How foreigners gave Switzerland impetus

Switzerland in the 19th century was a country undergoing transformation politically, intellectually and economically. However, it was not its own impetus that accounted for the change in mood. As well as established Swiss figures, a large number of foreigners, immigrants and refugees were involved in this new beginning that enabled Switzerland to make significant progress during this crucially important century.
By Jürg Müller

"Those who have got on the wrong side of the law, embezzled money, cursed their rulers or been involved in botched plots think to themselves: It doesn't matter, I'll go to Switzerland where I'll be safe; the Swiss are stupid and have pots of money – they'll look after me. Bespectacled doctors with moustaches, goatee-bearded communists, literati, writers and teachers are arriving in their droves along with raving-mad propagandists, shoe polishers from Rome and Vienna, uncouth characters and swift-footed freedom fighters."

(Extract from: "Berns moderne Zeit", Stämpfli Verlag, Berne 2011)

This was the mood at the election campaign in Berne in 1850, which had taken on a new tone. Switzerland had been a country of immigration since the 15th century, welcoming people from all backgrounds with open arms. A good example are the French Protestants known as the Huguenots. These religious refugees created significant economic momentum in Switzerland. Many persecuted immigrants also arrived in the post-Napoleonic period of the Restoration from 1815. The failed revolutions of 1848 at various places in Europe also drove thousands of political refugees to the emergent Swiss federal state founded in the same year. This provoked a defensive response from the

Swiss people as the pamphlet quoted above illustrates.

Switzerland becoming a place of refuge also led to the first foreign political test of the Federal Council. The major powers condemned the generous granting of asylum to their rebellious citizens. France, Prussia and Austria demanded the handover of refugees, exerted pressure and even amassed troops on the border. Military intervention was avoided thanks to mediation by Great Britain and several deportations. The Federal Council deliberately pursued a dual strategy: it defended its liberal asylum laws but conceded to pressure in some cases. Refugees were magnanimously taken in but asylum seekers who were excessively politically active were expelled.

Pastor Blocher asked: "Are we Germans?"

Switzerland gained a reputation as an archetypical asylum country in the 19th century. And it also pursued an extremely liberal immigration policy, which was not to the detriment of the nation as events illustrated. The immigrants brought dynamism to the republic, and Switzerland was to a large extent dependent on the influx of well-educated foreigners in certain areas. This is highlighted by a look at the university scene that was just emerging at the time. Up to 50

percent of professorships were held by Germans, and foreigners occupied all the lecturing posts at some faculties in Zurich. The University of Berne even dispatched agents to entice highly qualified academic staff to Switzerland from abroad.

The achievements of the Germans – particularly in intellectual life and business – were so highly regarded in Switzerland that a veritable Germanophilia took hold at the end of the 19th century. The admiration for German culture was so great that questions were raised about Swiss identity. Many Swiss people – in complete contrast to the above-quoted pamphlet imbued with anti-German feeling that was produced by conservative factions – were so partial to Teutonism that they asked themselves in all seriousness: "Are we Germans?" This was the title of a publication by the leading publicist in the field and pastor Eduard Blocher (1870–1942). The grandfather of former Federal Councillor Christoph Blocher labelled German-speaking Switzerland a German cultural province. His German roots may have had something to do with this: Eduard's grandfather, Johann Georg Blocher, had emigrated to Switzerland from Württemberg and was naturalised in the canton of Berne in 1861. At the turn of the 20th century there were around three times more Germans living in the city of Zurich, for in-
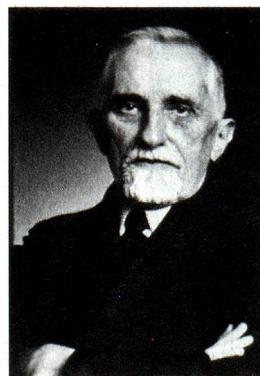

Napoleon

Friedrich Schiller
Author

Heinrich Zschokke
Publisher

Eduard Blocher
Pastor

The three confederates in the Federal Palace symbolise a Switzerland closed off from the outside world – this does not reflect reality

stance, in percentage terms than there are today.

Switzerland – a pan-European phenomenon

The Swiss economy was more oriented towards international trade at that time than during much of the 20th century. "It was scores of foreign entrepreneurs who began to turn 'underdeveloped Switzerland' into a modern industrial state," the economic historian Tobias Straumann recently explained in a newspaper article. And the Germanist and literary scholar Peter von Matt observes: "Modern political Switzerland, which began with the period under Napoleon, was a pan-European phenomenon from the outset." (Quotation from: "Die tintenblauen Eidgenossen", Munich 2001). Even leading Swiss figures in literature were heavily influenced by foreign authors: without the example set by German emigrants, "who expressed their political fervour in compelling verse", writes von Matt, "there would have been no writer by the name of Gottfried Keller".

It was also Peter von Matt who, at the momentous commemorative celebration "200 Years of Modern Switzerland" in Aarau on 17 January 1998, gave a powerful reminder to the fully assembled Federal Council and Switzerland of why the nation had reason to be grateful for imported ideas: "It obtained the philosophy of mediation from the political genius of the Frenchman Napoleon, which once again made coexistence possible, and the play 'William Tell' from the poetic brilliance of Friedrich Schiller, which colourfully and vociferously testified to the whole world of our glorious past."

It is not just Switzerland's federal structure that can be traced back to Napoleon's mediation of 1803. The modern system of democracy with all its liberties also began to emerge during this period. Schiller's Tell of 1804 poetically canonised the founding myth in its current famous form. This made a major contribution to enhancing the self-assurance of the emergent nation. The temporal concurrence of the German and French contributions to Switzerland's self-perception may be coincidental but it nonetheless indicates that Switzerland and even its myths are not home-grown achievements.

Switzerland would not exist without the German Zschokke

Napoleon and Schiller were not immigrants; they shaped the image of Switzerland from outside. Every child is nevertheless familiar with their names. The same cannot be said of Heinrich Zschokke (1771–1848), who is a little-known figure. This German from Magdeburg influenced Swiss national identity in many ways. A comprehensive biography (Werner Ort: Heinrich Zschokke, Baden 2013) and an exhibition in Aarau, where he worked for many years and obtained citizenship, have gone some way to raising his profile this year.

Edgar Bonjour, one of the old masters of Swiss historiography, said 60 years ago that the emergence of modern Switzerland would not have been possible without Heinrich Zschokke. Zschokke had an impact in many areas: he was a politician, statesman, exponent of the Enlightenment, revolutionary, author, publicist, philosopher, pedagogue, a member of the Aargau parliament and the Constitutional Council – and he was highly driven. According to his biographer Werner Ort, Zschokke consciously chose to come to Switzerland after spending a brief period in Paris and disappointedly turning his back on France. He believed that what had been "discovered" but had failed in

France was possible in Switzerland, namely the establishment of the postulates of liberty, equality and fraternity.

Besides many other achievements, Zschokke influenced our view of history for generations. His historical work, "Des Schweizerlands Geschichte für das Schweizervolk" (Swiss History for the Swiss People) of 1822, served as the basis for the teaching of history in Swiss schools until into the 20th century. Incidentally, Heinrich Zschokke's work was published by Heinrich Remigius Sauerländer from Frankfurt am Main (1776–1847), the founder of the eponymous publishing house in Aarau. Sauerländer was also one of the key figures in the establishment of modern Switzerland with his publishing activities. He was also President of the Aargau Society for Swiss Culture.

The Snells influenced Swiss political thought

The publishing houses and newspapers obviously played a major role in the liberal transformation, among them the "Neue Zürcher Zeitung", which expounded liberal opinion and campaign issues. It and other newspapers gave columns to political refugees from neighbouring countries. These included Ludwig Snell (1785–1854) and his brother Wilhelm (1789–1851). The two brothers from Hesse were among Switzerland's most influential constitutional theorists and exercised major influence over the liberal-radical movement. Wilhelm Snell was the founding rector of the University of Berne, while Ludwig was its first professor of political science. The two brothers, who adopted a radical approach to politics, soon became commonly known as "the Snells", from the German word for

"fast". They actually lost their positions at the University of Berne in a power struggle with the conservatives. Nevertheless, they made their mark on Swiss political thought both legally and philosophically as university lecturers.

A revolutionary from Dresden built Zurich's skyline

Foreigners in Switzerland were also able to shape the universities externally, as illustrated by Gottfried Semper (1803–1879), originally Danish, later German and from 1861 a citizen of Affoltern am Albis (Zurich). Zurich has him to thank for a defining feature of its cityscape, namely the present-day main building of the Federal Institute of Technology (ETH), which sits imposingly high above the historical city centre. Architect Semper was also a rebellious figure who had to leave Dresden – where he built the famous Semper opera house – due to his revolutionary activities. In Switzerland, he designed the observatory in Zurich, the city hall in Winterthur and the new steeple in Affoltern, which earned him citizenship there. He also impressed the Federal Council, who bestowed a life-time professorship upon Semper.

A Briton played a key role in railway line management

Switzerland's growing industrial sector also looked for specialists and tradespersons abroad. This was essentially because they possessed technical abilities that the local population could often not yet offer. The great Gotthard (1872), Simplon (1898) and Lötschberg (1907) railway tunnels were mainly constructed by foreigners in the second half of the 19th century.

The Englishman Robert Stephenson (1803–1859), an internationally sought-after

railway expert, played a key role in the design of the Swiss railway network, which proved a major factor in the economic upturn. He was commissioned by the Federal Council to visit Switzerland in 1850 and subsequently put forward a line management blueprint. The essence of his proposal was to create a great cross-shaped railway system stretching from Lake Geneva to Lake Constance and from Basel to Lucerne with Olten as the crossover point. Stephenson thus provided the impetus for integrated railway construction in Switzerland, which began in the mid-1850s.

Immigrants proved visionary entrepreneurs

The extent to which the development and essence of the Swiss economy in the 19th century can be attributed to foreign expertise is highlighted by a particular type of immigrant – the technically skilled and often visionary entrepreneur. There were countless creative-minded immigrants who developed into entrepreneurs, establishing Switzerland as a modern industrial nation. Some of these entrepreneurs laid the foundations for world-famous corporations. These included Heinrich Nestle (1814–1890) from Frankfurt am Main, who later called himself Henri Nestlé. He had ended up as a journeyman by Lake Geneva, where he passed his qualifying examination as a chemist's assistant, before ultimately founding Switzerland's largest industrial company today and the biggest food production group in the world.
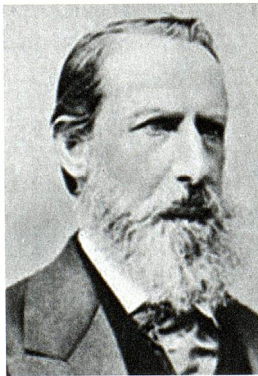
Together with Charles Brown, Walter Boveri (1865–1924) from Bamberg founded Brown Boveri AG, which is today known as ABB and is a leading company in energy and automation technol-
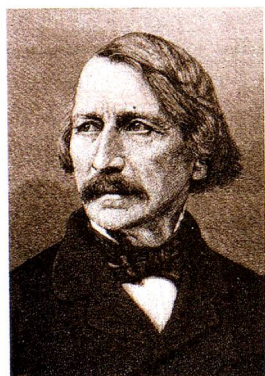
Gottfried Semper
Architect

Robert Stephenson
Railway engineer

Heinrich Nestle
Pharmacist's assistant

Alexander Clavel
Silk dyer

Charles Brown
Machinery designer

Dominating Zurich's skyline: the main building of the Federal Institute of Technology designed by Gottfried Semper, who was expelled from Dresden

ogy. Ciba, one of the companies that preceded Novartis – the second-largest pharmaceutical group in the world – in Basel can trace its origins to Alexander Clavel (1805–1873) from Lyon. Clavel was Switzerland's first and leading manufacturer of aniline inks at his laboratory in Basel.

The traditional Swiss drink Ovomaltine was also inspired by a foreigner. The chemist Georg Wander (1841–1897) was brought to the University of Berne from Germany. He founded his own laboratory in Berne's historic city centre where he succeeded in developing pharmaceutical specialities using malt as a carrier for medicinal substances. Together with his son Albert, he created Ovomaltine, which ensured the commercial breakthrough for the company Wander. The company today belongs to Associated British Food.

Even in the entertainment industry, a foreign company set the standard in Switzerland in the 19th century. The "Swiss National Circus of the Knie Brothers" traces its origins back to an Austro-Hungarian family of artists and was therefore originally not as national as its current title suggests. The patriarch Friedrich Knie (1784–1850) founded his own troupe of artists in 1806. The circus regularly visited Switzerland from 1814 before finally choosing Rapperswil on Lake Zurich as its base for the winter season in 1919.

Switzerland conducted innovative technology transfer

So, the influx of people into Switzerland included far more than just profiteers, "bespectacled doctors with moustaches", "goatee-bearded communists", "raving-mad propagandists" and "shoe polishers from Rome and Vienna", as the pamphlet quoted above from 1850 would have us believe. They comprised many people to whom Switzerland has reason to be extremely grateful. In the period of industrialisation, Switzerland did not just benefit from immigrant pioneers but also made significant use of foreign expertise in general. "In the leading sectors of industrialisation, the textile industry, railway construction and electrical engineering, Switzerland proved innovative insofar as it adopted methods and processes developed in other countries and cleverly adapted them to new requirements," explains the "Historical Lexicon of Switzerland" in rather understated terms. The printing entrepreneur Adelrich Benziger (1833–1896) from Einsiedeln made the point more forcefully at the Swiss Patent Congress of 1882, where he is credited with saying: "Our industry has only reached its current stage of development because it has used other countries – if that is theft, then we are all industrial thieves."

Walter Boveri
Mechanical engineer

Georg Wander
Chemist

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