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Autor: De Weck, Roger
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An article which was written for the 700 years of Switzerland...

1291-1991 Switzerland

Switzerland is a country of unusual and unexpected harmonies: many things that do not belong to each other seem to fit together very well here. A Helvetian melange in the middle of Europe! The landscape changes over a few kilometres, mountains make way for long-drawn plains with lakes and cities. German is spoken in the north, French in the west, Italian in the south, and in the east the beautiful Romansh that is so little known abroad. And yet this multiplicity forms a whole that emanates calm.

Where does it come from, this mysterious harmony that loves contrasts yet avoids conflicts? As almost everywhere else in the world, the right here opposes the left, and vice versa; yet the political forces have accepted a government coalition that has lasted for decades and still promises to maintain stability. With its 6 1/2 million inhabitants, Switzerland is a small state that has managed to keep out of all European wars since 1815. It is a country without mineral resources, without access to the sea and without a strong market that has nevertheless grown to become one of the most successful export nations.

The image of Switzerland as it is today admittedly differs sharply from the historical picture of confederation that has accreted over seven hundred changeable years. A rich country? Switzerland was for centuries one of the poorest in Europe; precisely because it was so miserably off, generation after generation of Swiss sought their fortunes abroad, in all five continents. A peaceful country? The Confederation repeatedly threatened to be torn apart; the last of a series of civil wars took place in 1847. An independent country? Since they quarrelled among themselves, the Swiss often came under foreign influence and at times lost their autonomy.

No, the seven hundred years of Swiss history - from the day on which the first Confederates swore allegiance in the famous Rutli meadow to the present, when Switzerland heads so many statistics of affluence and outward success - have not been a straightforward evolution. There were setbacks, treachery and selfish faintheartedness. There have also been grand achievements, such as the "invention" and founding of the Red Cross.

In the meantime people of different languages and origins, of mixed opinions and religions, of diverse cultures and backgrounds, have come so close in the course of the centuries that they have found what they were looking for: freedom, peace, prosperity. Swiss solidarity draws from the historical experience that a maximum of diversity presupposes a good measure of equality. Only if no one is badly underprivileged - no citizen, no linguistic group, no religious community, no culture - can so heterogeneous a country as Switzerland remain in equilibrium. For all the nations of the world that are seeking to come together - whether Europe forms an ever closer community, North Africa moves towards a Maghreb union, or South America breathes life into the Andean pact - for all these nations the arduous but successful history of Switzerland is perhaps a glimmer of hope and a modest indication that widely differing elements may with time grow into a durable whole. Everyone knows that this takes time, that it takes centuries. Switzerland now celebrates its seven-hundred-year jubilee.

Roger de Weck

At the time of writing, Roger de Weck, born in Fribourg, Switzerland, in 1953, lived in Hamburg, where he was Editor of the weekly Die Zeit.

Another Addition

There was another addition to the Amstalden family recently.

Elizabeth Amstalden and partner Marcus Churches, had a beautiful baby girl. Abigail Rosemary Churches (pictured) was born on 28 April 2006, weighed 9lb 13oz and was 56 cm long.

The birth went well and the whole family is doing great (now that Liz is over the shock!!) Grandparents, Christine and Paul Amstalden are pretty proud too.



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