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A chat with the Ambassador – getting to know a little more about Dr Nobs (Part 1)

By Craig Press

On a fine and calm June day the Swiss Ambassador to New Zealand, Dr Beat Nobs, hosted the *Helvetia* at the Swiss Embassy for an interview. Over coffee he talked about his diplomatic and civil service career, his family, his impressions about New Zealand, Swiss history and culture, and how the Fifth Switzerland retains links to the home country. This article is an abridged transcript of the first part of the interview. The second part of the article will appear in next month's *Helvetia*. The article is the first in a planned series about aspects of being Swiss while living in New Zealand.

Why did you join the Foreign Service and does the same motivation keep you in the Foreign Service today?

"There were probably two underlying reasons. Firstly, I have a natural interest in the world and opportunities to see places and interact with people. Secondly, as an historian and history teacher, I have always thought it would be nice to be a small part of history, even if it's just a small cogwheel down in the engine room."

"It was a very difficult exam [to become a diplomat]; it was among the most difficult I've ever sat. Luckily enough, in the eyes of the selection panel, I provided the sort of skills that were required. The system relies on generalists, people who are deployable across a broad range of issues."

Why did you choose New Zealand as a posting?

After eight years building up Switzerland's capacity to contribute to a multilateral approach to environmental issues, Dr Nobs said he felt like it was time for a change.

"As chief-negotiator for Switzerland for the environment for over eight years, I was engaged in a

great number on international negotiations of multilateral environmental agreements such as the Kyoto Protocol and the Cartagena Protocol on Biosafety. As a diplomat and nomad of sorts I had the feeling that it was time to move on. In that regard it was especially important that my professional experience could be put to good use in improving our bilateral relationship with New Zealand and that the family would equally benefit from my posting."

"Two basic conditions had to be met for the latter – we wanted the children to grow up in normal surroundings rather than behind compound walls. We were also conscious of the fact that English is the Latin of today. That is why we wanted to give the children the chance to acquire English almost as a second native language. [Helvetia: Exposing them to the New Zealand accent certainly seems a way of throwing them in the deep end?] Dr Nobs: "Indeed, after almost two years in the country, our youngest son has taken up a distinct Kiwi accent."

"New Zealand was, among other countries, on our wish list, so the decision by the Swiss Government to transfer me to Wellington was very welcome. My Dad worked in Australia and in New Zealand in the 1950s, and I still remember with fondness the slides he showed me when I was a boy. He passed away six months before we left for New Zealand, but he knew about our plans."

What are the core strengths and challenges in the relationship between the two governments?

"New Zealand and Switzerland are part of a very small group of western OECD countries that do not belong to the European Union. We share a fundamental set of values, such as the respect for the state of law, human rights, and a meaningful protection of the environment. To promote these values,

we co-operate very closely in the multilateral field of diplomacy within the framework of the international organisations of the UN-system and the WTO. As relatively small countries we both know, that we must jointly engage in bringing about common global solutions to today's pressing global problems on the basis of international law. We have no other means of power than the law."

Why does Switzerland have such an extensive range of consulates and embassies?

"Switzerland has always been staunchly independent and that has led to a fairly large diplomatic network. We have more than 100 embassies and multilateral missions around the world and are well represented everywhere. For example, we have an embassy in every country in South America except the Guyanas (Suriname and Guyana) and are in the process of opening up new embassies in countries such as the Dominican Republic, Haiti and in Africa Cameroon and Angola, just to name a few. We believe such a wide network is necessary for a small country that depends so much on international economic relations and takes great interest in global affairs."

Do members of the Fifth Switzerland have special strengths to offer for a Foreign Service career?

"Very much so – it is clear that the so called Fifth Switzerland is a very important component of who we think we are. Being a multicultural country we have always embraced influences from abroad, be that through actual migration of foreigners into Switzerland or through the contributions of Swiss compatriots abroad. The contribution of the Swiss abroad is indeed very important and I keep repeating that during my gatherings with the Swiss here in New Zealand – they should be proud and should

not be coy about the contribution that they can make. The often expressed attitude of a few members of the Swiss community abroad that they are no longer part of Switzerland and should therefore not interfere in Swiss affairs is completely false. In particular, their participation as voters in federal referendums and elections is highly welcome and much encouraged!"

Do you see any generation differences in attitudes about being an active part of the Fifth Switzerland?

"Apart from individual differences, there can be no doubt, that some – not all – of the people who emigrated themselves maintain a strong psychological link with their homeland. They visit Switzerland, they often still have close family ties there and they do tend to participate in Swiss clubs abroad. The second or third generation emigrants all around the world – and the Swiss are no exception to that rule – emotionally tend to feel much more part of the country that they were born in than their parents/grandparents. In the case of the Swiss in New Zealand the process of full integration was undoubtedly helped by the long distance between the countries and the fact that New Zealand is a country of immigrants, albeit very British in its origins.

However, of late, we at the embassy have noticed a new interest among some of the second and third generation Swiss in New Zealand. The World has grown smaller and it is much easier to travel back and forth and discover the roots of the parents/grandparents. In addition, it has also become very beneficial for New Zealand-Swiss dual citizens to remember their entitlement to a Swiss passport, because it allows them to work in all the countries of the European Union, including the UK, the UK being the preferred destination for young Kiwis for their cherished OE. Unlike other Kiwis, a Swiss passport holder can stay and work in the UK as long as she or he likes.

This is a consequence of bilateral agreements concluded between Switzerland and the EU. So, all of a sudden we get a lot of Kiwis trying to reconstruct their Swiss lineage – which is fair enough. Often their OE takes them to Switzerland too, where some feel like foreigners and return to New Zealand, but some discover a somewhat new sense of belonging and stay on."

Part 2 in next month's Helvetia.

Swiss Yodel Choir Matterhorn

Melbourne, Australia



Vor mängem Jahr...

A reflection of Swiss Musical Diversity

In the Matterhorn choir's 38th year we thought it might be time to record some aspects of our diverse activities in the form of a selection of songs and musical treats on a CD. The choir hopes to have created an enjoyable souvenir for all its fans, friends and particularly its members. Two of the musical creations originated in the homeland of "Ländlermusik". One composition was donated to the choir by one of its founding members, Ernst Ehrler; the second comes from the repertoire of the well known composer and musician Alois Betschart. Irma Thalman delights us with her guest performance of three alphorn pieces, and Lui Blöchliger and Sepp Goldiger remind us with their cow bell ringing of an idyllic scene in the Swiss Alps. The remaining musical pieces are performed by choir members Chrigel Hostettler, Urs Zuber and Beat Stuber, who call themselves the "Schwörgelis Melbourne". For one piece "Tschäderebäng" they are ably supported by the rest of the choir forming the percussion group.

Happy listening!
NZ\$27.00

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AHV woes – but not AHV's fault

A good friend of mine – let us call her Sophie – drew my attention to a problem you might be unaware of – and you will only become aware of when it is too late. So read on and act!

Sophie and her Swiss husband had both worked in Switzerland for a few years before coming to New Zealand. They lived and worked in New Zealand all their working life and did not pay "Freiwillige AHV-Beiträge". When they reached AHV age, they got the AHV payments for the few years they had worked in Switzerland when they were young. It was not much, but still, it was something. The money, the "Ehepaar-Rente", went into an account with a Swiss bank, in Switzerland. The account was to the name of Sophie's husband. Sophie had the power of attorney.

Then Sophie's husband died. Sophie notified AHV and the bank, expecting that from now on her "Einfache AHV Rente" would still go to the account which now became the account of the Erbengemeinschaft.

But here things got difficult: The bank closed the account with the death of Sophie's husband. Sophie could have opened a new account for her AHV. A new account, however, can only be opened in person, and as Sophie was not able, for health reasons, to fly to Switzerland, she could not do that and lost all future AHV payments.

Sophie urges any Swiss couple in the same situation – where their Ehepaar-Rente goes into a Swiss bank account that is in one person's name only – **to change this account into two separate bank accounts, with half the Ehepaar-Rente paid into each account, so as not to lose the AHV after he or she passes away. Next time you are in Switzerland, sort out your finances; open separate bank accounts. It might even be worth going to Switzerland now while you are still fit and able.** *tb*