendner-monatsblatt.ch>  
Individual copies can also be ordered from  
Tel. +41-81-285-33-33  
"Heimat als Utopie", Bernhard Schlink, Suhrkamp Verlag. ISBN 3518066137.  
"Mythen des Alltags", Roland Barthes, Suhrkamp Verlag. ISBN 3518100920  
"Mythologies", Roland Barthes, Editions du Seuil (Points). ISBN : 2020005859

being able to help others," he is quick to answer. "But," he adds, "I suppose I miss chatting with neighbours in the 'Wirtschaft zur Au' inn after Sunday service. Other than that – well, perhaps the occasional plate of hot apple sauce!" gk

#### GÉRARD BOCHUD (57)

Montreal, Canada



The Bochud family has been living in Montreal since 1968. Gérard (57) is a program director and Professor of Graphics at the University of Québec. His wife, Simone, died in 1995. But life with his two sons Yann (32) and Emmanuel (30) goes on. Weekdays he spends in Montreal and weekends in the Cantons-de-l'Est. And holidays, of course, are spent in Switzerland...

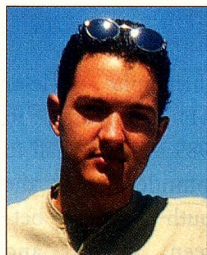
Yann, who lived in Switzerland until only four years ago, occasionally feels torn: "I always feel I've left something behind, but I feel the same way in Gruyère. I feel more

Québécois, but I cannot deny my roots..."

His father, on the other hand, does not miss his home country. "Switzerland offers security, and everything has its place. When I come here on holiday I think it's great – but if I stay too long it starts getting on my nerves. Then I come back here, to wonderful wide-open spaces!" Nevertheless his ties with the home country are perceptible: "I would be the first to mount the barricades for Switzerland if need be!" IE

#### HERMANN GNÄGI (23)

Nata, Panama



23-year-old Hermann Antonio Gnägi spent the first seventeen years of his life in Nata, a small town some 180 kilometers from Panama City. His father, Hermann

Ernesto Gnägi (53) of Gerolfingen/BE, was a cheesemaker by profession and left Switzerland at the age of 25 to work in Panama. His son, Hermann Antonio Gnägi, returned to

Nata after completing six years of studies in Switzerland (graduating in economics from St. Gall University).

The Gnägi family feels closely bound to Switzerland. They are active members of the local Swiss club and make regular trips to Switzerland. Says Hermann Antonio Gnägi, "What my father and I really miss are the mountains, the snow and the chocolate." Both greatly value the Swiss sense of neatness and organisation and the advantages offered by Swiss democracy. "We will always keep returning to Switzerland – even if it's only for a holiday," says Hermann Antonio Gnägi. "I believe a Swiss living abroad can never completely cut his ties with Switzerland." gk

Translated from German.



The Alphorn group and Swiss Yodlers of Sydney

## Wherever you are there's a Swiss oasis nearby

There's no reason to wait until homesickness becomes unbearable. Thanks to occasional or regular contact with other Swiss compatriots abroad, you can talk about your experiences, build a social network in your host country, or just relax and spend a sociable evening in a Swiss-style atmosphere.

Around the world there are 750 Swiss clubs and institutions affiliated with the Organisation for the Swiss Abroad (OSA): support groups, traditional Swiss clubs, sports clubs, folklore groups, Pro Ticino chapters, service clubs, chambers of commerce, parents' associations, sponsors of the 17 recognised Swiss schools abroad, et cetera. Year after year new members are added to the family of recognised Swiss Abroad associations. And the list of institutions with their own home page is also growing rapidly. A list of such organisations is given on the [www.aso.ch](http://www.aso.ch) home page. Your embassy or consulate will gladly provide you with additional information. And children and youngsters who want to experience Switzerland for themselves will find attractive holiday and study arrangements under [www.aso.ch](http://www.aso.ch) (see also page 11).

gk

## Cowherd's melodies that tear at heart-strings

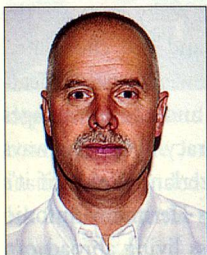
Eskimos, they say, are particularly prone to homesickness. Not nearly as much as the Swiss, though. No-one talks of "Eskimo illness", yet there is such a thing as the „maladie suisse" (the "Swiss illness"): an ailment which has placed us in the ranks of "nature-loving fellows who can only live life in a splendid landscape with splendid customs" (Udo Leuschner). In 1710 Theodor Zwinger was the first to document his accounts of the "Kuhreigen": cowherd's songs which prompted Swiss mercenaries in France and the Netherlands to fall sick or desert in droves whenever they heard it. As a result, the playing of such alpine melodies was strictly prohibited.

Sadly, the Swiss vulnerability to homesickness has never been scientifically investigated. But then, neither has the Eskimo's similar complaint.

gk

### DANIEL RÖTHLISBERGER (49)

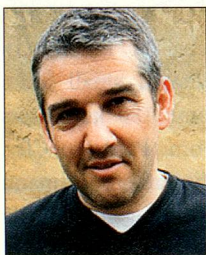
Johannesburg, South Africa



49-year-old Daniel Röthlisberger has been living and working near Johannesburg since September 1975. A precision mechanic by profession, he is Director of Austro Engineering (PTY). During the first five years of his stay he suffered from homesickness: "It was always worst at Christmas, when it was so hot here and I thought back to snow-covered Switzerland and cosy interiors," he says. However, he gradually acclimatised. Yet even after more than 27 years of living abroad he still cannot claim, hand on heart, that he does not miss Switzerland, despite being fully aware of the advantages of living in South Africa. Every two years or so he makes

a short trip back to Switzerland. "When I was in Berne last winter, I noticed that the city was no longer so clean. Trains were vandalised and walls were covered with graffiti." Yet he still enjoys a good dish of Rösti and Geschnetzeltes: "We can get that in Swiss restaurants here, but it never tastes quite as good as it does back in Switzerland." gk

Christophe Meier (41)  
Sommières, France



Christophe Meier (41) emigrated in 1989 from St. Gall to Sommières (in the south of France between Nîmes and Montpellier), where he lives with his wife and three children (aged 8, 12 and 14) and works as a graphic designer. The "St. Galler"

with roots in the Appenzell enjoys living in France and does not suffer from homesickness. But he still feels tied to the home country and returns to Switzerland between four and six times a year, for business as well as pleasure. Says Christophe Meier, "Switzerland is the country I grew up in and where I spent 30 years of my life. It's a country I know well and whose advantages I have come to appreciate since living abroad. As the saying goes, there's nothing so Swiss as a Swiss abroad."

What does he miss about Switzerland? "Certainly not the standard clichés. You can find cleanliness and punctuality and such like wherever you live. It depends more on the environment in which you live and work." But whenever he comes to Switzerland he derives great pleasure from the mountains. And he found Expo.02 simply fantastic. gk