

At the best possible moment

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Swiss literature – a presentation in Leipzig

Switzerland was the guest of honour this year at the Leipzig Book Fair, the world's largest festival of books. Switzerland's presentation won widespread acclaim. Authors and politicians nevertheless had much explaining to do after the referendum on 9 February.

The Swiss presence in Leipzig between 13 and 16 March was remarkable – it included over 80 authors from all four of Switzerland's linguistic regions, around 70 publishing houses, cultural institutions like Pro Helvetia, a delegation from the Federal Council's image promotion and communications agency known as Presence Switzerland, as well as academics, journalists and even Alain Berset, the Federal Councillor responsible for culture. "Auftritt Schweiz" (Switzerland Centre Stage) was the overarching title. The organisers of the Leipzig Book Fair avoided the term "guest country", which is widely used elsewhere, as after all a large number of Swiss writers belong to the German-language cultural circle and there are few boundaries between Germany, Austria and Switzerland when it comes to literature.

Many Europeans were nonetheless perplexed by Switzerland's approval of the Swiss People's Party (SVP) initiative against mass immigration shortly before the opening of the book fair. The spotlight was on a guest that itself is no longer a good host. After the referenda of 2009 and 2010 on banning minarets and the deportation of foreign criminals, was this another manifestation of a xenophobic Switzerland?

Two representatives of small Swiss publishing houses, Jean Richard of "édition d'enbas" in Lausanne and Madlaina Bundi from "hier + jetzt" in Baden, noted down their impressions of the book fair for "Swiss Review".

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"You're from Switzerland, aren't you, with that wonderful rolling "R"? Ah, the Swiss, they know how to do things right. They still put democracy into practice. The initiative on mass immigration just illustrates that. As a national conservative, I fully endorse it. I should probably emigrate to Switzerland..." Bursting with enthusiasm, a visitor to the Leipzig Book Fair shared this with me on the urban railway, without realising the irony of his words. I did not like to explain to him that immigration to Switzerland may soon become impossible. I was still too shocked by the result and fearing

the worst for us in Leipzig. I was concerned that we in the publishing industry and our authors would be stigmatised as anti-Europeans by colleagues and the audience and as provincials isolated and out of touch with the world. Before my trip, I was thinking that Switzerland being guest of honour at the book fair had come at the worst possible moment.

We had carried out long and intensive preparations. All the publishing houses had been asked to put forward ideas and suggestions for readings, discussions and debates a year ago. A diverse, multilingual presentation had been planned to include a wide range of cultural, political and social trends, and we were, of course, also expected to entertain.

My fears did not materialise. When Federal Councillor Alain Berset stepped up to the lectern on the opening evening, he found favour with the audience within minutes. His speech was full of insight, humour and self-irony – and this self-irony ran through the

Federal Councillor Alain Berset succeeded in redressing the situation somewhat with a short but brilliant speech. He began with a quotation by the Austrian writer Roda Roda: "To be born Swiss is a great blessing. It is also wonderful to die Swiss. But what does one do in between?" Alain Berset's answer was: "At the moment, one is tempted to say that one perplexes the world and then explains Switzerland to the perplexed world."

Berset also explained how much the Swiss enjoy crossing cultural boundaries and so are constantly obliged to produce translations for the various linguistic groups. He summed it up in one sentence: "We have the privilege of having to understand one another."

Many representatives of Switzerland, from the highly acclaimed young author Dorothee Elmiger to the bestselling author Martin Suter and the old master Franz Hohler, had the opportunity to give readers a closer insight into Swiss literature over the days that followed and also the task of clearing up the confusion and explaining Switzerland to the audience in panel discussions, TV programmes and newspaper interviews. Peter von Matt's explanation of the referendum result was widely quoted: "30% of every society is made up of idiots, Switzerland included".

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programme over the following days like a common thread. Whether in the literary wrestling show, spoken-word cameos on the tram or the literary journey to the canton of Africa, the Bernese Oberland, the Swiss guests took all the clichés and examined them thoroughly in their presentations. The audience appreciated this as I experienced myself during the presentation of our book "Die Schweizer Kuh" (The Swiss Cow). Using various images, I illustrated the cult status and marketing of our unofficial heraldic animal. This went down well as the images said less about the cow and more about us Swiss. I had everyone laughing.

I am also pleased that Switzerland presented itself in Leipzig as a nation with complex domestic and external relations far removed from the clichés. It is difficult to say whether we got this message across to everyone. But, in retrospect, the Swiss guest of honour status definitely came at the best possible moment.

MADLAINA BUNDI