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The voice from home is silenced

For seventy years, Swiss Radio short-wave broadcasting provided Swiss Abroad with an emotional link to their home country. During the Second World War and the Cold War, many non-Swiss also used the service. But last autumn, the era of the short-wave radio service came to an end.

BY ROLF RIBI

ON THE NIGHT of 30 October last year, people gathered around the short-wave broadcasting antenna of Sottens in the canton of Vaud. Everyone there was aware that at 2 a.m. that morning, a seventy-year era in the history of Swiss broadcasting would come to a close. Swiss Radio International had just broadcast its last radio shows over short-wave and satellite. Now, a Swiss institution that used to be heard all over the world was to fall silent forever.

The last two hours of broadcasting were dedicated to listeners from South America. Thus the radio had come full circle since 1 August, 1934, when the very first short-wave broadcast from the League of Nations transmitter at Prangins near Geneva was transmitted to Swiss nationals resident in South America. Shortly before this first broadcast to South America, the Swiss medium-wave broadcasting stations of Beromünster and Sottens had recorded programmes for compatriots in nearby European countries

Church bells from home

The National Holiday on 1 August, 1935, heralded the dawn of a new era of broadcasting. In a joint production for Swiss

Abroad in North and South America, Swiss Radio's three studios made the first broadcast over the short-wave transmitter at Prangins. The programme featured a speech by Federal President Rudolf Minger, choir songs in all official languages, the Ruetli oath and church bells ringing from the homeland.

"In the early 1930s, the need for communication with the homeland was especially important to Swiss Abroad," wrote Professor Walther Hofer in the jubilee book entitled "50 Jahre Schweizer Radio International" ("50 years of Swiss Radio International"). Many compatriots had emigrated to America and other continents, too. The world was suffering from global recession and travel was expensive. So radio rapidly became a popular means of maintaining emotional ties with the home country.

The positive feedback from the broadcast on 1 August, 1935, prompted the Swiss Broadcasting Corporation, as it was then called, to commission their own antenna. It was inaugurated in Schwarzenburg in the canton of Berne on 6 May, 1939, on the eve of the National Exhibition in Zurich.

"Schwarzenburg" became the voice of home for expatriates all over the world. According to the book entitled "History of the Swiss Broadcasting Corporation up to 1958", "Maintaining strong ties with the homeland was not only an emotional matter; it also helped to conserve the home country's values". So short-wave broadcasting served a double purpose: To foster and strengthen close connections with Swiss Abroad (then numbering around 200,000), and to promote an understanding of our democratic society beyond our borders.

"An island of democracy"

The short-wave transmitters in Schwarzenburg also increased the range of medium-wave broadcasts by the national stations of Beromünster, Sottens and Monte Ceneri. This was important during the Second World War: "Only short-wave allows us to

send out our message to the world: a message proclaiming that there remains only one island of democracy left in the heart of Europe" (wrote Paul Borsinger, the first director of Swiss short-wave radio).

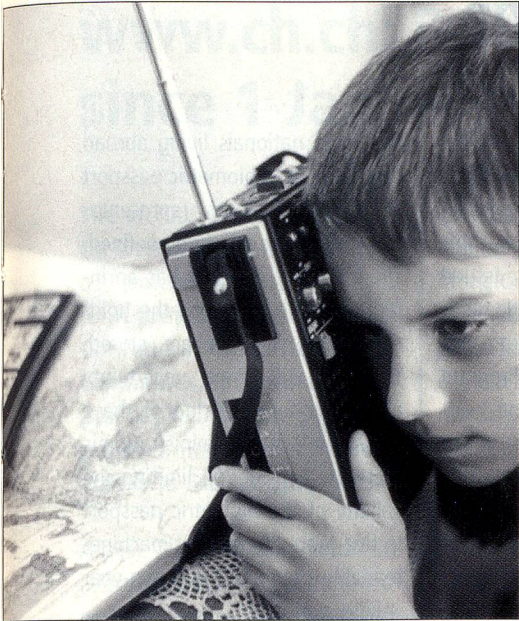
During the Second World War, "Weltchronik", a radio programme by Jean Rudolf von Salis, became the "Voice of the Nation". Every Friday his calm, clear, objective voice was to be heard discussing the progress of the war and global politics. Just before his death in 1996, the professor told me that the Federal Council had only dared to censor him once, in 1940. His reaction then was to suspend "Weltchronik" for five months.

The heyday of short-wave radio came during the Cold War. Radio waves were practically the only means of penetrating the Iron Curtain. The number of transmitters in Switzerland had risen to five. Swiss short-wave radio ensured its presence with forty hours of broadcasting each day. The audience had increased to three million regular listeners and eleven million who tuned in occasionally. Broadcasts from a neutral country were regarded as credible and trustworthy.

Radio crisis

The fall of the Berlin Wall and the ensuing relaxation of East-West relations triggered a crisis in international short-wave radio stations. Swiss Radio International (SRI), as it was called in 1978, was at a crossroads. "Suddenly, one of our main tasks had become obsolete," said Nicolas Lombard at the time. Lombard was later to become Director of SRI.

For one thing, there was the short-wave radio identity crisis. For another, there was the realisation that short-wave broadcasting had become obsolete. Reception quality was too unstable and power consumption too high. Moreover, listeners' demands had changed: globalisation and the associated effects had spread to our country, travel had become cheaper and consequently the number of visits to the home country by expatri-



Farewell short-wave radio

ates had risen. "Sentimental connections to the homeland, formerly so important, declined," says Professor Walther Hofer.

Swiss Radio International could not ignore this trend. Short-wave links were shut down one by one, to the point of complete abandonment last October. Politicians and the media debated long and hard about the strategic future of Swiss Radio International. The result was the creation of a multilingual, multimedia platform in the spring of 1999.

From short-wave to the Internet

Thus the former short-wave radio station was turned into what the Tages-Anzeiger called "the most comprehensive information platform about Switzerland. A lighthouse of Swissness for expatriates and foreigners around the world interested in our country." The online content of this media portal (www.swissinfo.org) is truly impressive: free information about current events and topics related to Switzerland. Text, images, videos and audio are all presented in nine languages.

In addition, the radio and television news of the Swiss Broadcasting Corporation (now SRG SSR idée suisse) are published in the four official languages. Anyone who wants to receive the daily radio show "Echo der Zeit", the television news or music stations such as Swiss Classic can do so around the clock. Swiss Abroad will find valuable information and services such as voting dossiers,

sites devoted to the Fifth Switzerland, and a forum for Swiss Abroad.

Was the abrupt strategic change from short-wave to Internet in 1999 the right path to take? There are reasons to confirm that it was: a survey conducted in 1998 by the Federal Office of Communication showed that the number of short-wave listeners had dropped below 50,000 and was steadily sinking. Analog short-wave technology is now an obsolete medium compared to the Internet, which bridges larger distances with more ease.

The fate of international radio was also sealed on account of the government's financial problems. For years the government bore half the costs of Swiss Radio International, with the other half generated by the licensing fees. In 2003, however, the hammer fell. In order to relieve the burden on the federal purse, the government announced that it would be cutting its subsidies from CHF 18 million to CHF 5 million in 2005 and reducing this to zero in 2006. This caused major problems for Swissinfo/SRI (as it has been called since 2001). The shortfall of CHF 10 million a year will then most probably have to be made up by the company itself.


Doubts and questions

The abrupt change of strategy in 1999 is also open to question. The Internet is not a substitute for radio. Short-wave radio had its own unique character, whereas there are lots of similar Internet platforms. Added to this, Internet access is not yet available in all parts of the world and hence to all Swiss Abroad. Swissinfo/SRI's media platform is now in competition with the global online portals run by major newspapers (which are not free) with their extensive analyses and commentaries. Aside from that, the Swiss Confederation's comprehensive website (www.admin.ch) is also a serious rival.

"We still have CHF 28 million for each of the forthcoming years 2005 and 2006, and with 120 employees, we are by far the largest multimedia editorial team in this country," says Swissinfo Director Lombard confidently.

How did expatriates react to the end of Swiss Radio International? "For months we've been receiving e-mails, postcards and letters from all over the world, criticising the closure of the radio service," says Rudolf Weber, director of the Organisation for the Swiss Abroad (OSA). "Many believe that an

important piece of their home country has been lost with the silencing of the Voice from Switzerland." And how can Swiss Abroad keep themselves informed about affairs back home? "Providing information to Swiss living abroad is part of SRG's public service mandate," says Wyder.

The 90,000 or so Swiss Abroad who exercise their political rights in Switzerland require up-to-date information on political affairs. They have access to a number of services such as federal voting and election dossiers, the Confederation's extensive Internet platform, current information and documentation from Swissinfo, as well as the long-running "Swiss Review" with its objective articles, published in five languages and in 25 regional editions for readers around the world. 

Translated from German.

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www.admin.ch

Homepage of the Swiss Confederation, in the four official languages plus English, postal and e-mail addresses

www.ch.ch

A guide to federal, cantonal and community administrations, FAQs

www.swissinfo.org

News and information platform in nine languages, news banner, multimedia, dossiers and service information

www.swisspolitics.org

Political information platform

www.revue.ch

Swiss Review Internet portal, federal information, services