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20th century Switzerland, revisited in a comic



ÉRIC BURNAND AND
FANNY VAUCHER
"Le siècle d'Emma",
éditions Antipodes,
207 pages.

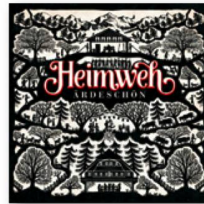
Did you know that in November 1918, as the war was coming to a close, a general strike saw Switzerland plunge into a near-revolutionary period, and that at this time the army fired on protesters, killing three men in Grenchen (SO)? Did you know that between 1942 and 1945, 17 Swiss men were executed by firing squad for having sold information to Germany? Have you ever heard of Max Leo Keller, Swiss Nazi and founder of the National Movement of Switzerland, who left for Germany in 1941 and was later sentenced to 14 years imprisonment upon returning to his country?

"Le siècle d'Emma," ("Emma's century" in English) is a 200-page comic book, published in November, which revisits the official version of Swiss history. The tale is punctuated by many dark episodes that are less than well known. It begins at the time of the general strike in 1918 and ends at the fall of the Berlin Wall, in November 1989. The narrative follows the life of a fictional woman named Emma, born in the small watch-making community of Grenchen, at the foot of the Juras. In 1918, she loses her fiancé in the clashes at the time of the general strike. In 1937, she rows with her brother over his pro-Nazi stance. In 1956, her nephew, whom she has adopted, shows her the dark side of Italian immigration. In 1975, her granddaughter confronts her with anti-nuclear and feminist challenges.

Written by Éric Burnand, former RTS journalist, and illustrated by Fanny Vaucher, "Le siècle d'Emma" captivates the reader. We suffer alongside those who have been crushed by the machinery of the state, even when accused of treason. The pages reveal a glimpse of Switzerland at different stages in its evolution. The period of 1956 to 1959 is notably striking: at this time, the economy sees an extraordinary boom, abortion and cohabitation are prohibited, and women do not have the right to vote. "In this introverted Switzerland, distrust is everywhere," says Burnand. During this period, Italians are met at the border and examined like cattle. The graphic novel gives substance to situations. As seasonal workers had no right to family reunification, Emma sees her adoptive son's Italian fiancée forced to bring her son into the country through the green border.

STEPHANE HERZOG

Heidi's Switzerland bathed in a red sunset



HEIMWEH:
"Ärdeschön", Phonag 2019.

Is it possible to be homesick (in German, Heimweh haben) even if you are at home? The eponymous twelve-member men's choir (Heimweh) can. All of them live in different rural areas of Switzerland, but they are homesick for their homeland – for an idyllic Switzerland that conveys familiarity, serenity and security. The world they depict in their songs is an escapist, idealistic, clichéd and striking homeland right out of a picture book.

It is a world swimming in clichés that work perfectly. In their fourth album, "Ärdeschön" (Beautiful Earth), Heimweh sing, for example, about the "Alpabfahrt" and toast their good cheese. "Äs isch Alpabfahrt bi üs im Tal / D'Herbschtsunnä schiint numal / Glii scho git's dr erschti Schnee." ("It's time for the Alpabfahrt in our valley / the autumn sun is shining again / The first snows are just around the corner"). On the other hand, they remind us of life in an old farmhouse: "Im Summer het's mängs Feschtlä gäh / Ds halbe Dorf isch eis cho näh / U me het tanzet bis id Nacht." ("We sometimes held get-togethers in the summer / Half the village came for a drink / And we danced long into the night.") However, things get really emotional in the title song: "The sky is bathed in a red sunset / Which makes the Alps glow / We are looking after our country well / And it is doing the same for us". And an alphorn sounds in the distance.

The content that conveys such yearning is underscored musically by a popular dialect pop – however, the album is definitely more pop than folk music. The accordion stays in the background, zithers and clarinets cannot be heard, instead the sound is synthesizers, guitars, contrabass and drums. The verses are each sung by a lead singer, while choir music and yodelling is only in the refrains.

Zurich producer Georg Schlunegger's choir has already achieved great success with this concept. Heimweh's earlier works always landed at the top of the Swiss charts or in third place. They have sold more than 100,000 albums, won two Swiss Music Awards, completed sold-out tours – and ensured a real Swiss atmosphere at wrestling competitions and all manner of events in the country. So it is hardly surprising that these down-to-earth men in their traditional costumes are at the top of the Swiss hit parade once again with their fourth album.

MARKO LEHTINEN