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“That deep connection with Europe is being called into question”

He has been passionate in his efforts to preserve Switzerland’s memory of the Holocaust. And he wants the “Fifth Switzerland” to have greater political clout. Outgoing OSA President Remo Gysin looks back – and ahead.

INTERVIEW: MARC LETTAU

Mr Gysin, you were born shortly before the end of the Second World War. And now you are campaigning for a Swiss Holocaust memorial. Will the memorial project be your lasting legacy?

This is a subject that has always moved me. The war and its consequences and the atrocities of the Holocaust were something we always talked about at school and at home. It is a very difficult subject. I still can’t comprehend what happened.

But, decades later, tell us what motivated you to reignite the conversation by proposing a memorial.

“Beobachter” set the ball rolling in 2017 with a novel take on the subject. The magazine focused on the people with Swiss passports who were victims of the horrors of that era, the Swiss fighters in the French Resistance, and Switzerland’s Jewish expatriates. However, victims also included women who lost their Swiss citizenship through marriage – and consequently any protection that Switzerland may otherwise have given them. This moved me deeply.

No one loses their Swiss citizenship through marriage now. Swiss Abroad generally get greater protection and recognition than they did back then. Things seem to be different these days.

By no means is everything perfect. Take the current resurgence in anti-Semitism. When tensions escalate between Israel and Palestine, for example, this poses a renewed threat to Swiss Abroad. But other people in the



Remo Gysin presenting the Holocaust memorial project in Berne. Photo: Keystone

“Fifth Switzerland” also need our protection, such as those affected by natural disasters or by poverty.

The groundwork for a Swiss Holocaust memorial has been laid. Do any past highlights that you remember pale in comparison?

My 20 years in the OSA have been full of memorable moments. In particular, all the personal encounters that I have had with Swiss Abroad. I was also lucky enough that the start of my presidential term coincided with the OSA’s 100th-anniversary celebrations.

A spectacular way to start.

This was followed by other spectacular moments, such as the Swiss Abroad Day at the 2019 “Fête des Vignerons” (winegrowers’ festival) in Vevey. Even the pandemic was remarkable in a

completely different way. I thought it was incredible how swiftly we were able to switch to entirely new forms of communication.

If memorable moments shape our view of the past, then the future is all about the challenges that lie ahead. For example, the framework agreement with the EU is dead. Switzerland walking away from the negotiations raises many questions regarding the future of things such as international mobility, freedom of establishment, freedom of movement, health insurance, and social security. There is now a great deal of uncertainty.

We are conducting this interview in Basel. If you looked around you would not notice any difference here.

“Regarding the framework agreement, the Federal Council has acted unilaterally. This strikes at the heart of our democracy.”

A city like Basel would be unable to function without all the cross-border commuters who prop up our health system and practically every sector of the economy. You would certainly notice the difference eventually. That deep connection with Europe is now being called into question. The abandonment of negotiations means that we have anything but clarity. It raises questions, not least because nobody bothered to think of the over 400,000 Swiss who live in the EU.

You were already critical of Switzerland’s EU policy when you were National Councilor – and you still are now.

Key questions have shaped Swiss foreign policy for as long as I can remember. What do we want? And who is responsible? Parliament’s right to have a say is enshrined in the Constitution. As is the people’s right to have the final word and call referendums where appropriate. But now the Federal Council has acted unilaterally. This strikes at the heart of our democracy.

Does this make you want to campaign again in favour of Switzerland joining the EU?

Let me put it this way: the Federal Council’s decision to pull out of the talks has put the possibility of EU membership into sharper focus again.

It would be interesting to hear the Swiss Abroad speak out on such key matters. But critics say that the voice of the Council of the Swiss Abroad (CSA) is nothing more than a whisper.

The OSA has good political connections nowadays. Our influence has increased. We liaise closely with parlia-

mentarians and the relevant authorities. The CSA also represents the “Fifth Switzerland” much more effectively than before. But I have to admit that we are still a long way from where we want to be. If the CSA wants to increase its political clout, it needs to have greater legitimacy. We must therefore ensure that all Swiss adults living abroad are able to participate in the CSA elections in future. That is also how I believe democracy should work.

The plan is for e-voting to come into full use for the first time at the 2025 CSA elections. Would that be a milestone?

E-voting makes everything easier. That applies to federal and cantonal elections and popular votes. But having our own e-voting system is also crucial to conducting the CSA elections. And if we want a higher turnout, it is basically up to us to make it happen. Take Australia, Mexico and the UK, for example, where expatriates on the ground have ensured that as many Swiss as possible can vote. This is what we want to see.

Are there any hot potatoes awaiting your successor?

Just the usual issues. Many in the “Fifth Switzerland” are unable to exercise their political rights as Swiss citizens; the banks continue to be a thorn in our side; and the political squeeze on the Swiss Abroad shows no sign of abating here in Switzerland.

In other words, there is increasing clamour within parliament to restrict the civil rights of the Swiss Abroad.

Precisely. But if they want to renegotiate these civil rights, let us choose a completely different direction. Why don’t we create a dedicated constituency for the “Fifth Switzerland”? This would provide the Swiss Abroad firstly with better representation and, secondly, with much greater exposure. However, the main thing to be aware of is that the nature of mobility has changed. People tend to stay abroad for shorter periods of time. They come and they go. This is a strong argument against restricting the political voice of Swiss who live abroad. At the end of the day, our politically interested compatriots abroad contribute greatly to Switzerland’s image as an open, interconnected, sustainable, outward-looking country.

What would Switzerland be like without the “Fifth Switzerland”?

Only half of what it is.

Remo Gysin, born in 1945, was an SP politician for many years and has been a member of the OSA Executive Committee since 2001. He became the OSA President in 2015 and will be stepping down from office at the end of August 2021.

A holistic approach to camp leadership

The young leading the young – a normal sight at most Swiss children’s and youth holiday camps. And the reason why young people in Switzerland receive training specifically dedicated to preparing them for camp leadership.

MIREILLE GUGGENBÜHLER

Hundreds of campfires are lit every evening across Switzerland between July and August during the summer holiday camp season, when numerous children’s and youth organisations host tent, biking and hiking camps or organise group accommodation. One such camp provider is the Youth Service of the Organisation of the Swiss Abroad (OSA), whose camps are geared to providing teenagers and young adults from the “Fifth Switzerland” aged 15 or older with an unforgettable holiday in their “other” home country and an opportunity to strengthen their ties to Switzerland.

Meanwhile, the Foundation for Young Swiss Abroad (FYSA) runs nine camps each year for children aged eight to 14. The aim of these camps is to enable Swiss children living abroad to experience their native country for the first time or to get to know it better, offering them the chance to visit the sights, explore lakes, mountains, rivers and other scenery, go on short hikes, play games, take part in sport and do handicrafts and drawings.

Thanks to the OSA Youth Service and the FYSA, around 400 children, teenagers and young adults are able to visit Switzerland each year.

Holiday camps help to promote sport

This holiday selection for young people from the “Fifth Switzerland” belongs to a whole array of Swiss holiday camps that are simultaneously a part of Youth and Sport (Y+S) – the federal government’s biggest national scheme to promote sport and physical exercise. Each year, some 80,000 sports courses and dedicated camps take place with around 637,000 child and youth participants. The Confederation and cantons provide training to prospective Y+S leaders in various sports for the purpose of managing camps.



Leaders in children’s and youth organisations such as the Swiss Guide and Scout Movement receive leadership training in the “Camp Sports/Trekking” category. FYSA and OSA Youth Service leaders have often done this training already, because they are involved in other such organisations. The FYSA also offers a Y+S leadership training course every year to those who have not yet completed one, in collaboration with the OSA Youth Service.

During their training, prospective camp leaders complete various stages in which they gradually take on more responsibility. They learn how to plan and carry out activities, and how to interact with and instruct children and young people to create memorable experiences for them. In particular, they are trained in how to conduct outdoor activities and taught about the relevant safety precautions.

“When we train them, we teach them how to minimise risk and how to respond when even the best preparations go awry,” says Marco Gyger, the “Camp Sports/Trekking” training course coordinator at the Federal Office of Sport.

A special type of sport

“Camp sports and trekking is a special type of sport of which I am proud. This is because sporting performance is not the priority. We follow a holistic approach instead,” says Gyger. Intellectual, moral and physical well-being count equally.

Incidentally, there is no shortage of new people wanting to teach this sport. Thanks to word of mouth, the FYSA and the OSA Youth Service find sufficient numbers of staff each year. These include many who are already actively involved in youth organisations as camp leaders and have therefore done the requisite training. To be camp leaders, they must be aged between 18 and 30 and go through an application process. Three quarters of those who are male do it as part of their civilian service. Many camp leaders are students at teacher-training university who will later enter the education profession.

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