

OCTOBER 2025

Swiss Review

The magazine
for the Swiss Abroad



**Permafrost thaw, crumbling mountains –
are parts of the Alps still safe to live in?**

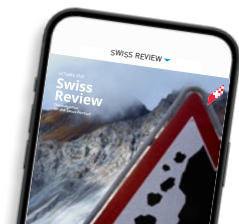
**Who am I? Where are my roots?
Tracing ancestry is an emotional journey**

**Grisons was car-free until 1925, but it now
has more cars per capita than any other canton**

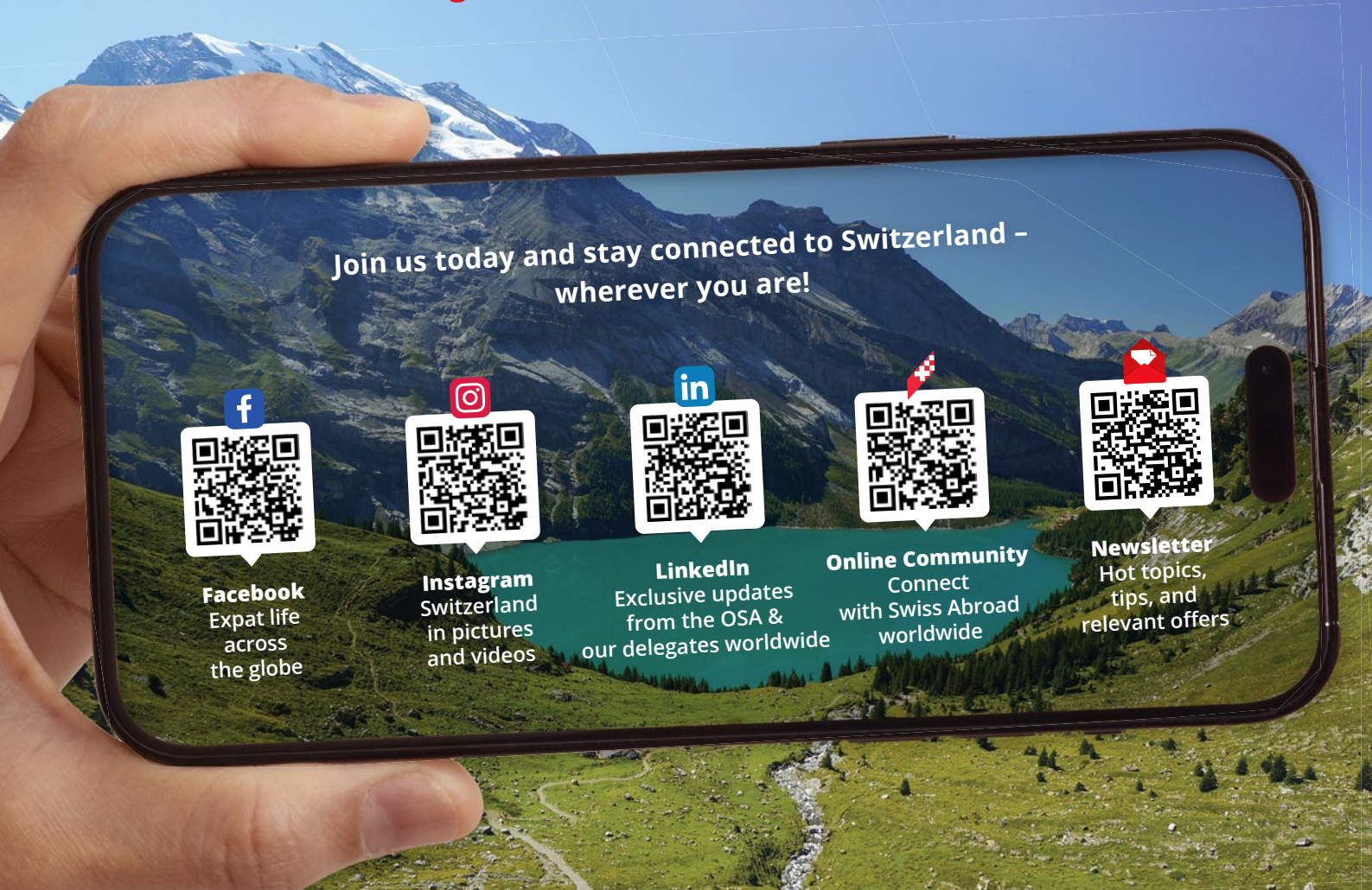


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Cover photo: Warning sign in the Swiss Alps.

Photo: Keystone (Val dal Botsch)/iStock; montage: Joseph Haas

Shock and awe



Autumn in Switzerland? There are plenty of things to do. Enjoy the mild October days; play boules with your friends by the Rhine; hike in the Alpine foothills of Fribourg and Vaud; browse through the autumn schedule of your local theatre; pick the last tomatoes; roast the first chestnuts. While we do that, we can also look back at the preceding few months.

US President Donald Trump made sure 1 August went off with a bang and a clatter even before the fireworks started, slapping a 39 per cent import tariff on Switzerland. This was much higher than any of Trump's other European tariffs. Switzerland wondered what it had done wrong – there are no Swiss tariffs on US imports. Who knows where this will take us? Parts of the Swiss economy are already feeling the pressure, and some companies have started to lay people off.

Many would have preferred to take a step back on Swiss National Day to process the events of 28 May – the day a devastating landslide not only obliterated the village of Blatten but also changed our perceptions. As the permafrost thaws and mountain peaks crumble, where does this leave those who live in the valleys below? What do we do if disasters like Blatten become more frequent? The residents of Blatten want to rebuild their village, but could their efforts be in vain? It's an awkward question to ask, but should we consider vacating certain Alpine valleys altogether? This edition of “Swiss Review” looks both at this and at the delicate state of US-Swiss relations.

Tracing your own ancestry can be very revealing – and leave you in shock and awe. Many Swiss Abroad have explored their Swiss family tree, and their interest continues to grow. Some travel to Switzerland to visit their roots, which is invariably a momentous experience. We spoke to genealogist Kurt Mürger. “Descendants see it as an emotional journey back to their roots,” he told us.

MARC LETTAU, EDITOR-IN-CHIEF

The following news is certainly more shock than awe: the federal government has announced that it will be cutting subsidies in numerous areas – including the OSA. The scope to deliver the print edition of our magazine free of charge is becoming narrower, which is why reader donations are more important than ever. Please show your solidarity and donate. Thank you. – See page 33 for details.



Donate here

“Swiss Review”, the information magazine for the “Fifth Switzerland”, is published by the Organisation of the Swiss Abroad.



An aerial photograph of a mountain valley in Switzerland. A large, dark, jagged area of exposed earth and rock, the result of a landslide, dominates the center of the image. A large, black, semi-transparent cross is superimposed over the lower-left portion of the image, partially obscuring a small village. The surrounding landscape is a mix of green forested slopes and open grassy fields. A river or stream flows through the valley floor, its path partially obscured by the landslide debris.

Thawing ice, crumbling mountains

The devastating landslide in Blatten (canton of Valais) shocked Switzerland. Are exposed mountain valleys really still safe to live in? Scientists warn that the likelihood of cataclysmic landslides and mudslides in the Alps will only increase with climate change.

The view over the buried village of Blatten. The layer of ice and debris is two kilometres long and up to 100 metres deep. The avalanche of debris thundered into the valley from the left, reaching as far as the hamlet of Weissenried on the right-hand side.

Photo: Keystone

Permafrost, the “glue” that holds mountains together, is thawing at an increasingly rapid pace. Higher temperatures mean more landslides and rockfalls, as meltwater penetrates the permafrost and accelerates erosion.

THEODORA PETER

The Valais village of Blatten was wiped out on 26 May 2025, when some ten million cubic metres of rock and ice plummeted into the Lötschental valley. Blatten's residents, who had been evacuated to neighbouring villages two weeks before, watched in horror as the Birch Glacier came thundering down the side of the mountain at 3.30 p.m., burying their village.

A fatal chain reaction triggered the disaster. In the preceding days and months, parts of the Kleines Nesthorn mountain had begun to break off, piling up on the glacier below. The ice groaned under the enormous strain – before finally giving way. According to the scientists at ETH Zurich, who have been monitoring the glacier and the Kleines Nesthorn since the 1990s, climate change is likely to have contributed to permafrost thaw and increased rockfall. They see parallels between Blatten and the landslide that ripped through the Grisons village of Bondo in August 2017. Back then, an approximately three-million-cubic-metre rockslide on the Piz Cengalo mountain landed on a small glacier, causing some of the glacier to be swept away. This sent a river of mud, rocks and dirt flooding into Bondo. Eight hikers were killed. The inhabitants of Bondo got the shock of their lives, with the debris flow causing extensive damage to homes and roads. To protect the village from future threats, the authorities have invested over 50 million Swiss francs in protective infrastructure including a dam to prevent flooding.

Plans for a rapid rebuild

Blatten's 300 residents have lost everything they own. The landslide claimed the life of a man who had been on the way to his sheep and was later found dead. Barely a day after the disaster, local mayor Matthias

Bellwald declared that Blatten would be rebuilt. “We have lost our village, but not our heart,” he said – a quote that was seen around the world. Only two weeks later, the Communal Council pledged to rebuild the village within the next five years. It was important to say that Blatten had a future and that it was possible to rebuild, said Bellwald in July when “Swiss Review” visited him in the neighbouring village of Wiler, from where the mayor is continuing his duties. Some 80 per cent of Blatten's residents have remained in the Lötschental valley after finding other places to stay. Happily, there was no exodus. One reason for that is because children from Blatten have always gone to school in Wiler and Kippel. “Continuity is crucial for our schoolchildren,” says Bellwald. After the shock and trauma, adults in the village community must adjust to a new reality. “This isn't necessarily easy,” says the mayor. Neighbouring communities welcoming them with open arms is one thing, but living in exile is another. Many villagers are simply desperate to return home. “We are fully committed to making this happen.” Firstly, the authorities will secure access to the hamlets higher up that were left unscathed. They will then

clear away the earth and rocks beneath which the centre of the village is currently buried. The aim is for Blatten's first new house to be ready by 2029.

Insurers are set to pay out around 300 million francs for new builds. The public sector will invest in roads, electricity and water supplies, with the federal government and the canton of Valais having promised financial assistance. Many Swiss municipalities and private individuals have also donated money in solidarity.

But as the country rallies around Blatten, some wonder whether climate change is rendering certain parts of Switzerland uninhabitable. Giving up on Blatten would be unimaginable, says the mayor. “This is our home and



Blatten's mayor Matthias Bellwald does not want to give up on his village: “This is our home and our land.”

Photo: Keystone

our land.” The village belongs to the people who have lost it. “And we have the right to return.” Blatten is a “once-in-a-millennium event” that could happen anywhere. “We would have to relocate the entire country [to avoid every hazard].”

Uncertain future for Brienz-Brinzaul

The spectre of relocation hangs over another Swiss mountain village: Brienz-Brinzaul in Grisons, where unstable slopes were a longstanding issue that came to a head in 2023 (see “Swiss Review” 5/2023). The hamlet's

“It gets awkward when you start questioning the very existence of the places that people call home.”

Historian, ethnologist and mountain expert Jon Mathieu on Switzerland's Alpine identity and the social impact of natural disasters.

INTERVIEW: THEODORA PETER

The Blatten landslide has brought people in the Lötschental valley together. Can we say the same about Switzerland as a whole?

Jon Mathieu: It is probably overstepping the mark to claim that a landslide has brought the whole country together, but there has clearly been a nationwide wave of solidarity. It was particularly touching to see numerous donations from small municipalities – communities that had no real obligation to help the people of Blatten, but did so anyway. The president of the National Council tapped into this sentiment when she opened the summer session of parliament by mentioning the disaster in a short address entitled “Together for Blatten – a country stands together”.

Why do natural disasters engender this sense of togetherness?

It is all to do with empathy and that feeling of belonging. People stick together in difficult moments. This does not mean we suddenly all become bosom buddies; the rat race will go on as it always has. But the immediate response is to want to do something. This, essentially, is a ritual that dates back centuries. During the Reformation, men made monetary and



Jon Mathieu, born in 1952, is professor emeritus in history at the University of Lucerne. He was founding director in 2000 of the Centre for the History of the Alps at the Università della Svizzera italiana. Photo provided

material donations – known as “gifts of love” – mainly to their fellow brothers in faith. This tradition was revived when Switzerland became a country in its own right, albeit recipients were now both male and female. This new phase began after the Goldau landslide of 1806. The “Landammann” (chief magistrate) of Switzerland made an appeal for donations. It was the moment when people got their first inkling of a new era after the demise of the Old Swiss Confederacy.

How are the Alps intertwined with Switzerland's identity? And has our relationship with the Alps changed over time?

The first suggestion of any Alpine identity dates back to the 16th century, when a number of scholars began to refer to “Alpine people” – not least to emphasise that they were less

than keen on being affiliated to the Holy Roman Empire. But it was not until the late 19th century and the opening of the Gotthard railway in 1882 that this identity became important. The railway line was the new federal Swiss state's pride and joy, signalling to the entire (Western) world that we were a mountainous nation. The national exhibitions of 1914 in Berne and 1939 in Zurich made a big play of it. Both events happened to take place shortly before the World Wars – two difficult periods in Swiss history. This national identification with the Alps has waned since the 1960s, although the rest of the world continues to associate Switzerland with mountains.

Can we dare to talk about the costs and benefits of protecting ourselves from Mother Nature – or even consider vacating certain Alpine valleys altogether?

By all means, but then we risk the ire of those communities affected. Basel was rebuilt after the 1356 earthquake, they will say. No one would consider evacuating Zurich or Berne either if the Limmat or Aare burst their banks, as they have done in the past. It gets awkward when you start questioning the very existence of the places that people call home. People on the ground weighing up the costs and benefits are not always best placed to make those decisions either. To date, no one has analysed this complex issue over a long period from a scientific viewpoint.

www.labisalalp.usi.ch/en

The Goldau landslide in 1806 was met by a wave of national solidarity. The first nationwide campaign for donations was launched following the disaster.

Image: Keystone





Top: In Bondo (Grisons), authorities have invested 50 million Swiss francs in protective structures, including a dam and a catch basin. In 2017, the village was razed by a mudslide.

90 residents had to evacuate their homes in November 2024. With the threat of a huge landslide literally hanging over it, Brienz-Brinzaul has remained off-limits since then. Rock-falls proliferated again this summer after heavy rainfall, although the situation had become a little less acute by the time of our editorial deadline in mid-August. Brienz-Brinzaul will not be vacated for good, the authorities insist. The construction of a drainage tunnel costing 40 million francs is meant to mitigate the risk of landslides. Nevertheless, the villagers are aware that they may yet have to resettle.

The Bernese Oberland also has its fair share of crumbling mountains. Landslides have been a topic in Guttannen since 2005 (see “Swiss Review” 4/2022), while officials have been closely monitoring Spitzer Stein, an increasingly unstable peak above Kandersteg, for a number of years. Permafrost thaw has weakened one side of Spitzer Stein, raising concerns that millions of cubic metres of rock could come tumbling down and cause flooding. Dams are currently being built to protect Kandersteg. These will cost 11 million francs.

In general, scientists warn of further deterioration in the Swiss Alps. Permafrost temperatures monitored at over 20 sites by the Swiss Permafrost Monitoring Network (PERMOS) have increased significantly in recent years. Permafrost is commonly found above altitudes of 2,500 metres, acting as the

“glue” that holds mountains together. Higher temperatures mean more landslides and rockfalls, as meltwater penetrates the permafrost and accelerates erosion.

Another growing problem: heavy rainfall

Climate change has also amplified other natural threats. Apart from drought, the Alps have seen a proliferation of heavy rainfall events. Warmer air can hold more moisture. Due to the topography, major concentrated downpours in the mountain valleys can have fatal consequences. A storm in the upper Maggia Valley in Ticino caused flash flooding in summer 2024. Raging torrents obliterated houses, roads and bridges, claiming the lives of eight people. Officials subsequently expanded the area in the valley that it regarded as risk-prone, meaning that a number of houses near water are now classed as unsafe and had to be vacated.



Right: Heavy rainfall in southern Switzerland caused widespread destruction in the summer of 2024. The picture shows a section of the A13 near Lostallo in the Miso Valley that was washed away.

Below: In the Grisons village of Brienz, the hillside continues to slide. Whether those evacuated from their homes will be able to return is uncertain. Photos: Keystone

Other cantons are also reviewing their hazard maps and investing a great deal of money in dams to prevent flooding and in netting to intercept rockfalls. In total, Switzerland spends around one billion francs a year on shoring up its defences against natural hazards. This includes investing in early-warning systems that save lives by ensuring that communities are evacuated in time.

ETH climate scientist Sonia Seneviratne, who is vice-chair of Working Group I of the Intergovernmental Panel on Climate Change (IPCC), believes in the importance of prevention. “But these are no more than sticking-plaster measures in the long run,” Seneviratne told the “Watson” news portal in



an interview. We need to be asking a different question: “Should we really be living and building more houses in increasingly exposed areas?” Global warming will further increase the risk of rockfalls, landslides and mudslides in the Alps. It is imperative that we take this into account, stressed Seneviratne. “Unless we dramatically cut carbon emissions and get a handle on climate change, future tragedies are almost inevitable.”

Angela Koller



A 42-year-old lawyer from the Centre Party joined the Appenzell Innerrhoden cantonal government in April. So far, so unremarkable. But Angela Koller is different. She is the first woman to be elected as Appenzell Innerrhoden's cantonal president at the *Lands-gemeinde*, the traditional open-air assembly at which eligible citizens gather to vote. Appenzell Innerrhoden became the last Swiss canton to give women the vote – after the Federal Supreme Court forced it to do so in 1990. Some 35 years later, Koller – who has sat in the cantonal parliament for a number of years – says that she has heard from a lot of women who, in her words, “want better representation”. This motivated her to stand for election. She beat three other candidates to the post, with the customary show of hands sealing a historic result. Koller had previously not only chaired the parliamentary committee responsible for overhauling the cantonal constitution but had also headed the Appenzell employees' association, AVA. Bodies like the AVA often carry more weight than political parties in Innerrhoden. Koller was exposed to politics from an early age, often listening in to the conversations at her parents' pub. She has enjoyed reading ever since she was at school, and her book recommendations on Instagram reflect this. Koller will first take on the education portfolio. She and Roland Dähler are the dual heads of the cantonal government. Dähler currently has governing powers, which will pass to Koller at the end of a two-year alternating cycle that has just begun. Innerrhoden's women may not have been able to vote before 1990, but their embroidery skills used to be one of the canton's key sources of income. They now have a political milestone to celebrate.

SUSANNE WENGER

1,800 pages long – the Federal Council unveils package of Swiss-EU agreements

The outlines of the deal to reset Swiss-European Union relations had been known for months. On 13 June 2025, the federal government approved and published all its contents along with corresponding laws and declarations – marking the beginning of a public consultation process. The package is over 1,800 pages long and consists of two elements: a “section on stabilisation” containing existing agreements that have been amended (e.g. freedom of movement), and a “section on development”, with new agreements on food, electricity and health. The package of agreements continues with the existing bilateral approach guaranteeing Swiss access to the EU single market. Switzerland negotiated a safeguard clause on immigration. Berne also had to make concessions, with the new agreements providing for a “dynamic” adoption of EU law – a particularly contentious area for Switzerland. The consultation process, involving political parties, umbrella organisations and other interested parties, will run until the end of October.

(RED)

Link to the Swiss-EU package: www.revue.link/cheu

Live in France but go to school in Switzerland – end of a Genevan anomaly

The Geneva cantonal government announced in June that the 2,500 or so children of cross-border commuters who go to school in Switzerland will, in future, have to attend lessons in France. In other words, the residence principle will also apply to school attendance, meaning that children in the Geneva area will have to attend school in the country in which they live. This marks the end of an anomaly. In other border cantons, parents who live abroad but send their children to school in Switzerland have always had to pay the full school fees. The new regime has not gone down well everywhere. Neighbouring French municipalities are up in arms, saying that Geneva took the decision unilaterally.

(SH)

For more information, see the online edition of “Swiss Review”: www.revue.link/school

“20 Minuten”, Switzerland's largest newspaper, to end print run

“20 Minuten”, the Swiss newspaper with the highest circulation (330,000 in German-speaking Switzerland; 130,000 copies of “20 minutes” in French-speaking Switzerland) will discontinue its print edition at the end of 2025 to focus solely on its online reporting. The move reflects the challenges and rapid pace of change facing Swiss print media. The aggregate print run of Switzerland's leading daily newspapers has shrunk from 2.51 million to 1.34 million in the last ten years.

(MUL)

More than a tariff shock

It initially seemed that Switzerland was part of a first group of countries that were going to be able to make a customs deal with the USA. The shock arrived on 1 August: President Trump imposed a 39 per cent tariff on imports from Switzerland.

CHRISTOF FORSTER

It was a bombshell that shook Switzerland to the core. On Swiss National Day, US President Donald Trump hit the country with an exorbitantly high tariff rate of 39 per cent. Only a few countries in the world have to endure higher punitive tariffs. The steep import tariffs will be felt most keenly by machine manufacturers, watchmakers and producers of luxury goods (which also include Nespresso capsules). The pharma industry has been spared.



President of the Confederation Karin Keller-Sutter at the 1 August celebrations on the historic Rütli meadow: all the questions she fielded were about the tariff shock, not the Swiss National Day.

Photo: Keystone

Conversely, Switzerland abolished all industrial tariffs at the beginning of 2024. Over 99 per cent of all goods from the USA can be imported into Switzerland tariff-free.

The Federal Council expressed concern at Trump's announcement. The FDP party president called it a "catastrophe". The SP, on the other hand, criticised the Federal Council's "strategy of currying favour" with the USA, a strategy it said had failed "massively". Financial umbrella association *economiesuisse* expressed its shock. In its view, the high tariffs are neither justified nor comprehensible.

"A way to get through to Trump"

The Federal Council and Swiss business community had both felt for a long time that they were out of danger, even though Trump had imposed a 31 per cent tariff on Switzerland in April. Shortly thereafter, President of the Confederation Karin Keller-Sutter spoke with Trump on the

phone. She apparently managed to get the US president to understand the consequences of his tariff policy. That was how the "Washington Post" reported the outcome of their call, in any event. Since then, it has emerged that that conclusion was false, something that took even Keller-Sutter by surprise. Trump asked a lot of questions, she said. "I clearly found a way to get through to him."

High-ranking delegations from both countries subsequently reached agreement on a tariff deal. All that was missing was Trump's signature. But that showed no sign of appearing. Doubts in the Federal Council began to grow. Shortly before the ultimatum expired, Keller-Sutter requested a second telephone call with the US president. Accounts vary on how exactly this call went. In any event, it failed to produce the desired result. Quite the opposite: instead of the 31 per cent initially threatened, Swiss companies are now being penalised with a tariff of 39 per cent. Once again, anyone who believed there was a special relationship between the two "sister republics" was disappointed. The current situation is more reminiscent of an elder sister telling her younger sister what to do.

Hit where it hurts

The tariff announcement triggered a fresh wave of hectic activity in Switzerland. Politicians and representatives of the economy sought in vain for ways to avert the tariff imposition. There was also something humiliating about the whole affair: while the US president was speaking disparagingly about the president of the Confederation on television, the latter was on a plane heading for Washington. But the discussions were unsuccessful. The Swiss economy must – at least for the time being – live with tariffs of 39 per cent.

This steep duty is hitting Switzerland where it hurts. Exports are Switzerland's economic lifeline. They are one of the reasons behind the country's affluence. For a long time, during the period of open international trade, Switzerland was able to leverage its status as a small country that was not a member of the European Union. This position is looking increasingly tenuous. The division of the world into power blocs, which is what seems to be happening, might drive Switzerland closer to the EU. A first step in this direction would involve approving the new treaty package with the EU.

Related topic: the purchase of the US F-35 fighter jet has been a huge debacle for Switzerland, page 23

Tracing their roots to Switzerland

Tracey Jones and Pete Thalmann, both from the US, sought professional help to trace their family roots back to Switzerland. They were deeply moved by what they discovered. Both their cases illustrate how important tracing ancestry can be for those who live far away from the homes of their forebears.

DÖLF BARBEN

Tracey Jones (56) lives close to Philadelphia and works at a school. She visited Switzerland with her husband last year. In St Gallen, she discovered one of the houses in which her grandmother had lived as a child. She was deeply moved by the experience, she tells us.

Pete Thalmann, 80, lives in Holliston near Boston. The former electrical engineer spends his summers on the Cape Cod peninsula. He wants to travel to Switzerland this autumn. His itinerary will include the hamlet of Eggetsbühl near Wängi (canton of Thurgau), where his great-grandparents lived.

Jones and Thalmann have a few things in common. Both have been interested in history and, in particular, the history of their respective families since they were teenagers. Both wanted to trace these family roots – doing the groundwork, pursuing leads and overcoming hurdles along the way. Both also know Kurt Münger.

Münger, 74, is the president of the Swiss Society for Genealogical Studies (SSGS). He says that the SSGS receives more and more inquiries from people abroad who are interested in their Swiss ancestors. “We try to help them as much as we can in our voluntary capacity.”

Münger grew up in eastern Switzerland and lives in Gossau, but his family originated from the canton of Berne. In around 1900, many Bernese farmers moved to Thurgau to start a new life. Migration also plays a big role in Münger’s family history, albeit on a smaller geographical scale.

He says he regards himself as an inquisitive soul who wants to understand as well as discover. Münger studied chemistry and wrote a doc-

toral thesis on specific molecules. People who up sticks to start afresh elsewhere remind him of what molecules do.

Curiosity and perseverance

All genealogists are driven by curiosity, he adds. A healthy, not a lurid curiosity. It can take you far, provided you keep persevering: “The investigations are not always easy.”

Tracey Jones did her initial research online, delving through various archives until she stumbled upon

“To see where my grandmother grew up and which houses she lived in was extremely moving. Moments like that are priceless.”

Tracey Jones, USA

Kurt Münger. The SSGS president referred her to a genealogist with local knowledge, who provided her with the decisive leads. Jones then travelled to Switzerland.

She says her grandmother never reminisced much about her childhood or teenage years, although she was very proud of where she came from. “To see where she grew up and which houses she lived in was extremely moving.” Her father had never been to Switzerland and was over-

joyed when she was able to show him photos of her visit. “Moments like that are priceless.”

Pete Thalmann would agree. His priceless gift from the past was an article written by his grandfather that appeared in a newspaper in Baltimore. John J. Thalmann left home after learning to become a dressmaker. He met the love of his life, Mathilde Bos, in Paris. The couple then emigrated to Baltimore. But tragically, six of their children died. “Baltimore was a hellhole back then,” says Thalmann. For fear of losing all their children, his grandparents returned to St Gallen for a while.

Thalmann’s father was two at the time. Thalmann would have liked to have found out where his father later went to school. “But I hit a dead end.” He is all the more intrigued as to what his ancestors were like as human beings. “My grandfather and my father were gentle souls, but they didn’t shy away from taking risks,” he says. “I am just the same.” Thalmann built up his own business and was a go-getter. “And life dealt me heavy blows, like it did them.” He lost one of his daughters – and his wife.

Mistakes are easy to make

It is much easier these days to search your ancestry than it used to be. Everything is digitalised; even old church records are available online. There are also people happy to do the heavy lifting for you – provided you cough up enough money for their services.

This is where Münger urges caution. Mistakes are easy to make if the research is done in a hurry. For example, what if there are two possible male ancestors who have the same



Genealogy! – Max Spring draws exclusively for “Swiss Review”



Genealogist Kurt Mürger keeps receiving more enquiries from people abroad who are taking an interest in their Swiss ancestors. Photo provided



Genealogist Therese Metzger finds that people who live in a country with a short history that has been marked by immigration are often particularly interested in their own family history. Photo provided

name? Pick the wrong gentleman and you mess up the entire family tree. If you are unsure, you will have to look for proof. That takes a lot of patience. Or help from experts like Therese Metzger.

Aged 79, Metzger lives in Münsingen near Berne and is a professional genealogist. She does over 30 assignments a year, two thirds of which come from clients abroad. For around 1,000 Swiss francs, she is able to produce lists of people dating back over 200 years.

A large proportion of her clients come from the US, she says. "There are people who just want to know where their ancestors lived. Once they know that, they are happy." Some clients will then travel to the place in question. "To stand in a church and know that an ancestor was baptised there is very moving for them."

Other clients are interested in the detail. One person wanted informa-

tion about a possible ancestor who lived in the 13th century. "I had to give up." Being able to look that far into the past is only possible in exceptional cases.

Nor is it easy if the client can only give a name that was very common in the past. "Where do I start to look if the ancestor is called Jakob Meier?" Priests with bad handwriting are another problem. Decoding their scribbles is almost impossible. "Purgatory is the least they deserve," she laughs.

Migration drives people to trace their ancestry

Metzger used to wonder on occasion why people in countries like the US were so interested in tracing their ancestry. She concluded that the relatively short history of the United States had something to do with it, as did the hugely important role that immigration played in the American story. "I imagine it's like being an adopted child," she muses. "They, too, want to know where they have come from."

Mürger takes a similar view. Visiting your ancestors' home country is much more than just a holiday. "Descendants see it as an emotional journey back to their roots." They will often view the trip as a lifetime goal or a once-in-a-lifetime experience.

Pete Thalmann in Yellowstone National Park, writing poetry. He plans to travel to Eggetsbühl bei Wängi (Thurgau), the home of his great-grandparents. Photo provided



Tips on how to trace your ancestry

Start with the people who are alive; those who are dead can wait. This is the golden rule to remember when you begin your research. Firstly, ask relatives who can provide information by speaking to you. Then start searching for other sources.

There is no need to reinvent the wheel. Other people will often have done research on the same family and drawn family trees. You need to check whether someone has already done this spadework for you.

Contact genealogists in Switzerland. The Swiss Society for Genealogical Studies (SSGS) can provide information directly or pass on inquiries to local genealogy societies. www.sgffweb.ch

Tracey Jones and Pete Thalmann share this sentiment. It is very important for her to hold on to her Swiss roots and pass that knowledge on to her two daughters, says Jones. "I now know exactly where I come from, and this makes me very proud."

After visiting Switzerland, Thalmann intends to flesh out the family history that he has been writing. The account, already of considerable length, is for future generations to read. "I have six children and eleven grandchildren." When he read his grandfather's article for the first time, one thing became clear to him: "Voices from the past are priceless."

Maurice Bavaud: the Swiss man who planned to assassinate Hitler

In May, a commemorative plaque was erected in Neuchâtel to commemorate the life of young Catholic Maurice Bavaud, guillotined in Germany in 1941 for having planned to assassinate Hitler. Switzerland made no attempt to save its native son.

STÉPHANE HERZOG

What should you do against a dictatorship? A commemorative plaque erected in Neuchâtel in May in honour of Maurice Bavaud, who at the age of 22 attempted to assassinate Hitler, raises this question. “We might wish for more people like him in the world, to kill these monsters,” retired doctor Jean-François Burkhalter, 81, who was responsible for the initiative, said during the ceremony. Maurice Bavaud, who came from a humble Catholic family, decided to act. “He sees the Führer as a threat to Switzerland’s independence, to humanity and to Catholicism,” according to the record of his trial in 1939, which no Swiss diplomat attended.

In 1938, after returning from a seminary in Brittany where he had trained to become a missionary, the young man took the train for Germany, whose leaders were seeking dialogue with Switzerland and making barely any effort to prevent Swiss citizens visiting the Reich, recalls historian Marc Perrenoud. Maurice Bavaud managed to get close to Hitler during a parade in Munich on 9 November. The number of arms raised to hail the dictator prevented him from firing. He was subsequently arrested for travelling without a ticket. The Swiss embassy in Berlin, run by a certain Hans Frölicher, “did not want to exhaust Germany’s goodwill towards Switzerland for this person”, the Neuchâtel historian comments. The Office of the Public Prosecutor, when approached by the German authorities, carried out an investigation into the young man, and sent the Nazis a message describing him as a homosexual.

Maurice’s father suggested that Germans imprisoned in Switzerland be released in exchange for his son’s life. The Swiss administration ignored this proposal. During the trial, his duty counsel stressed (in vain) that Bavaud had not fired a single shot. His family received a final letter from the prison in Plötzensee. “I embrace you all very tightly, as this will be the last time.” Maurice was guillotined on 14 May 1941. There was no burial. During the 1950s, the Bavaud family received 40,000 Swiss francs in compensation from the Federal Republic of Germany as a settlement. In 1979, German writer Rolf Hochhuth depicted Bavaud as a modern William Tell. In 1980, journalist Nicolas Meienberg published a work devoted to him.

Could Switzerland have saved Bavaud? Marc Perrenoud cites the case of another Neuchâtel native, pastor Roland de Pury, who was arrested in a Protestant church in Lyon in 1943. He was close to the French Resistance



Maurice Bavaud.
Photo handout: Filmkollektiv
Zürich

and his life was saved after an exchange with German spies. De Pury and his family had relatives and contacts that the Bavaud family did not. In 1989 and 2008 respectively, federal councillors René Felber and Pascal Couchepin acknowledged that Swiss diplomacy did not do enough to save Bavaud. The commemorative plaque devoted to the Catholic features a bas-relief portrait of him. It was placed on a house located between the house of his birth and the house he left to go to Germany. A memorial stele stands on the banks of Lake Neuchâtel and another plaque (erected in 1998) can be found on the house where he was born. “Here, though, you can see his face,” the former doctor says. The doctor’s plan is to have a monument to Bavaud erected outside Plötzensee.

The heart-wrenching adoption baby trade

The Federal Council wants to ban couples in Switzerland from adopting children abroad, arguing that it is the only way to prevent illegal practices. It is a highly charged issue.

EVELINE RUTZ

From the 1950s, the received wisdom among couples in Switzerland who wanted to adopt children was that they were giving someone the chance of a better life, not least if the child came from a poor country and a seemingly deprived background. It was seen as a humanitarian act. Interestingly, this positive spin persisted for a long time, says Andrea Abraham, professor at the Berne University of Applied Sciences. Reported abuses of the system barely registered in public debate. In Switzerland, experts, let alone the general public, have only started addressing the issue in recent years – unlike their foreign counterparts. Abraham: “This is astounding, given that child adoption has such a real-life impact.”

“This wound will remain”

Sarah Ineichen has played a key role in bringing the international adoption process under much greater scrutiny. Ineichen arrived in the canton of Nidwalden from Sri Lanka as a baby in 1981. When delving into her past many years later, she discovered that what she had been told about her roots was wrong. Instead of meeting whom she thought was her biological mother at her place of birth, Ineichen was confronted by a woman who had merely given her name to secure the necessary adoption papers. “I still don’t know who my biological mother is,” says the 44-year-old. She has no idea why she was given away as a baby, and whether her biological mother gave her away of her own accord. “This deep wound will remain with me until I die.”

Ineichen went public in 2017, one of the first adoptees to do so. She and others founded Back to the Roots – an organisation that advocates for the rights of Sri Lankan adoptees in

Switzerland. Newborns used to be snatched from their mothers and sent for adoption, she says. Some babies were even surreptitiously swapped for stillborn babies in hospital and handed over to adoptive parents. “They picked the children for the parents, not the other way round.”

Officials turned a blind eye

The international adoption process played on Western couples who were desperate to have children. Studies

ing that time. Orphanages and women’s refuges in both countries played an active role in the international adoption process. These organisations would help expectant mothers to keep their pregnancy and the birth of their child secret. In particular, they would assist pregnant women who faced stigma because they were destitute or had conceived out of wedlock or as a result of rape. It was also not uncommon for them to organise the necessary adoption papers and coordinate the handover of



by Abraham and numerous others prove this, documenting illegal practices in 11 countries of origin from 1973 to 2002. They refer to suspected child trafficking, forged documents, missing declarations of consent from biological mothers, and cases of Swiss officials who turned a blind eye to systematic lawbreaking. Around 700 babies from Sri Lanka and 2,280 babies from India were adopted dur-

Sarah Ineichen made irregular adoptions into a widely debated topic. The issue concerns her personally: “I still do not know who my biological mother is.”

Photo: Keystone

newborns to mainly Western adoptive parents.

The adoption process moved abroad

From 1973, more and more couples from Switzerland would arrive in these countries. Due to social factors and changes in the law, it was now easier for people who wanted to

adopt children to do so abroad. Few were unduly worried by this. As one of the studies recounts: “It was like reproductive medicine today, in that it was socially acceptable back then to say that adoptive parents were entitled to have children, full stop.” Self-interest was conveniently hidden under the veneer of altruism.

Responsibility now lies with the federal government and the cantons, says Ineichen. “They were the ones that tolerated and even facilitated this shabby trade for decades.” By not doing enough to protect children and their biological families from exploitation, an entire generation of adoptees now have to suffer the consequences. “We expect an apology for the wrong that was done to us as well as targeted support to help us uncover our past.” DNA tests in the countries of origin to help uncover falsified adoption papers are one example of what can be done.

Gaps in information

It is heart-wrenching to discover that there are gaps in information or parts of your story that are actually downright lies, says Andrea Abraham. People have to live with this incomplete biography. It affects their sense of identity and belonging. “There are still thousands of adults in Switzerland who have unanswered questions.”

The Federal Council wants to ban international adoption. “It is the only way to fully prevent abuses of the system,” Justice Minister Beat Jans argues. Monitoring what happens in the countries of origin is extremely difficult and time-consuming. The Hague Adoption Convention, which came into force in Switzerland in 2003, is an example of the significant progress that has already been made, but there are limits to its scope, he adds.

The Federal Council intends to flesh out its plans by the end of 2026. A ban could come into force by 2030 at the earliest.

Among those directly affected some are vehemently opposed to the government’s plan. “Without international adoption, I probably would never have grown up in a loving family,” says EVP National Councillor Nik Gugger, who was adopted from India as a young boy. Within a month, he collected over 10,000 signatures for a petition to prevent a blanket ban.



Gugger believes that the Hague Convention already has effective safeguards in place – but that a high bar should also be set for countries of origin, with professional support provided in Switzerland. “The practices of yesteryear are no longer possible,” says Centre Party National Councillor Stefan Müller-Altermatt, who is the adoptive father of a boy from Armenia. Full documentation and trans-

parency are essential today, he points out.

A ban would stigmatise those directly affected, say opponents. Adopted children would start thinking that they actually should not be in Switzerland. It would imply that adoptive parents are in the wrong. This is unfair and does not reflect reality. And the consequences for orphans and abandoned children would be devastating, they warn.

The reform will have no impact as far as the Swiss Abroad are concerned.

Nik Gugger is fighting against tight restrictions. Born in India and adopted by Swiss parents, he talks about his luck: thanks to this adoption, he was “able to grow up in a loving family”. Photo: Keystone

“They can continue to adopt children in accordance with the laws of their country of residence,” says Joëlle Schickel-Küng from the Federal Office of Justice. Foreign adoptions will, in principle, be recognised in Switzerland if they take place in the country where the adoptive parents live.

Grisons – from car-free to four-wheel drive

Grisons was stubbornly anti-automobile until 1925. One hundred years later, the Alpine canton now leads the way in road infrastructure and cars per capita. We look at the hairpins that were negotiated in between.

JÜRIG STEINER

Climate activists could maybe learn a trick or two from Grison's decision to ban cars in the early 20th century – a move that went against the grain but commanded majority support within the canton.

"People of Grisons!" exhorted the banner. "Do you really wish to graft and grovel for those who roar past you in their motor cars with an air of haughty contempt?" The rhetoric went full-throttle, more or less turning the anti-car argument into a class war. Twenty years after the first automobile had been patented by German engineer Carl Benz in 1886, cars were portrayed as "stink boxes" flaunted by flash tourists from the lowlands. The canton's Alpine valleys would be engulfed in dust, noise and stench if nothing was done to stop them.

It took a remarkably long time for such views to change. Grisons became a car-free enclave, banning all motor vehicles between 1900 and 1925 – longer than anywhere else in Europe.

Bolting horses

It was the Grisons cantonal government, no less, that crank-started the prohibition on cars, taking the public's concerns seriously. Baulking at the prospect of these newfangled contraptions endangering other road users on the narrow, winding mountain passes of Engadine, it issued its canton-wide ban in 1900. If visiting motorists came rattling around the corner, carriage drivers feared that their horses would bolt and take them and their passengers down the mountain with them.

Cars quickly became an accepted form of transport elsewhere in Switzerland. After the ban came into force in Grisons, officials in Chur soon be-

gan to worry that being car-free could put the canton at an economic disadvantage. Yet the all-male electorate (women were not allowed to vote) remained unmoved. The ban survived nine consecutive popular votes, despite road users occasionally taking matters into their own hands: photos of the time bear testimony to vehicles being pulled by horses once they passed into Grisons.

It was not until 21 June 1925 that a narrow majority voted in favour of the motor car. Some suspect – not

republished essay to mark the 100th anniversary of the ban being lifted.

From June 1925, the car began to take the 150 valleys of Switzerland's largest canton by storm, it is now safe to say. Only 136 passenger cars were registered in Grisons at the end of 1925. The number is now 126,000.

The canton leads the way in numerous mobility-related "disciplines", scoring above the national average in terms of cars per capita. There are significantly more cars than households in Grisons. Based on the latest information from the Federal Statistical Office, people in the canton have a penchant for buying big, expensive cars. And the proportion of new four-wheel-drive vehicles is higher than anywhere else in Switzerland.

Driving over the mountains

Grisons historian Simon Bundi has followed the story of automobiles closely. He curates the car museum at Emil Frey Classics in Safenwil (canton of Aargau) and has led a research project devoted to 100 years of the motor car in Grisons, the results of which are now available in a book.

There are several reasons why the ban lasted so long, Bundi tells us. Grisons is Switzerland's most sparsely populated canton, statistically speaking. But it has an extensive transport network. Back then, there were significant doubts as to whether a relatively small number of taxpayers would be able to cover the cost of maintaining roads for cars. People feared that the financial burden might be too great.

At almost the same time as the advent of the automobile, Grisons had also made the expensive decision to establish the Rhaetian Railway (RhB). The RhB regarded the car as a com-

The canton's Alpine valleys would be engulfed in dust, noise and stench if nothing was done to stop them.

Argument of those in favour of a car ban



Higher, farther, faster, more beautiful? In search of somewhat unconventional Swiss records

This edition: the canton that resisted the lure of the motor car longer than anywhere else.



petitor for the transport of goods, which is why the canton continued to ban vans and lorries from valleys accessible by train even after 1925.

The Confederation eventually lifted the handbrake. In 1934, the Federal Council and parliament decided to expand Switzerland's mountain road network and pledge major financial assistance to the Alpine cantons. Grisons had lobbied heavily for this money and now began to build roads with a vengeance. Car mania soon gripped the canton.

As early as 1929, the Upper Engadine hosted an international car show attracting 10,000 visitors. The canton began clearing the Julier Pass for winter traffic in 1934, making it the first alpine pass to feature asphalt roads and turning the passage over the mountains into a major tourist attrac-

The reality of Grisons prior to 1925: anyone bringing in goods by lorry from outside had to hitch up their horses at the cantonal border, owing to the ban on cars. Photo provided



Then came automotive mania: post buses waiting at the entrance to the San Bernardino Tunnel on its opening in 1967. Photo provided



Left: The tone of the argument against cars was, at least for a while, very reflective of the class struggle. Photo provided

tion. As mass tourism expanded after the Second World War, more and more people wanted to drive to ski resorts in cars. Grisons, once anti-car, was now ready.

Canton of bypasses

Switzerland's second-ever stretch of motorway was built in the Rhine Valley between Trimmis and Landquart in 1958, while the first road tunnel through the Alps, between Hinterrhein and San Bernardino, was inaugurated on 1 December 1967 – 13 years before the Gotthard. Simon Bundi's research shows how pioneering road infrastructure was even celebrated on postcards, bearing testimony to Grison's proactive policy on personal mobility.

Without cars, the canton's economic transformation into a tourist destination would have been unthinkable. But more road traffic meant that the anti-car lobby at the beginning of the 20th century may have had a point. Towns and villages turned into traffic bottlenecks, leading to air pollution, noise and an increased risk of road accidents. Grison's approach, both then and now, has been to build additional roads that bypass residential areas. "Grisons is the canton of bypasses," says Bundi. "No other canton has so many of them. Usually

Right: Picture taken from the air during the construction of the Küblis bypass. As it makes clear, Grisons is also the land of bypasses. Photo provided

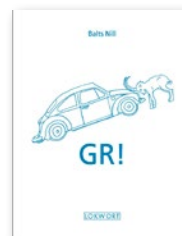


costing a lot of money, they help to funnel people into the tourist destinations more quickly."

One thing has not changed in Grisons since the end of the car ban: traffic levels continue to rise, and a large proportion of traffic originates from outside the canton. Motorists are feeling the squeeze in urban areas, with no more than half of households in cities like Berne and Zurich still owning their own car. Yet four wheels remains the mode of choice for people travelling into the mountains. Congestion at the busy Landquart motorway junction has become the norm on sunny winter Sundays.



Simon Bundi, Isabelle Fehlmann, Flurina Graf, Christoph Maria Merki, Kurt Möser: Das Jahrhundert des Automobils. Graubünden 1917-2025. Institut für Kulturforschung Graubünden. 2025, AS Verlag, Zurich



Balts Nill: GR! 2025, Lokwort Verlag, Bern, 24 pages. Über «Stinkkarren» und «Modespielzeuge». Ein Lehrstück zur Schweizer Demokratie.

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EDITORS
Marc Lettau, Editor-in-Chief (MUL),
Stéphane Herzog (SH), Theodora Peter
(TP), Susanne Wenger (SWE), Amandine
Madziel, FDFA representative (AM)

FDFA OFFICIAL COMMUNICATIONS
The editorial responsibility for the "Notes
from the Federal Palace" section is
assumed by the Consular Directorate,
Innovation and Partnerships, Effin-
gerstrasse 27, 3003 Berne, Switzerland.
kdip@eda.admin.ch | www.eda.admin.ch

ADVERTISING DIRECTOR
Airpage AG, Uster/Zurich
furrer@airpage.ch | www.airpage.ch

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EDITORIAL ASSISTANT
Nema Bliggenstorfer (NB)

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SwissGlobal Language Services AG,
Baden

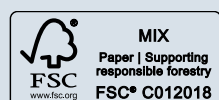
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revue@swisscommunity.org
Phone: +41 31 356 61 10
Bank details:
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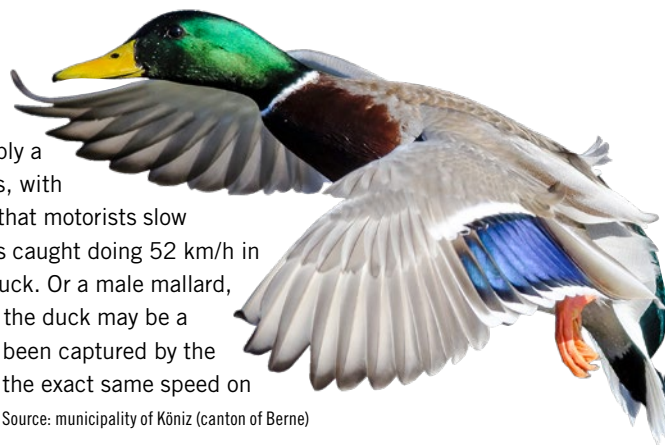
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Fowl play

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Many Swiss cities and municipalities apply a 30 km/h speed limit in residential areas, with speed cameras often in place to ensure that motorists slow down. On 13 April 2025, one culprit was caught doing 52 km/h in the town of Köniz near Berne. It was a duck. Or a male mallard, to be precise. Local police revealed that the duck may be a repeat offender, saying that a drake had been captured by the speed camera in the exact same spot at the exact same speed on the exact same date seven years earlier. Source: municipality of Köniz (canton of Berne)



657,291

This year's UEFA Women's Euro 2025 held in Switzerland during July saw Europe's best female footballers play in front of record crowds. The aggregate attendance across all matches stood at an impressive 657,291, outstripping all previous records at the women's Euros. The tournament also attracted a cumulative live viewing audience of 450 million, who saw a total of 106 goals. Referees handed out only three red cards. Euro 2025 will be remembered as a joyful, gripping, peaceful spectacle.

For recommended reading, see page 27.

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Swiss women – with or without a football – arguably become independent earlier than men, because they leave home at a younger age. On average, they fly the nest when they are 21. Young men, on the other hand, live with their parents until the average age of 22.6. When should children move out at the very latest? At the age of 29, say the Swiss – albeit young people in Ticino are still welcome to enjoy all the amenities of "Hotel Mamma" until they are 32.

Source: YouGov survey, April 2025

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And after they have flown the nest? Once they have their own accommodation, shared or alone, young women seem to hit the ground running quicker. Not only are young men twice as likely to have their parents still washing and ironing their laundry, but they also rely on their parents' money for longer: 57 per cent of young women get by without any financial assistance, compared to only 45 per cent of young men. Source: YouGov survey, April 2025



Should the super-rich bankroll the fight against climate change?

The Young Socialists (JUSO) believe that people in Switzerland who inherit 50 million francs or more should pay a hefty tax on their estates to help fund the fight against climate change. Their controversial “Initiative for a future” will be put to voters on 30 November 2025.

THEODORA PETER

In spring 2024, the Young Socialists (JUSO) – the youth wing of the Swiss Social Democrats (SP) – launched an initiative proposing an additional inheritance tax on estates and endowments worth 50 million Swiss francs or more. JUSO says it wants to “make the rich pay for climate change”, adding: “The super-rich are destroying our future. With their private jets, superyachts and billion-dollar investments in polluting industries, they produce more carbon within a few hours than the average person would in their entire lifetime.”

Those who inherit less than 50 million francs are not the target of the proposal. But anything over and above this amount would incur a 50 per cent tax, i.e. the state would take half of all the assets. According to the proposal, up to six billion francs in additional tax revenue would be raised every year as a result. Its supporters want the money to be spent on “socially equitable measures to fight climate change” and the “ecological restructuring of the economy”.

JUSO President Mirjam Hostetmann explains that billions of francs in investment will be needed in the years ahead to combat climate change. “Without the super-rich paying their fair share, the wider population will have to foot the bill,” she says.

Entrepreneurs threaten to leave Switzerland

According to a study by the University of St Gallen, the initiative affects around 2,900 taxpayers across the country who own total assets worth 560 billion francs – or 20 per cent of all taxable wealth in Switzerland. The authors of the study believe that



some of these high-net-worth individuals could leave Switzerland in order to avoid paying the tax, meaning that a lot less would go into the state coffers: up to a billion francs per year.

Some of the super-rich who would have to pay the tax have reacted in horror. Business magnate Peter Spuhler, one of Switzerland’s richest people with an estimated wealth of four billion francs, calls the initiative a “blatant act of confiscation”. Spuhler, who is chairman of the board of directors of train manufacturer Stadler Rail, even warned in a newspaper interview that he would emigrate to Austria, where there is no national inheritance tax. In Switzerland, his eventual heirs would have to fork out at least 1.5 billion francs in inheritance tax if voters approved the initiative. Absurd, says Spuhler. “Look at my bank balance and you would be

To emphasise their environmental motives, the authors of the initiative unveiled their proposal in 2022 on the dried-up bed of the River Emme.

Photo: Keystone

surprised. Nearly all of my wealth is invested in my companies and in other smaller firms.” He would have to sell his businesses to pay the tax. In the worst case, these would end up in the hands of foreign investors. Such fears are unfounded, say those who champion the initiative. Mirjam Hostetmann countered his remarks, pointing out that it would be possible to pay the tax in instalments or take out loans to cover the bill.

Economist Volker Grossmann, who is a professor of economics at the University of Fribourg, disagrees that taking on new debt is problematic for family companies, provided business is going well. “The economic impact has been completely exaggerated,” he told the tabloid newspaper “Blick”. Taxes are not the only criterion for a location’s attractiveness – Switzerland also has other benefits.

The initiative would affect around 2,900 taxpayers, who own total assets worth 560 billion francs – **or 20 per cent of all taxable wealth in Switzerland.**

Grossmann calls inheritance tax “the least painful tax of all”, because inheritors don’t earn the assets bequeathed to them but are simply in the fortuitous position of having been born into wealth.

A repeat of 2015?

The Federal Council and the conservative majority in parliament flatly reject the initiative. They say it would make Switzerland less attractive as a domicile for wealthy individuals, not least given that the rich already contribute a lot to public finances through wealth tax. One per cent of taxpayers pay over five billion francs, or nearly 40 per cent of direct federal tax revenue.

The SP and the Greens are the only parties supporting the initiative, arguing that the gap between rich and poor is growing. Given the political balance of power, it would be astonishing if the proposal were to be approved at the ballot box. According to a poll conducted in August 2024 by the free newspaper “20 Minuten”, 58 per cent of voters are against the initiative. No updated poll was ready at the time of our editorial deadline.

Ten years ago, a left-wing initiative to introduce inheritance tax at federal level was clearly rejected, with 71 per cent saying no. The aim back then was to charge 20 per cent tax on estates worth two million francs and upwards – to help fund the state pension. The new scheme would now target the super-rich.

Variation from canton to canton

Inheritance tax already exists at cantonal level, albeit in different forms. No such tax exists in Schwyz or Ob-

walden, while spouses and direct descendants are mostly exempt in all the other cantons. Tax rates vary considerably, from 0 to 49 per cent, depending on the canton.

Neighbouring countries also take different approaches. The German system uses progressive tax rates but grants numerous exceptions, on company assets for example. In Austria, inheritance tax at federal level was abolished completely in 2008. Italy,

Tackling climate change requires the super-rich to pay their fair share, argues JUSO President Mirjam Hostetmann.

Stadler Rail supremo Peter Spuhler, a high-profile opponent of the initiative, has threatened to move abroad. Photos: Keystone

meanwhile, has a relatively low inheritance tax rate of four per cent and offers tax breaks to attract high-net-worth individuals. France is the most expensive place to inherit wealth, with tax rates of up to 45 per cent depending on the size of the estate. If you inherited 100 million euros, you would have to pay the French state 45 million euros. This is much more than what JUSO is proposing for Switzerland: after deducting the tax-free amount, you would receive a tax bill of 25 million francs for the same amount.

The initiative aims to prevent a situation in which the super-rich would be able to dodge the new inheritance tax by moving to a different country. It proposes a legally contentious retroactive clause to this effect, which the Federal Council has already said would be unworkable in its current form.

On 30 November, voters will decide whether that becomes an issue.





Switzerland to vote on public service for all

All young Swiss men are obliged to do military or civilian service. An initiative now aims to widen the scheme and make it mandatory for all Swiss to do public service that benefits the community and the environment.

THEODORA PETER

In a world where crisis and catastrophe play out on a daily basis, every citizen should take social responsibility and do public service, say the authors of a cross-party initiative calling for a revamp of Switzerland's conscription system that would widen the concept of military/civilian service and oblige all Swiss citizens to do public service of benefit to the community and the environment. The scheme, dubbed "service citoyen", would also be open to foreign nationals.

"Strengthen the concept of civil duty"

The public service could either take the form of classic military service or equivalent public works on a militia basis. This would cover areas like disaster prevention, food security and care provision – where volunteers, family members, and people doing civilian service currently do much of the heavy lifting. "We want to strengthen the concept of civic



"To bolster security, we need the armed forces and the civilian population to be partners."

Noémie Roten, co-author of the initiative.

duty," says 36-year-old campaign coordinator Noémie Roten. This includes greater recognition of voluntary work. "Young women fail to grasp why they should, for example, do an unpaid care internship while their male counterparts receive monetary compensation from the state for doing civilian service." In a militia system, men and women would receive equal treatment, including regarding remuneration.

Opposition across the political spectrum

Policymakers in Berne are sceptical of the proposal, with the Green Liberals the only party in favour. Left-wing politicians reject the equality argument and bemoan what they view as the mandatory nature of the scheme, saying that it is the wrong way to go about strengthening community engagement.

Politicians on the right oppose the initiative because they fear it will weaken the military. Roten herself did military service after leaving school. She drove an army truck. "We are not anti-military," she counters. There are still many young people who will want to opt for military service, she believes. The initiative also aims to shore up defence and civil protection. "To bolster security, we need the armed forces and the civilian population to be partners." Young people would come together from various regions and walks of life, contributing – in Roten's words – to "greater solidarity, responsibility and cohesion across the linguistic and social divide".

The Public opinion: fairly open minded

The authors of the initiative will now try to convince the electorate and

the cantons of their idea in time for the 30 November vote. They can take encouragement from the latest results of an annual study by ETH Zurich, which evaluates public opinion on foreign, security and defence policy issues in Switzerland. In the 2025 survey, two thirds of respondents were generally in favour of a universal form of mandatory public service for men and women as well as people being free to choose between military service, civilian service and community work.

There were no up-to-date opinion polls at the time of our editorial deadline. Facing broad-based opposition and limited funding, however, the authors of the initiative will have a difficult job to convince voters.

We will review the popular votes of 28 September 2025 in the next edition of our magazine.

Overview of the votes on 30 November

Public service for all: The aim of this initiative is that all citizens do public service for the benefit of the community and the environment – whether this be in the military or civilian context (see main text).

National inheritance tax: This initiative foresees a 50 per cent tax on inheritances and endowments worth 50 million francs or more, with the proceeds going to fund the fight against climate change (see pages 20–21).

New fighter jets – no fixed price after all

The Federal Council long assumed that it would be able to buy fighter jets from the US at a fixed price – just as the electorate had been promised. But the government's F-35 order could now cost over a billion francs more.

CHRISTOF FORSTER

The procurement of new fighter jets will not be as straightforward as the Department of Defence (DDPS) originally hoped, it emerged in mid-August. Switzerland was unable to negotiate a fixed-price deal with the United States for its F-35 order, Federal Councillor Martin Pfister told the media on 13 August 2025. Pfister had talked one-to-one with Pete Hegseth on the phone. The US Secretary of Defense was very courteous but refused to budge. Washington would not deviate from its position. Consequently, the purchase of 36 jets could entail extra costs of anywhere between 650 million and 1.3 billion Swiss francs – as it currently stands.

The government now has a fresh debate on its hands on the merits or otherwise of procuring the F-35s – the very thing it wanted to avoid. The news has been greeted with dismay by the left-wing parties in Berne, who accuse the Federal Council of having misled the electorate.

Fixed price?

Getting a fixed price had become a mantra during the procurement process, with Pfister's predecessor Viola Amherd and the DDPS promising for years that the F-35s would cost no more than six billion francs. The fixed price would also take inflation into account.

Not everyone was so sure, including journalists. The Swiss Federal Audit Office (SFAO) issued a clear warning in 2022, suggesting that the fixed price was not a foregone conclusion. The SFAO earned a sharp reprimand from the DDPS for this intervention. Questioning the deal would seriously jeopardise Switzerland's interests, the DDPS claimed. Those in charge at the SFAO back then have expressed irritation at the DDPS for having so readily ignored the misgivings of legal experts. The DDPS could have removed all legal ambiguity by resuming negotiations, they said. The contract had not been signed at that point.

A short time later, the US embassy in Switzerland stated that the procurement of the F-35s would involve a fixed price. The DDPS sought legal advice on the matter. According to the US law firm Arnold & Porter, there was little risk of the price increasing. Arnold & Porter noted that written correspondence between Switzerland and the US had made explicit reference to fixed prices that take account of inflation. The US government could only change tack in exceptional circumstances – and the risk of this happening was low, it said, given that the jets had been fully developed and Switzerland's specifications were unchanged.



The DDPS had good reason to feel confident, based on this assessment.

Borrow more money – or order fewer jets?

But the report also included a warning: under US law, additional costs can be passed on to Switzerland. It was unclear whether the Swiss government could still pay a fixed price if such an eventuality arose. This is because the contract precluded any dispute being settled by a court of arbitration. Disagreements would probably have to be resolved through diplomacy. But unfortunately, diplomacy has now run its course.

The Federal Council intends to go ahead with the purchase, regardless of additional costs. It will evaluate various options before the end of November. One is to buy fewer jets in order to stick to the six-billion cap approved at the ballot box. Another is to ask parliament for an additional loan, which may or may not have to go to a public vote, said Pfister.

It looks like the final chapter of this story is still far from completion.

A climbing F-35. The fact that the expected cost of this aircraft is rising sharply in spite of "fixed prices" has been the subject of some highly charged political debate in Switzerland.

Photo: Keystone



Swiss housing shortage fuels Airbnb debate

Affordable rents are scarce in Switzerland, with online booking platforms like Airbnb depriving tenants of suitable properties. Municipalities have now begun to fight back.

DENISE LACHAT

While banner-wielding protesters march through Barcelona, shouting for tourists to “go home”, residents in Swiss towns and cities are using the channels of direct democracy to vent their spleen. In 2023, voters in Lucerne approved an initiative called “Protect living space – regulate Airbnb”. Five municipalities in the Jungfrau region have now followed suit. According to Hanspeter Berger, the SP Böödeli-Jungfrau co-chair whose regional party branch is taking the fight to Airbnb, petitions supporting similar initiatives in Unterseen, Interlaken, Matten, Wilderswil and Bönigen were able to garner the necessary number of signatures in no time at all. “Airbnb is a big concern for everyone,” says Jürg Müller-Muralt from Unterseen, who helped to coordinate the initiatives. Residents packed out the local community hall to vote on the matter. Müller-Muralt had never seen anything like it, he says.

Cause for concern

People are concerned for good reason. The Federal Office for Housing (FOH) refers to a “worrying” trend in its latest report. In many Swiss regions, there are fewer and fewer properties available for long-term rent. Is Airbnb the culprit? The short-term rental platform is at least one of the factors making the situation more acute. “The Airbnb business model has unethical consequences,” says

Hanspeter Berger. “Property owners can earn up to four times more on short-stay than on long-stay rentals. It squeezes local people out of the housing market and pushes up the cost of rent.” What Berger finds particularly galling is that you can make a quick buck from tourists via Airbnb while people working in the tourism industry often take home modest pay and cannot afford to live near their place of work. What is the answer to this problem? The five popular initiatives in Unterseen, Interlaken, Matten, Wilderswil and Bönigen aim to make Airbnb less attractive by preventing people from letting out their property on a short-term basis for more than 90 days per calendar year. The idea is that by limiting a property’s short-term listings to 90 days a year, a conventional long-term rental will again become financially more attractive to the owner.

The 90-day rule is nothing new. There are cities in Switzerland and across Europe that already enforce it. The canton of Geneva introduced the rule back in 2018, while the canton of Vaud adopted something similar in 2022. And since the beginning of 2025, the city of Lucerne has applied it as a means of implementing the initiative mentioned above. David Roth, who masterminded the Lucerne initiative, is looking forward to the situation easing. He is convinced that hundreds of properties will revert from second homes to primary residences in the months and years ahead.

In Lucerne, visitors from all over the world are an everyday sight. The city is now taking action against the Airbnb boom with restrictive regulations. Photo: Keystone

With expensive rents also charged for poor-quality homes that have been renovated on the fly and fitted out with bunk beds, even Urs Kessler – an avowed opponent of regulation – approves of the measure. The status quo would otherwise be detrimental to Switzerland's image as a tourist destination, the former Jungfrau Railways CEO remarked in an interview.

Housing shortages in the Alps

Of course, not everyone thinks this way. There are plenty of people who believe that the 90-day rule threatens the guarantee of property rights. The measure has also alarmed owners of holiday chalets. However, the five municipal initiatives in the Jungfrau region make a specific exception for such properties. "If holiday chalets and apartments are owner-occupied, up to five beds may be rented out without restriction," explains Hanspeter Berger. The Bernese Oberland has made a tradition out of these types of accommodation, which no one complains about. Thomas Egger, who heads the Swiss Centre for Mountain Regions (SAB) thinks that Airbnb is very welcome in Alpine villages where the priority is to turn 'cold beds' in second homes into 'warm beds'. But it becomes a problem when primary dwellings are taken off the market for the long term.

Housing shortages in the Alps are, according to Egger, a direct consequence of the Covid pandemic and, therefore, a relatively new phenomenon. "Since the pandemic, many more people want to move to the mountains to live in permanent homes or temporarily in second homes," he says, adding that the average vacancy rate for residential properties in popular tourist areas has consequently fallen by half to below one per cent within the last three years. Under one per cent equates to a housing crisis – which is now the reality in many tourist destinations. The SAB director does not expect the situation to improve any time soon.

But Egger does not see Airbnb as a competitor to the hotel industry. Airbnb attracts a different clientele and contributes to more overnight stays, he says. It also opens up an additional sales channel for hotels.

How strict and how enforceable?

There are no blanket national restrictions on Airbnb rentals in Switzerland, hence cantons and municipalities have to act of their own accord. At the beginning of 2022, the city of Berne started applying a specific regime to short-



term rentals in its old town. Depending on the relevant housing zone, attics or apartments on the second floor or higher are reserved for long-term tenants. Unterseen has banned short-term rentals within its residential zone, while Interlaken applies rules to the use of second homes based on the zoning regulations for distinct areas of the town. The SAB also recommends that municipalities first analyse available living space and draw up a suitable strategy in order to take appropriate measures.

Then again, it depends on how strict the measures actually are. Interlaken stipulating a minimum rental period of just two consecutive nights "is neither here nor there", says Berger, given that Airbnb guests tend to stay for exactly that amount of time. Yet, more important is how well the relevant measures are enforced. In the canton of Geneva, for example, both the head of tourism and the Geneva tenants' association chair (and OSA Executive Board member) Carlo Sommaruga have criticised a lack of oversight. Obviously, you need resources if you want local officials coming by to check whether an apartment is occupied or not, says Sommaruga, who wants monitoring to be funded by revenue from penalty fines if required. But establishing a process is anything but easy. Lucerne, Davos and St Moritz are among the first municipalities that have at least begun to facilitate checks by obliging Airbnb landlords to register with their local authority and publish their identification number on the booking platform.

Anonymous key deposit boxes instead of doorbell panels with names: the Airbnb boom is driving renters out of their own neighbourhoods in many cities. Photo: Keystone

The painful truth

Cäsar von Arx (1895–1949) was Switzerland's best-known dramatist before 1945.



Cäsar von Arx
(1895–1949)

CHARLES LINSMAYER

Cäsar von Arx's play "Der heilige Held" (The holy hero) debuted at Schauspielhaus Zurich theatre on 5 March 1936. Leopold Lindtberg was the director. The production portrayed an episode from the Entlebuch rebellion against the city of Lucerne in 1478. Peter Amstalden, who led the revolt, is to be executed unless his father-in-law Niklaus von Flüe pledges support for Lucerne. Von Flüe, a hermit, rejects the ultimatum, and Amstalden is beheaded – at the very moment that von Flüe is conveying a legendary message that will help to calm the troubles. The message of the play? "Serving others is the key to finding God, and searching for God is the key to serving others." Despite favourable reviews as well as praise from none other than Thomas Mann, who called the play "quintessentially Swiss", only three poorly attended performances followed. With Switzerland's playwrights distracted more by other interests than giving their competitors abroad a run for their money, could the theatre-going public have made the conscious decision to stay away?

Down the rabbit hole of Swiss exceptionalism

Cäsar von Arx, born in Basel on 23 May 1895, was nevertheless the most famous Swiss dramatist of his era by some distance. But he, too, fell down the rabbit hole of Swiss exceptionalism – the spiritual defence of the nation referred to as "geistige Landesverteidigung". Taking prompts from Schiller, Shakespeare and Arnold Ott, von Arx never hit the same chords as those of his avant-garde peers. History was his domain. Swiss history in particular. After "General Suter" flopped in Berlin in 1932, he became more entrenched than ever. "Someone else should write for those inso-

"The 'normal person' in this 'era of electricity' would laugh at anyone who says that a lit torch is worth preserving as much as the electric light bulb. But what if the power in the light bulb runs out one day? Won't the torchbearer again become our Prometheus? Why, then, does anyone have the right to deride me or go so far as to call me a dinosaur, just because I cultivate self-knowledge and the uniqueness of personality in this era of technology and individualism? Humans tend to hoist what they deem important onto the pedestal of blessed dogma; it is no longer the torchbearer that they appreciate but the electrician."

(Excerpt from "Der Fackelträger" [The torchbearer]:
Cäsar von Arx: Werke IV, edited by Reto Caluori,
Schwabe Verlag, Basel 2008)

lent city-dwelling Jews," he raged in a letter to his father, before putting pen to paper on three further chapters in Swiss history.

Anniversary celebrations in 1941

Von Arx's career highlight came in 1941, when over 100,000 people attended his stage show in Schwyz celebrating 650 years of the Swiss Confederation. Unbeknown to spectators, Federal Councillor Philipp Etter did his utmost to ensure that all mention of refugees and anti-fascism was removed from the script. Von Arx then experienced a rude awakening in 1945. Referring to Max Frisch's morality play "Nun singen sie wieder" (Now they sing again), he scribbled the following in his diary: "Why is something so simple, calm and profound, so poetic beyond my capacity? It's always history, history, history. This is the painful truth, and I will have to live with it." Indeed, von Arx – whose final works were the Zwingli play "Brüder in Christo" (Brothers in Christ) and a performance commemorating the 450th anniversary of the Battle of Dornach – never regained any contemporary standing. "Without my wife's beautiful optimism, I would have given up the fight long ago," he admitted to Franz Beidler in 1947. Wife Gertrud died on 14 July 1949, and Von Arx shot himself in his study in Niedererlinsbach a few hours later. "Nulla crux, nulla corona" ("No cross, no crown") was written on his gravestone. The crown had eluded von Arx, because he was unable to escape his straitjacket.

BIBLIOGRAPHY: Cäsar von Arx's collected works, edited by Armin Arnold, were published in four volumes by Schwabe-Verlag, Basel, from 1986 to 2008.

CHARLES LINSMAYER IS A LITERARY SCHOLAR AND JOURNALIST BASED IN ZÜRICH

Back of the net



MARIANNE MEIER & MONIKA HOFMANN:
“Das Recht zu kicken.
Die Geschichte des
Schweizer Frauenfußballs”
(The right to play.
The history of Swiss
women’s football).
Verlag Hier und Jetzt.
Zurich, 2025. 335 pages,
39 francs.

This summer’s Euro 2025 in Switzerland was a shot in the arm for women’s football – with an attendance record, exciting matches and a sense of euphoria both inside and outside the stadiums. The Swiss team thrilled their home support on the big stage, reaching the quarter-finals for the first time.

Those dreamy days of summer should not disguise the fact that women’s football in Switzerland had been prevented for a long time from getting to this point. Women were still being denied access to this bastion of masculinity well into the 1960s. Unlike its English and German counterparts, the Swiss Football Association (SFA) had never banned women’s football as such. Nevertheless, Switzerland’s female football pioneers had to fight hard for the right to play, as historian Marianne Meier and gender scientist Monika Hofmann recount in their book.

Sisters Monika and Silvia Stahel – who founded Switzerland’s first-ever women’s football team, FC Goitschel, in the Aargau village of Murgenthal in 1963 – were two such pioneers. Once the ball got rolling, women’s football wanted to become more than just a novelty act at village tournaments. Yet attempts to get competitive football off the ground fell foul of the SFA, who instead sought to placate would-be female footballers by offering to train them as referees. Monika, Silvia and friends would have preferred to play but saw the refereeing course as a chance to get on the football pitch and show what they could do. They were only allowed to officiate junior matches.

The first Swiss women’s football league was finally established in 1970 – and welcomed to the SFA fold 20 years later. The beginning of the 1970s also saw the first women’s international matches. One of the best fledgling internationals of this era was Madeleine “Mado” Boll, who played for the Milanese works club ACF Gomma Gomma. The talented Boll had moved to Italy after being frustrated by the dearth of opportunities in Switzerland. Boll had even played a game for one of FC Sion’s junior boys’ teams at the age of 12 in 1965 – and became an SFA-registered player as a result. The governing body stripped her of her registration once it had noticed its “mistake”. Boll never gave up, paving the way for thousands of women and girls who have since followed in her footsteps.

THEODORA PETER

Podcast series (in German) coinciding with the book: www.revue.link/pod

The Young Gods: 40 years of experimental Swiss rock



THE YOUNG GODS:
“Appear disappear”
Two Gentlemen records,
Lausanne, 2025

The band, founded in 1985, has just released its thirteenth album. “Appear Disappear” captivates with its raw, harse sound and calls for rebellion. For any rock fans listening to the latest opus from the Swiss band, the fury of the record might bring to mind U2. Those in the know, however, will be aware that it was the Swiss who influenced the Irish! Co-founded in Geneva by Fribourg native Franz Treichler, the “Gods” have influenced a fair number of bands, including the Irish stars mentioned above, as well as David Bowie and the German band Rammstein.

The Young Gods’ music is based on guitar-free rock that makes inventive use of the sampler, a tool that lets you record sound from any source and then do what you like with it. Rappers were among the first to use this tool, followed by electronic music artists. “Appear Disappear”, released in June, is styled as a rock opus, this time featuring guitars. Some tracks in the Young Gods’ catalogue are for hardcore fans only. This album, however, is more accessible. The Young Gods wanted to create a raw album, and they did! This album is fuelled by the tensions of the world. “Appear Disappear”, the first track, is an onslaught of drums shredded by oversaturated guitars. This short song is followed by “Systemized”, where Franz Treichler sings, “I’m not the enemy,” in his own idiosyncratic brand of English.

You have to listen to “Appear Disappear” a few times to get a handle on it. Is it a dark album? The lyrics of “Shine That Drone” champion resistance. “The song’s about a crowd that starts dancing and stamping on the ground to kick up a cloud of dust, which then interferes with the drones,” the singer explained to music journalist Daniel Koch. “Appear Disappear” is thus more a call to arms than a painting of the apocalypse. Anyone new to the “Gods” can absolutely start with this album before working their way through the band’s back catalogue. Doing things this way will doubtless find favour with Franz Treichler (guitar, vocals), Cesare Pizzi (sampling, electronic instruments) and Bernard Trontin (drums), who consider sound an infinitely malleable substance. So where does Switzerland come into all this? Culture vultures will spot that one line from the album – “I spend my time in the brain of the monster” – is a quotation. When he visited Switzerland in 1964, Che Guevara used the expression to refer to wealthy Helvetia, a peaceful land filled with banks and not always above suspicion, according to his friend Jean Ziegler.

STÉPHANE HERZOG

Elisabeth Eidenbenz: a story of modesty

This Swiss Abroad, who was modest and remains little known to the general public, brought hope and humanity in times of war.

AMANDINE MADZIEL

In the maternity hospital in Elne, the lives of women and children of many nationalities and religions were saved as they fled from Franco's dictatorship or then had to flee the Gestapo. Spanish, Jewish and Romany women were hidden here, in spite of orders from the Swiss Red Cross to follow Vichy's racial laws. Around 200 Jewish babies are believed to have been saved. Elisabeth Eidenbenz took in and cared for those seen as 'undesirable'. Thanks to her determination and sometimes her disobedience, 600 babies escaped certain death via a Swiss maternity ward.

Her story

Born in Wila (Zurich) in 1913 to pastor Johann Albrecht Eidenbenz and Marie Eidenbenz, née Hess, she was the third of six children. Elisabeth trained as a teacher. She attended Zurich Youth College from 1929 to 1933 and the School of Domestic Economy in Neukirch an der Thur in 1934. She began her career as a teacher in working-class neighbourhoods in Winterthur and Zurich.

Elisabeth was first recruited as an aid worker by the Service Civil International in 1938, during the Spanish Civil War, and initially looked after the employees of the Swiss Aid Committee for the Children of Spain, otherwise known as Ayuda Suiza, in Burjassot in the province of Valencia.

In January 1939, when Catalonia was conquered by the Francoists, she was dispatched to the South of France to set up a maternity and rest home for refugee women and their children in Brouilla, near the Spanish border. When the home had to be evacuated in late September 1939, Eidenbenz spotted the Château d'En Bardou, in the neighbouring town of Elne. She raised the funds required, and the property was purchased by the Swiss Aid Committee for the Children of Spain. A little renovation work later, and it officially opened its doors as a maternity hospital.



An iconic image: Elisabeth Eidenbenz with Spanish child refugee Pablo.

All images from the Paul Senn photo reportage in the "Schweizer Illustrierte" newspaper of 25 February 1942 © Gottfried Keller Foundation

The Mothers of Elne

The Mothers of Elne, which was in operation between November/December 1939 and Easter 1944, provided rest and respite for its residents. They came mostly from the camps surrounding Rivesaltes and Argèles and were in a lamentable state when they arrived. The cold, sand, lice, scabies, dysentery and more took the lives of many babies and children in the camps. Mortality rates were atrocious and making it to the maternity hospital gave its residents a ray

of hope. A large number of women were unable to bring their older children with them and were forced to leave them in the camps. These moments were genuinely heartbreaking and having to be split up like this was unimaginably traumatic for the families.

Yet, being able to rest out of the wind and the cold, as well as having sufficient food, was an unimaginable blessing for the women and children who ended up in the maternity hospital. The place of refuge offered these uprooted and excluded women a safe haven and support to allow them to concentrate on

the experience of motherhood. Some pregnancies were the result of rape, and the resulting psychological damage made the work of helping the women even harder.

Many women were extremely weak by the time they arrived at the maternity hospital and some had young, sick children with them, making it very difficult for them to breastfeed. Gestures of solidarity abounded, and many babies ended up being saved by mothers other than their own breastfeeding them.

Once the mothers had recovered, they had to return to the camps. Elisabeth Eidenbenz nonetheless strove to rescue as many women and children as possible from this fate, by finding them jobs either in the Châteaueu or in another branch of Swiss Aid.

At Easter 1944, the Gestapo ordered the maternity hospital to evacuate within three days, and the establishment was permanently closed.

Awards

Elisabeth Eidenbenz received numerous awards, including recognition as Righteous Among the Nations by the State of Israel in 2002, the Gold Cross of the Orden Civil de la Solidaridad Social from the Spanish government in 2006, the Creu de Sant Jordi from the Catalan government in 2006 and the Légion d'Honneur from the French government in 2007.

Elisabeth dedicated all her awards to Lucie, a Jewish woman who had suffered a stillbirth but who stayed at the maternity hospital to breastfeed children whose mothers were too weak to do so themselves. Lucie was arrested by the Gestapo in 1943.

Until now Switzerland has scarcely given any recognition to Eidenbenz. Despite the fact that she looked after and took in so many women in need, without regard for their origin or their faith, her story is still

largely unknown and she has as yet received no awards from her own country.

During the final years of her life, Elisabeth lived with a female friend in Austria. She returned to Zurich to live in 2008 and died there in 2011.

The current status of the hospital site

The historic site, which has been converted into a museum and was listed as a historic monument in 2013, is unfortunately in need of financial support. According to Nicolas Garcia, mayor of Elne, it needs renovations to the tune of four million euros.

Assistance from Switzerland appears essential if this place of remembrance is to be preserved and the site is to be restored, says Garcia.



A crucial safe haven for mothers in need: the Swiss Mothers of Elne.



Breastfeeding women in the maternity hospital, with a small Swiss flag discreetly placed in the background.

Federal votes

The proposals submitted to the people are set by the Federal Council at least four months prior to the voting date.

The Federal Council decided at its session on 25 June 2025 to submit the following proposals to the people on 30 November 2025:

- Federal Popular Initiative “For a civically engaged Switzerland (Civic Duty Initiative)” (FF 2025 2027)
- Federal Popular Initiative “For a socially just climate policy – financed through fair taxation (Initiative for a Future)” (FF 2025 2026)

All information on proposals submitted to the people (voting pamphlets, committees, recommendations by the parliament, Federal Council etc.) can be found at www.admin.ch/abstimmungen or in the Federal Chancellery app “VoteInfo”.



Popular initiatives

The following federal popular initiative had been launched at the time of going to press (deadline for signatures in brackets):

- Federal Popular Initiative “Yes to protection against unfair rents (Fair Rent Initiative)” (3 December 2026)

The list of pending popular initiatives is available in French, German and Italian at <https://www.bk.admin.ch/>

- > Politische Rechte
- > Volksinitiativen
- > Hängige Volksinitiativen



An unforgettable summer for the young Swiss Abroad

Nature, adventures and meeting new people all made up the unique experience that the 2025 OSA summer camps offered young people aged 15–18 in the heart of Switzerland.

Just as it has done every year since 1934, the Organisation of the Swiss Abroad (OSA) organised summer camps in each of Switzerland’s four language regions this year. The participants, who came from all over the world, were given a glimpse of the cultural and geographical diversity of Switzerland. In spite of weather conditions as varied as the activities, the mood remained sunny.

Julia, who comes from France, said:

“I had an incredible experience and met some wonderful people I will never forget. We shared unforgettable moments together, like hiking with breathtaking views, and I’ll always treasure these memories.”

José, from Spain, added:

“My experience was awesome at the Swiss Camp. I made a lot of friends from all around the world and I also enjoyed and learned from the Swiss culture.”

Béatrice, from Germany, told us:

“At camp, we didn’t just explore other cultures during the international food evening — we also discovered so much about our native country Switzerland itself. On 1 August, we played mini-golf (a Swiss invention), enjoyed fondue and shared an unforgettable last evening together, including writing letters to the friends we made in camp. It’s amazing to connect with people your age from around the

world, in places as peaceful as the countryside or as vibrant as Lausanne and Lucerne.”

Mariane, from Brazil, concluded:

“The Sainte-Croix Swiss Camp was the best experience I’ve ever had in Switzerland. The memories of going on hikes, playing sports, chatting with new friends, making campfires and especially cooking at the international food evening will always have a special place in my heart. It’s amazing to meet people from all around the world, get the chance to be friends with them and learn all about their countries. All of this made the Swiss Camp the best ever!”

These camps allowed a large number of young people to make lasting friendships, strengthen their connection with their country of origin and take home some special memories that will last a lifetime. You can find everything organised by the Youth Service here: www.revue.link/youthoffers. Please contact the Youth Service for any additional information.

MARIE BLOCH, HEAD OF THE OSA YOUTH SERVICE



Youth Service of the Organisation of the Swiss Abroad,
Alpenstrasse 26, 3006 Berne, Switzerland
Email: youth@swisscommunity.org
www.swisscommunity.org
Tel. +41 31 356 61 25



Between the lakes and the mountains, a visit to Meggenhorn Castle in Lucerne. Photo provided

Swissinfo under pressure: a question of political will

An opinion piece by Larissa M. Bieler, swissinfo

Should the Swiss Abroad have more political influence? This question has sparked a heated debate on the dialogue platform of the Swiss Broadcasting Corporation (SBC). “Yes, give them more of a say,” declared one respondent. “People who have lived in different countries are much wiser. They have a better understanding of different cultures and of where the world stands at a certain time.”

Others were more critical: “In my opinion, anyone who has lived outside Switzerland for more than a year should not be allowed to vote until they return.”

The Swiss Abroad are well aware that their political rights at home can be polarising. Accusations of freeloading, debates over access to social benefits, and concerns about their growing numbers and potential influence on voting outcomes often stir controversy. Living far from home yet still retaining the right to vote raises thorny questions about belonging, fairness and solidarity. In such emotionally charged discussions, the Swiss Abroad find themselves increasingly in the glare of both media scrutiny and political debate.

Government wants to cut services for Swiss Abroad by half

Hence, it is all the more important to provide consistent and factual reporting, not just about, but for the Swiss Abroad. Reporting that is nuanced, contextualised and open to dialogue. This information mandate is enshrined in law. Founded in 1935 as Swiss Radio International, swissinfo fulfils this role today as a digital platform in ten languages. It receives around 45 million website visits per year, and significantly more during times of crisis.

Why does this matter in democratic terms? The Swiss Abroad often feel the impact of political decisions in ways that differ from their peers at home. Take, for example, the abolition of child pensions. In Switzerland, in cases of hardship supplementary benefits cushion the blow. This support does not exist abroad. And when the Swiss Abroad cast their votes differently from voters at home, it



The 830,000 Swiss expats make up Switzerland's fourth largest “canton”. The Swiss Abroad need strong media such as swissinfo or the “Swiss Review”.

Larissa Margot Bieler who comments on the current debate on austerity measures and service cuts from swissinfo's perspective in this opinion piece, is the director of swissinfo and a member of the SBC executive board

inevitably draws attention, and sometimes controversy, back in Switzerland.

However, this tried-and-tested and legally anchored service for Swiss expats is now under intense political pressure. From 2027, the government plans to entirely cut federal subsidies for the SBC's international service as part of its 2027 relief package. This would effectively cut the budget in half, which would have serious ramifications for the basic media coverage for the Swiss Abroad as well as for Switzerland's presence and sovereignty in the global network.

Reality of life instead of ratings

swissinfo is a democratic tool for Switzerland. Stories about Swiss emigrants may

draw big audiences at home, but they do not meet the information needs of the community itself. “That often has little to do with our reality,” a Swiss woman living abroad recently told me. Those following political events from afar need context, analysis, and a concise, overarching view of Switzerland. swissinfo provides exactly that where it is needed and enables the Swiss Abroad to exercise their political rights in an informed way. It offers daily news briefings, exchange and a community network with its own perspectives, concerns and needs. All this is unique in the media landscape. It's not a luxury, but a necessity.

A canton without media?

A canton without its own media would be unthinkable in a modern democracy. In terms of numbers, the 830,000 Swiss expats make up Switzerland's fourth-largest “canton”. Artificial intelligence may offer technical possibilities, however, a translation button alone does not turn a news broadcast into a meaningful report for people who have lived abroad for decades or were born and bred overseas but still hold a Swiss passport. swissinfo doesn't just translate the language, it also conveys Swiss culture and politics. This bridge-building role is lost when content is technically accessible but lacks context. Commercial, private media are not in a position to take on this task.

The Swiss Abroad are part of Switzerland's democratic diversity. The community needs strong media such as swissinfo and the “Swiss Review” magazine published by the Organisation of the Swiss Abroad (OSA) – not only in times of public outrage, but on a permanent basis. These aspects have not been given sufficient consideration in the 2027 relief package. Parliament will have the opportunity to correct this course in the autumn.

SWI swissinfo.ch



The FYSA summer season was another great success



It was an extremely hot June this year. Perfect for a cooling dip in the Aare. Photo: Pixofluna



Stairs on a steep cliff in the Bernese Oberland.
Photo: Noah Rüegge

We welcomed a total of 356 children and teenagers from 45 different countries to our ten summer holiday camps. The intense heatwave that greeted the start of the summer transitioned into heavy downpours by the end of the season. But there was fun and laughter throughout – rain or shine.

Camps took place across the entire country, with our “Swiss Trips” in particular clocking up the miles. We visited 12 cantons in three language regions – and certainly a few more en route – during the summer.

The “international evening” is one of the highlights of every camp, celebrating not only Switzerland itself but also the participants’ countries of origin. Our young people made posters showing interesting details of the places they live. They also presented snacks from home to their fellow campers, ranging from sweet to salty to spicy. Bon appétit!

As is the case nearly every year, participants did their traditional inflatable boat ride on the River Aare. The paddle from Thun to Berne took a few hours. Naturally, some crews punctuated the adventure with a cooling jump into the river.

The venues and dates for the 2026 summer season will be published in December 2025 at the latest. But there are two exciting events still to come before we switch back into summer mode: the winter holiday camp in Melchsee-Frutt and the JUSKILA youth camp in Lenk.

ISABELLE STEBLER, FYSA



High up on a tightrope in the Bernese Oberland.
Photo: Noah Rüegge



Tentatively negotiating the last of the winter snow in the Alps. Photo: Pixofluna

Stiftung für junge Auslandschweizer
Fondation pour les enfants suisses à l'étranger
Fondazione per i giovani svizzeri all'estero
Foundation for young swiss abroad

Foundation for Young Swiss Abroad (FYSA)
Alpenstrasse 24, 3006 Berne, Switzerland
Email: info@sjas.ch
www.sjas.ch



No risk, no gain

The Swiss Abroad Sara Alouini grew up in Tunisia and decided to come to Switzerland for her vocational training.

Even before her arrival, she contacted educationsuisse to find out about training opportunities and inquire about scholarships. During her apprenticeship, she was also able to complete her vocational baccalaureate — a door opener to university-level studies



at a university of applied sciences. She shares in the current online edition of the “Swiss Review” how the new beginning in Switzerland felt and how varied her apprenticeship as an electronics technician was, from designing circuit diagrams and programming microcontrollers to 3D printing and much more.

Here you will read why the apprenticeship was the perfect decision for Sara and how her journey will continue. www.revue.link/sarae

Educationsuisse offers counseling and support to all young Swiss Abroad on all matters related to education in Switzerland.



educationsuisse,
education in Switzerland,
Alpenstrasse 26,
3006 Berne, Switzerland
Tel. +41 31 356 61 04;
info@educationsuisse.ch;
www.educationsuisse.ch



Rejuvenated, representative – and self-assured

The Federal Palace in Berne belonged to the new Council of the Swiss Abroad for two full days in August. And the Council, which, in a way, is the “Parliament of the Fifth Switzerland”, made its first decisions and debated its role.

At the heart of Switzerland’s historical and political centre: the Council of the Swiss Abroad (CSA) was granted a very exclusive venue at which to begin its new term: the Federal Palace. This emphasises the role that the “Parliament of the Fifth Switzerland” intends to adopt. The CSA views itself as a committee, which records and formulates the wishes and requirements of the Swiss Abroad to bring them to the closer attention of the political decision-makers in Berne.

The CSA met for two days under the banner of “SwissCommunity Days”. On 22 August 2025, former and current Council members and a large number of other interested parties attended workshops in search of answers as to how the CSA can do as good a job as possible and how it can effectively ensure its issues are addressed by national politics. Involving both previous and newly elected members of the Council enabled the necessary knowledge transfer.

During its inaugural meeting on 23 August 2025, the new Council made its first decisions – in the chamber of the National Council, no less. It decided by 83 votes to three in favour of introducing a state-controlled e-ID system. The CSA views this electronic proof of identity as important to make it easier for Swiss people living abroad to contact Swiss authorities. Over the long term, the e-ID would also facilitate e-voting, since the procedure is compatible with e-IDs. The current e-voting process being trialled in certain cantons still relies to a large extent on the postal system: access data is still sent out by post and, depending on the area, can arrive late or even too late. Whether the CSA managed to make its position on e-IDs heard was revealed during the voting weekend on 28 September, long after this edition of the “Review” went to press.

The beginning of the CSA’s latest term also marks the conclusion of an important reform. As part of a pilot scheme, all Swiss Abroad were able to vote for their delegates in 13 constituencies directly – and electronically. This meant their election was broadly supported. Accordingly, the Council as a whole is now more representative than before. For the first time, 47 of the 120 delegates were elected directly, and the effect was obvious. There are plenty of new faces, many of the new delegates are visibly younger,



Meeting in prestigious surroundings: the CSA during its 23 August 2025 meeting in the National Council chamber. Photo: OSA

and the Council is already experiencing a culture shift: as part of its search for its role, the new CSA is also challenging the OSA Executive Board by bringing some thoroughly critical issues to the vote. The renewed Council is certainly not lacking in vitality.

Direct elections nationwide in four years

The renewal process is set to continue for the 2029 elections, promised OSA President Filippo Lombardi. If he gets his way, “well over 90 per cent” of all delegates will be directly elected in four years’ time. The first steps to making this happen have already been taken. According to CSA delegate Noel Frei, who played an absolutely key role in the working group devoted to direct voting, Berne University of Applied Sciences has already secured technical support and the FDFA has organised administrative support for direct elections across the board in 2029. Frei’s verdict on the recent elections: in terms of transparency and participation, they were “a great success”. The information provided by the FDFA was apparently crucial to the outcome: “It provided the key to a successful election.” (MUL)

Some of the photo highlights from the “SwissCommunity Days” can be viewed in the online version of this article. www.revue.ch/en

1/800 000



The Fifth Switzerland is a colourful, varied and multilingual puzzle with well over 800,000 pieces. Today's puzzle piece is ...

... Susanne Mueller, 61, who has been living in New York, USA, since 1991. She is a business consultant and coach who combines her work with sport.

What does it take for you to be able to say, 'This is my home'?

I feel at home wherever my computer is. All my work is online, so I can manage wherever there is an internet connection. I am a bit sad to admit it, but that's the reality these days.

How and when do you show your Swissness in your everyday life?

I always mention my nationality when I introduce myself. Then I can talk about pleasant things like travelling, hiking, skiing or chocolate. But I also tell them that women in Switzerland only got the vote in 1971!

If your friends asked you to make them a typical Swiss meal, what would you cook?

Fondue. I have learned to make it the traditional way and not from a packet. It always tastes great.

Do you ever feel like a foreigner when you visit Switzerland?

Sometimes, yes. Whenever I have to ask whether the bus is going the right way. Just because I speak Swiss German doesn't mean I know everything. People don't always realise.

What language do you dream in?

Swiss German, but sometimes in a mix of languages. Years ago, I once dreamt that I could speak fluent Mandarin. I was travelling back to the US from China at the time. But then the person sitting next to me woke me up. I couldn't speak Mandarin, unfortunately – it was indeed just a dream.

How do you keep informed about what is happening in Switzerland?

I enjoy reading the "Tages-Anzeiger" online. I also check the "20 Minuten" website now and again. I like Milena Moser's column in the "SonntagsBlick". She writes about her life in Switzerland and the US. My mother is also always well informed and likes to tell me about things in Switzerland that I need to know or to listen to.

Being Swiss means ...

... proudly showing off my little Swiss flag at the New York City Marathon. And taking one with me on my ascent of Mount Kilimanjaro. It helped me to find my tent in the dark.

When I think about Switzerland ...

... I think of being free to swim in the beautiful cool, clear waters of Lake Thun, with the snow-capped Alps in the background.

More: www.revue.link/puzzle3

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MARC LETTAU, EDITOR-IN-CHIEF

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Scholarships for vocational training or university studies in Switzerland

The Foundation for the Swiss Abroad has been managing funds since 1961 to support young Swiss Abroad who wish to complete a vocational apprenticeship or university studies in Switzerland and whose families do not have sufficient resources.

For further information and to submit a scholarship application, please contact educationsuisse, education in Switzerland, Alpenstrasse 26, 3006 Berne, Switzerland
Tel. +41 31 356 61 04, info@educationsuisse.ch

Beyond borders: Tips and Insights from an expert

Photo: Getty Images

Did you know that Zürcher Kantonalbank does not require a minimum deposit from Swiss citizens living abroad, regardless of which country they live in? Silvana Leutwiler, Market Manager for Swiss Citizens Living Abroad at ZKB, tells us about the needs of the “Fifth Switzerland” and the challenges they face.

What trends have you observed in your role at ZKB?

Three key trends have emerged when it comes to financial services for Swiss citizens living abroad:

Firstly, personal advice remains an important factor, as many expats value having individual support in their native language. Zürcher Kantonalbank offers support worldwide and provides a feeling of home through our shared values.

Secondly, security plays a key role – the stable Swiss economy, the strong Swiss franc as well as good old Swiss discretion continue to make Swiss banks attractive, which is why many clients keep their accounts even after relocating abroad.

Thirdly, digitalisation has thoroughly transformed the financial sector: mobile banking and digital channels enable secure transactions and communication at any time and from anywhere, reinforcing the connection to home.

What do you recommend in terms of legal and regulatory requirements?

Swiss citizens living abroad should contact their bank in good time to find out whether it is possible to maintain or open a banking relationship in their country of residence. Depending on the country, legal or regulatory requirements may affect doing business with a Swiss bank. Necessary steps include updating banking documents and carrying out administrative formalities such as contract amendments, which may sometimes require a signature to be given within Switzerland.

What tax considerations should be kept in mind?

Swiss citizens living abroad should be aware of various tax-related issues when managing their finances, such as double taxation agreements, reporting obligations or capital gains taxes. Depending on the country, specific regulations concerning pensions, differing tax systems, social security contributions and levies may also apply. In

order to meet tax obligations correctly both in Switzerland and abroad, it is advisable to comprehensively assess one's individual situation and seek advice from a qualified professional.



Silvana Leutwiler,
Market Manager for Swiss Citizens
Living Abroad at Zürcher Kantonalbank

One of Silvana Leutwiler's main responsibilities is to help make sure that Zürcher Kantonalbank fulfils its public service mandate. This means enabling Swiss citizens to maintain their banking relationship in Switzerland, regardless of their wealth or country of residence (sanctioned countries excluded).

Practical Tips:

How Swiss citizens abroad can ensure their banking activities remain safe and secure:

1. Choose a bank you trust and consider its ratings of independent rating agencies.
2. Maintain regular contact with your bank.
3. Use strong passwords.
4. Monitor your accounts on a regular basis.
5. Use secure internet connections.
6. Keep your software updated.
7. Stay alert to phishing attempts.

We remain fully committed to being the bank that's close to you for Swiss citizens living abroad.

Are you emigrating?

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