

SWISS

Background

Switzerland as a small country hosts four different language groups: German, French, Italian, Retho-Roman. Each of these groups has its affinities with the respective neighbouring countries, except Retho-Roman, which is spoken in the mountain district of Graubunden. There the people are actually bilingual and also speak German. These different cultures produce a rich variety. The Swiss had to learn to respect one another. They are generally open to mix with different cultures and learn foreign languages, because Switzerland depends on international relationships.

Characteristics

The following characteristics are the common traits, seen from an urban perspective in the German part of Switzerland:

Time

Switzerland is the land of watchmakers! On church towers and many other buildings there are clocks in order that everybody may check the time. Public transport keeps to a precise timetable. Offices and shops open and close on the minute. Time is understood as quantity: it can be spent, saved, wasted, lost or stolen. Time is money. Work is paid by the unit of time spent on it, so work has to be rationalised in order to gain time. The pressure of time is felt everywhere and causes stress. People get nervous and impatient when they have to wait. Drivers behind you would toot their horn if you do not start immediately after the traffic light has turned green. Promptness is an obsession. It is important to be right on time for an appointment, not too early, and not too late. Activities should not only start but also end punctually even when the agenda has not been completed. Schedules are "sacred" and it causes frustration when they cannot be kept up.

Dates are important. All kinds of events are celebrated.

Rules and Principles

On the whole people stick to rules and principles. Never try to bribe a Swiss policeman! Everything is organised and orderly. Prices are fixed, the traffic regulated, property is fenced, litter is put into litter boxes, flowers are planted in lines, etc.

Dogmatic issues can cause divisions. In the past, different wars were waged between Protestants and Catholics for religious reasons. As a counter-balance there is a long-standing democratic tradition. Tolerance is considered more important than the search for truth.

Professional life is separated from the private one. One does not expect to have a personal chat with a sales assistant when being served. Knowledge is divided into fields for which specialists are competent. Great value is attributed to psychology to solve problems in life.

Sermons have to be logically built in a steady development leading to the main point in the conclusion.

Security

The Swiss spend more money on insurance than any other people group. Money is saved in the bank. Although Switzerland has not had a war since the French Revolution it is still keen to have its People's Army. Military service is compulsory for every able-bodied Swiss man. The Swiss soldier has

to keep his gun and military equipment at home to be ready for mobilisation within 24 hours. All newly built houses have to be equipped with a bomb shelter.

By carefully planning the future the Swiss tries to avoid risks and failure. Experts are consulted for major decisions. The political decision-making takes time, and radical changes have no chance to get through. Only recently the last Canton (district) gave women the right to vote. The Swiss has a realistic and even sceptical outlook. This attitude is to avoid unnecessary ventures and results in stability on the one hand but mediocrity on the other.

Work

The Swiss is known to be a conscientious and precise worker (tradition of watchmakers). The high working standard may stem from his Protestant, and especially Calvinistic, background. The Swiss takes pride in doing a quality job and aims at perfection. There is little room for improvisation. For the Swiss there is no such thing as learning a trade by trial and error. One should learn the trade at school or in a training program, no matter how long it takes. Work is seen as something serious. Chatting, singing and laughter do not accompany it. There is a strong drive to complete a task; interference from others is seen as disturbing. The professional career takes high priority. Often family and friendships are sacrificed for it. In a firm or an organisation information is not freely shared in a network of personal relations, but is passed down through the channel of hierarchical structure.

Democracy

The Swiss nation grew out of the uprising of peasants and low aristocracy against the domination of high aristocracy. Switzerland is said to be the oldest democracy besides Greece. Every person has an equal vote in all the important issues on communal, cantonal and federal level. There is strong egalitarian thinking. The Swiss constitution is set up as a confederation in order to preserve equality of power. The executive body consists of seven federal councillors who make decisions in a collegial way. The presidency changes every year so that no one can become too influential. Any citizen may initiate a referendum against a law. Authority is more questioned than respected.

Personal Achievement

Status comes by personal achievement, independent of formal credentials of birth or rank. Even a well-to-do person would not behave like a star or a big man and expose his titles or his wealth. Understatement is considered as smart. The Swiss are generally opposed to pompous ceremonies, graduations, personality cults, etc.

Personal achievement is very important. Swiss society is highly individualistic and performance-oriented. Job satisfaction and a feeling of personal accomplishment are considered important. Since prestige is not established once and for all, many are in a state of constant striving for self-realisation. The Swiss are rather self-critical.

Privacy

Switzerland is crowded and limited in space. There is a strong sense of privacy and territorial behaviour. Homes are fenced and protected from physical and visual intrusion. Doors of properties and offices are generally closed. You ask permission when you enter someone else's room. The house or apartment is considered a refuge. Much effort is put into its furnishing and its upkeep. The Swiss woman is usually house-proud. The Swiss are not accustomed to dropping in on one another. One should phone before contemplating a visit. They keep and respect personal space and tend to be rather reserved. It is not common to address a stranger just in order to have a chat.

Property

There is a strong sense of possessiveness. To touch the car of a Swiss means to touch the owner. Property is something to be owned rather than just used. It gives security and stability in an unstable world. Therefore the Swiss prefers solid quality goods for long use. He cannot approve of a throwaway mentality. He builds solid houses, which pass from one generation to another. The Swiss is more selective in sharing, in borrowing, and in lending things. His worldview is materialistic. Property is well kept. There is also a strong sense of protecting nature and sites of cultural value.

Cleanliness is almost an obsession at home and in public.

Neutrality and Independence

In the past Swiss soldiers served as mercenaries in many foreign armies, sometimes even on opposite sides. This brought much misery to the country. The Protestant reformers opposed this practice. Since the sixteenth century military service in foreign armies is banned. Switzerland adopted a status of neutrality. Independence is highly valued, and therefore there is strong opposition to joining the European Common Market. The Swiss has an island mentality in the midst of Europe. This political outlook is also reflected in their personal outlook - they avoid interfering with other people's business taking rather the role of an observer.

Reserved

The Swiss is rather reserved and resents being asked personal questions by people he has just met. In personal relationships however, he is ready to share honestly even about ultimate things. In discussions and confrontations, frankness and directness is valued.

Selective in Friendships

The Swiss may greet a foreigner but he does not see the need to smile at him. He does not socialise with everybody. He is not used to superficial small talk and easy compliments. In rural areas in particular it takes a long time to be accepted as an insider. A difference is made between an acquaintance and a friend. You may have a close acquaintance for many years and still not consider the person to be a friend. A friend is a person with whom you share time, interests, problems, and even belongings. Because of the strong, often lifelong commitment involved the Swiss is cautious and selective in engaging in a friendship. It takes time to develop.