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The English Presence in Switzerland

La cultura anglosassone vive ed è tranquillamente incontrabile fin nel piu remoto angolo d'Elvezia. Si tratta di una lunga storia d'amore iniziata con W. Turner, Byron e Shelley, e continuata poi con una folta schiera di viaggiatori, innamorati della bellezza della natura. Ma nel ventesimo secolo, la minuta storia quotidiana non può non registrare anche la crescente presenza di donne anglosassoni sposate a svizzeri, da cui una ricca presenza femminile nel campo dell'insegnamento dell'inglese, sempre più richiesto. Accanto alla nascita di organizzazioni professionali di insegnanti (ETAS), si assiste allo sviluppo della Chiesa anglicana e di altre numerose organizzazioni comunitarie e culturali di grande vivacità. (Red.)

In whichever country you may find yourself, any foreigner knows that if anything should go desperately wrong you will always find help and succour in the safety of a piece of home known as an embassy or consulate. And of course Switzerland is no exception, being more than adequately supplied with both. However, the English presence in Switzerland does not stop outside these walls of British sovereignty. If you know where to look, the Anglo Saxon presence can be found almost everywhere, quietly going about its business.

It is a fact generally acknowledged that for some time now, for over two centuries to be exact, the English Lion has been having a love affair with Lady Helvetia.

This love affair can perhaps be said to have started to blossom in 1802 when that great English artist William Turner arrived in the Swiss Alps and was fascinated by everything he saw. He returned home and painted his images of Switzerland in his own inimitable style, bringing the magic of Swiss light to a smog-ridden London. He was one of the first of many famous English people to come to Switzerland to enjoy her beauties. The poets Byron and Shelley both found inspiration here. The author Sir Arthur Conan Doyle loved Switzerland and chose the Reichenbach Falls in the Bernese Oberland as the place dramatic enough to have his turbulent detective 'Sherlock Holmes' murdered. And it might be *fair* to say that following their example the British Aristocracy also discovered the Swiss Alps in the nineteenth century. They began to turn the Alps into their personal playground, climbing in summer and skiing and bobsledding in

winter.

In the twentieth century, Switzerland remained a favourite place for the well-to-do Englishman and woman and it is a tradition that looks as if it will be carried on for some time into the twenty-first century, if Prince Charles and his offspring are anything to go by.

But compared to the nineteenth century, in the twentieth century the Swiss themselves became wealthy enough to travel and one of the countries which seemed to attract them was Britain. And at this point the love affair between England and Switzerland stopped being purely platonic and moved into another sphere entirely. The Swiss male developed a most inexplicable penchant for British womanhood. He returned to Switzerland without souvenirs but with a British wife. The nineteen sixties and seventies began to see the beginning of a very strong female British presence in Switzerland, and then later as Swiss males moved further afield, American wives began to join the growing number of Anglo Saxon spouses.

At the same time, as the Swiss were importing English and American ladies, the growing influence of English and American culture on technology, science and economics caused a demand for knowledge of English as a foreign language on the home market. The Anglo-American women turned their hands to teaching.

From these beginnings there is now a strong English Language professional presence in Switzerland in the form of ETAS.

ETAS (English Teachers Association Switzerland) was started in Zurich and St. Gallen by English and Ameri-

can women teachers in the middle of the nineteen eighties, and it now has branches in every canton in Switzerland. It has spread and become more professional every year, so professional in fact that it is well-known outside Switzerland. Its 1500 members are no longer exclusively mother tongue speakers, nor are they exclusively female, but they are all dedicated to improving the standards of a profession that began as a 'job' that anybody could do as long as they spoke the language. Its branches meet regularly for seminars and workshops, and every year there is a large Annual General Meeting with speakers from Switzerland, Britain and other European Countries.

A large community has other needs apart from professional ones and one of the most pressing is the spiritual need.

The Anglican Church of St. Andrews was founded one hundred and two years ago, at first for those wealthy Englishmen of the late nineteenth century. Now, like ETAS, the Church community has grown as the Anglican presence has grown and there are

twenty-six daughter communities throughout Switzerland. Apart from in Zurich the main churches are to be found in Geneva, Lausanne, Bern and Basle. The churches' members are very active and hold many different events during the year, such as coffee mornings, fairs, and carol services open to the public. On any Sunday the average congregation in Zurich numbers 120 members, a far bigger congregation than one could expect in Britain.

Anglo-Swiss and Anglo-American Societies abound and can be found in many places in Switzerland. They provide cross-cultural social activities for many people with English and American roots or contacts.

Another aspect of social Anglo-American presence can be found in the world of the theatre. There are excellent British and American Drama groups in Switzerland, The Zürich Comedy club springs to mind. Their performances are eagerly awaited by everyone who enjoys the English Language and people are prepared to travel considerable distances to be able to enjoy the English-spoken plays and

musicals.

And on an everyday basis too, there are many English speaking men and women at work in Switzerland involved in the day to day working world of the country. Many Canton schools employ English and American teachers. The Swiss pharmaceutical industries employ English and American veterinary surgeons and scientists. Hospitals employ English nurses and Swiss dentists like to employ American and Canadian dental hygienists. And finally, people like myself (an imported spouse from the Scottish border) find themselves working on Swiss magazines and in the Swiss state education training systems.

It appears that the two hundred year love affair is still going strong and that it has now spread across the pond. In *Dombey and Son*, Charles Dickens has his character Mrs. Skewton exclaim, "What I have ever sighed for, has been to retreat to a Swiss farm, and live entirely surrounded by cows - and china." Dickens knew then the English passion for all things Swiss. It is nice to know that some things do not change.



J. W. M. Turner, Chatel Argent near Villeneuve, Switzerland, 1836.

Addresses

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For cultural Events

Please contact the British Council in Bern.

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