

I must confess I have my problems with identity, with the word as well as with the phenomenon.

But there is no avoiding the debates about the concept.

A few days after my birth a form was filled out confirming that I had been born in Switzerland of Swiss parents, which is why today I am considered a Swiss.

And yet, when I was still a baby I was also brought to the church to be baptized. They told me that I cried, because of the cold water. I have another version: it was my first attempt at self-determination.

I came by a religious and a national identity without being asked. By the time I was able to ask questions, the answers had already been given.

Today I am no longer a reliably practicing Christian, but I am still a practicing Swiss, and have been for more than seven decades now. Being Swiss brings some advantages, for instance a passport.

After World War II, in a Europe destroyed by war, it was quite comfortable to carry a Swiss passport when confronted with currency regulations and visas. The Swiss passport opened borders.

Until one day I lost my illusions about my Swiss passport. It happened in the United States, where I was writer in residence at the USC in Los Angeles. Freshly arrived, I went to a bank and did what an American would never do: I withdrew a large amount of cash. The lady behind the counter demanded an ID. When I showed her my passport, she insisted on “a real ID.” My passport was in a leather case; in another partition she found a credit card, and she noted the number and expiration date. As it was a fairly large sum of money, she asked for another ID to confirm the first one. Why not try my passport again? The lady rummaged in my case and struck

gold: a driver's license. I became a trustworthy citizen thanks to a credit card and a driver's license, with no help from my passport. I was prepared for the American way of life.

Nevertheless, I have kept my passport, which proves I'm Swiss, but does not say what kind of Swiss I am.

A citizen of a quadrilingual country, I come from the German-speaking part of Switzerland. My cultural sphere therefore also includes Germany, Austria, and all other places where German is spoken and written.

Switzerland's relationship with Germany is free of neither cliché nor prejudice. On the one hand you have the "cow-Swiss," and on the other side of the border there are the "sow-Swabians." This mutual derision is reflected in the title of a book, *Swiss, Germans and their Love-Hate Relationship*, and is treated in another publication as well, *Germans and Germany from the Swiss Point of View*: both of which provide an admirable illustration of both our admiration for our own particular version of Big Brother, and our fear of him.

This ambivalence is in no small measure based on memories of Nazi Germany, and will be shared less and less by coming generations. But the history of Swiss self-image and self-confidence is nevertheless closely connected to the country's relationship with Germany. Our classic nineteenth-century authors saw themselves as German writers without any special Swiss qualities, a self-evident relationship which was, however, interrupted by the First World War. Carl Spitteler (1845-1924), a prominent Swiss writer, published a pamphlet entitled "Our Swiss standpoint," in which he distanced himself from the growing nationalism in Germany, insisted on Swiss neutrality, and aimed at cultural independence for Switzerland. His opinions destroyed Spitteler's chances in the German literary world, although he did receive the Nobel Prize after the war for his epic novel *Olympic Spring*, a book that is hardly read today.

Nonetheless, I note an initial conclusion in our reflections on identity: my national identity and my cultural identity do not coincide.

What looks like a drawback may be regarded as an advantage. Etienne Barilier, a contemporary essayist from the French-speaking part of Switzerland, writes: “Artists and writers, wherever they are from, dream and hope that culture will take precedence over national boundaries, not that it will destroy them. In this respect artists and writers born in Switzerland are not in such a bad position, since they live in a country that cannot be a culture and in a culture that cannot be their nation. They are nobody’s children: It is not a virtue, it is not a fault, it is a perspective on the world.”

While there may well be no identification without linguistic reference, such an affiliation does create some complications.

The German that we Swiss speak is not identical with the standard German spoken in Germany. Indeed, some Swiss authors regard standard German as a foreign or half-foreign language, and the dialect as the original, the authentic Swiss German. I don’t agree with this conception. In my opinion we are bilingual, since standard German is in my part of the country a written language as well as a spoken one. The use of one language or the other depends on the speaker’s (or writer’s) particular circumstances.

For a long time I was convinced that to speak in one language and to write in another is a specifically, uniquely Swiss situation. But one day I was obliged to think again.

At a meeting in Cairo with Egyptian writers and intellectuals I was asked to summarize Swiss linguistic circumstances. I underlined our ostensibly unique situation, in which our spoken tongue is not the same as our written language.

After the lecture a young author approached me: “We Egyptians,” he said, “have the same problem.” At first I was indignant. When we Swiss have something we prefer to keep it for ourselves; we don’t like to share, not even our problems.

The young writer explained his writing habits: “We have a sacred Arabic, the Arabic of the Koran. In this Arabic we do not write stories or novels; for literature and for the print media we use a standard Arabic, so that we understand each other by reading. In addition to this we speak a dialect, the language of our daily lives, and this language changes from region to region, from country to country, to the extent that we don’t understand each other.” Taking this situation into account as a writer, he said, he uses standard Arabic for the narrative part of a story and dialect for the dialogue passages, and thus achieves authenticity.

An unfamiliar procedure, I thought at the time – but I would have occasion to correct myself. One of our classic nineteenth-century authors, Jeremias Gotthelf (1797-1854), a pastor, used the Bernese vernacular for the peasant heroes of his novels. But as his publisher in Berlin didn’t understand the dialect passages, the Swiss author had to replace them with High German.

After this encounter I realized that what had seemed to be unique to Swiss identity proved to be a variation on a general theme, an experience I was to repeat in many other regards, sometimes with the unexpected result that our suffering is less painful than we proudly believe.

The non-coincidence of national and cultural identity can be much more (or much less) dramatic if we look at the now globalized world. It can be helpful to take account of others in order to understand oneself.

The Kenyan Ngugi wa Thiong’o (born in 1938) writes plays for an illiterate audience in Kikuyu, an African dialect, novels in Swahili, which is understood over a wider African area,

and, in order to explain his country, a former colony, to an international public, he prefers to write his essays and pamphlets in English, the language of the former colonial masters.

To relate one's own "uniqueness" to that of another, and thus to put our reality into a larger context, does not mean that we lose or solve the problems, but rather that we cast them in a new light.

The tension between dialect and standard German remains, and there is even a word for its pitfalls: a "Helvetism" is an example of Swiss High German vocabulary that does not have an equivalent in standard High German, or which has a different meaning in the standard language.

How to cope with this situation as a writer? When a narrative work's social milieu or era is defined, the use of such Helvetisms is unavoidable if one is to preserve and respect the given period's authenticity. But the same is not necessary for an essay or an academic paper. The decision to use this or that particular language is not taken with respect to what is typically Swiss or more Swiss – the criteria may be purely formal and esthetic.

Such a problem of authenticity is familiar to you from your literary surroundings. How two languages attempt to merge can be seen from the way immigrants from Mexico, known as Chicanos, write: they stick to Spanish while at the same time making allowance for the needs of an American readership. For instance, in his long poem "Hechizospells" Ricardo Sanchez (born in 1941) mixes American slang and Barrio Spanish together with neologisms to produce verses such as: "Pero anda lucas/more messed up/que na changada/y soy debil, yes/ I am weak/ I know that." Thus Mexicanisms may be considered the Latin brothers of our Helvetisms.

I chose a linguistic example of a specific identity. But the language situation in my country could offer quite other specifications. As a consequence of Swiss immigration policy, our culture has undergone enormous changes. Nowadays, many more people in Switzerland

speak Serbo-Croatian, Spanish, Portuguese, Turkish, Albanian and English than Romansh, our fourth national language.

When Switzerland was the guest at the Frankfurt Book Fair in 1998 the speakers included young representatives of its four national literatures, as well as Ibrahim al-Koni, who spoke in Arabic. This author represented works written in Switzerland by speakers of foreign languages, such as those collected in the reader *Kisses and Hasty Roses*, foreign-language literatures with translations from English, Spanish, Russian, Albanian, Turkish, Arabic and Tibetan.

We call the offspring of foreigners resident in Switzerland “Secondos,” representatives of the second generation, those mostly born in Switzerland or who have at least grown up and been educated here. And yet we continue to treat them like outsiders. The Swiss once voted on whether to make it easier for them to get Swiss citizenship. The referendum item was rejected. It was a shameful vote against Secondos, who very often have documents identifying them as citizens of a nation they don’t know, and whose language they very often do not speak.

Can it be that my Swiss identity includes non-identity – or is our identity valid only from case to case, and not in accordance with reality? Besides the national identity there is a list of specific identities, corresponding to the various minorities.

As a result of our changing society we have new religious groups, such as Muslims. And because of them we are confronted with new problems: is there a need for a special Muslim cemetery, for instance? And what about the mosques? Suddenly we are in the middle of a folly: permission is granted to build a mosque, but not a minaret – a strange dispute that has the status of a credo. In the traditionally Protestant city of Zurich it was once possible for Catholics to be permitted to build a church with a clock tower, but no clock, an agreement that ended with a

typical Swiss compromise: the nearest Protestant church agreed to ring the bells to signal a mass in the Catholic church, guaranteeing that weddings there are not celebrated in silence.

When Jewish writers were collected in an anthology, the title chosen was *Double Peculiarity*. For a Swiss Jew, identity will inevitably be based on a certain privileged memory. Not that doubt is thus cast upon nationhood, but the Swiss Jewish community has its dates. The Jews received full Swiss nationality only in the last third of the nineteenth century, not least under pressure exerted by the French. Moreover, this memory also features some traumatic episodes connected to the Holocaust, because the Swiss policy during the Second World War was to send many Jewish refugees back to Nazi Germany.

What do these texts have in common, apart from the fact that their authors are of Jewish descent and hold a Swiss passport? What makes their texts Jewish Swiss? The editor offers the following answer: all of these authors are individualists, whether they come from a Swiss village, from France, or from Eastern Europe. They live in a multicultural society of minorities, and they put up resistance to a cultural entity demanding a common declaration of intent. What unites these authors may be a common intention to choose as their theme the Jewish life in Switzerland, with all of its attendant dignities and banalities. The editor of the anthology relies on the notion of a minority literature as formulated by the French philosophers Deleuze and Guattari, one which must find its own point of underdevelopment within a majority culture. In the Swiss case, such a process of deterritorialization would mean the dissolution of a generally binding society.

An identity with its own memory. Is there any identity without history? It's very instructive to realize what kinds of identities Swiss history offers, and has offered.

Carl Hilty (1833-1909), the editor of "The Political Yearbook," was a specialist in international law who represented Switzerland at international congresses. Prior to the First

World War. He wrote: “In my opinion the Swiss confederation is a form of government planned by God himself and well equipped by him for a special mission, an extraordinary people of God.”

Switzerland is not the only nation to refer thus to God. And with your permission, America is not God’s only country. But with all the candidates for national beatitude, God has His work cut out for Him treating all earthly beings in the same democratic fashion, considering that Brazilians claim God as one of their own (*brasileiro*) while Mexicans do the same (“*Deus es mejicano*”).

I once wondered what it would be like if God were Swiss. And yet, if he were, God would not yet have created the world; no, as a Swiss He would have temporized, waiting for the right moment, a moment without risk. Now, the world was obviously not created at the best moment. Scarcely had Adam and Eve appeared than they were chased out of paradise. Scarcely had they founded a family, one of their children killed the other. None of this would have happened if God had been Swiss, for he would have delayed things a little.

The idea of a “chosen people” acquired fresh topicality with the advent of the Second World War. In the middle of Europe and the dangers of war, Switzerland was spared. Was any other explanation possible than that Switzerland had enjoyed a miracle, evidence of the direct intervention of God Himself? But He must have loved Sweden and Portugal too, because they were also spared. Perhaps we are nearer to heaven thanks to our mountains.

The justification of our political existence brought into being the expression “special case” (*Sonderfall*), not a particularly happy or useful term but enduringly popular, like all such vague formulas. If “special case” means that this country has unmistakable qualities and particularities, there can be no doubt about such an expression, but in this sense every nation is

ultimately a special case. I could imagine a seminar in which students debate about the USA as a very special case.

But if special case means, as it has been understood, that on the one hand there is Switzerland and on the other hand there is world history, then the expression is questionable, because it has nothing to do with modern Switzerland, which is economically and financially involved with the entire world. Following the recent international bank crises it was quite interesting to note how long Switzerland hesitated before accepting the consequences for itself, finally taking into account step by step the fact that it no longer had a special role to play but instead had to adopt international measures: or shall we say, accept its international destiny.

All the more amazing is it that an author has quite recently taken the expression out of the mothballs for use as the title of a book, *Die Schweiz als Sonderfall* (Switzerland as a Special Case). The three pillars of his case are neutrality, federalism, and multilingualism. No doubt key words, but the author deals with them without entering into current problems, astonishing since he is a diplomat and represents Switzerland at the European Council in Strasbourg.

The wisdom of this defense, and the justification of Switzerland as a special case, culminates in the confession of Voltaire's hero Candide: "A country like Switzerland cannot influence world affairs. This is neither its task, nor has the country the capacity for it. Switzerland will render a good service to the rest of the world by keeping its own house in order. Thus Switzerland offers an example of how a state based on the liberty of its citizens can function. Once more, Candide's insight is valid: to cultivate its own little garden."

Let's point out his short-sightedness by looking at his analysis of federalism. To be sure, federalism was essential for the formation of a multicultural Switzerland. But what once were inevitable premises could turn into obstacles. Switzerland, a small country, has twenty-five

different school systems, all of which must currently be harmonized as a result of internal migration. Economic development no longer corresponds with the traditional borders of the cantons. In the interest of meeting modern academic standards, meanwhile, an arrangement among the universities is required, and the same is urgently required for the various cantonal hospitals. Generally speaking, and with a view to the future, we Swiss must revise our traditional federalism to establish a new one within a European community.

Cultivate one's own little garden: a modest aim; and yet, what if this garden lies in the United States, or in a Third-World country, together with our financial fertilizer and economic dung; and what if we have a Tamil doing the weeding, and what if our watering can is made in China? Shall we cultivate our own climate and leave the change in climate to the others, as if our own glaciers were not liable to melt in solidarity with the ice in the Arctic? No word about the challenges of a globalized world and our new responsibilities. Self-moderation can turn out to be an unexpected form of arrogance.

But ideas are stubborn, and a concept like the "special case" has its own history. To understand it properly, we must go back to the eighteenth century.

Salomon Gessner (1730-1788) wrote the first Swiss bestseller, *The Idylls*, a collection of short prose pieces depicting a peaceful pastoral world where the sheep and goats and lambs and kids do not smell, because they all use Rococo deodorant.

To quote Gessner: "Bucolic poetry becomes more convincing when the scenes are transported into a far-away world. Thus we achieve a higher degree of plausibility if scenes do not correspond to the peasants of our time, peasants who are forced to turn the fruits of their bitter toil over to the ruling princes and towns, whom poverty and suppression have made vile and cunning."

Gessner, the aristocrat from Zurich, explained quite frankly why the contemporary peasantry could not serve as a model. Yet in a letter the same author sneered at “how a genuine Swiss citizen thinks,” and continued writing the following: “Nowhere on God’s earth is there a spot like ours; all people are slaves except for the Swiss. And even if his house and his country are a pigsty, he can proudly lean back and look down with contempt on the rest of the world for its lack of freedom.”

Such idylls have been present from the very beginning of our literature, more as a motif than as a reality. Thus we engendered not only our own literature, but our own contradictions as well.

When it did explicitly come into being as a concept, the idea of a special case, already lurking in the minds of the Enlightenment without yet having been thus named, would bring with it a strange new vocabulary. Let me quote the following:

“If the white man remains true to his instincts he reacts instinctively against all that will be said to him or recommended. What he has already devoured he has to bring up. His blood refuses all that has grown on foreign ground... Does Switzerland fulfill a useful function within the European system, with its earthbound and backward attitude? I say yes to this question. If it is right that Switzerland is the most conservative, backward, self-righteous, bristly and stubborn of all European nations, the European human being is assured that he is at home in his center, for being indigenous, carefree, self-confident, conservative and backward means nothing other than that we are intimately connected to history... This would not be a bad role for Switzerland, to be earthbound and a center of gravitation.”

What sounds to our ears like a piece of comedy was actually written with conviction in the thirties of the last century by none other than C.G. Jung, the founder of an independent school of analytical psychology; his academic work guaranteed him international renown.

A chosen people and a special case are tempting premises for an identity, but Switzerland has given rise to some entirely different interpretations, and continues to do so. Since the end of the Second World War the country has been undergoing a process of demystification, point by point:

By confronting Switzerland's humanitarian history with the Holocaust and its inhumane refugee policy during the Second World War – see the “Jewish” stamp in the passports of Jewish refugees as well as the slogan “The boat is full.” By confronting Switzerland's neutrality with its arrangements with Nazi Germany – a democratic Switzerland whose bourgeoisie was not immune to fascist ideology.

A prominent victim of this process of demystification is the Swiss Army, once our holiest cow: in 1986 a third of Swiss voted in favor of a Switzerland without an army, and there is currently a discussion underway of the Swiss Army's contemporary function.

What started as a revision of the most recent Swiss history broadened to become a revision of Swiss history in general. It is indicative that personalities no longer determine periods, but that historians now speak of “Switzerland and the Swiss,” the collective that shapes and leaves its mark on history. Young historians have stripped history of its heroes and democratized it, they have shown that peaceful Switzerland has a bloody history of social injustices.

Demystification had become a matter of such urgency in the 1960s that it became the fashionable thing to do. Alongside serious criticism there is also what I have called the “negative

yodeling” of those who prefer to pass judgment rather than to analyse the situation. Instead of dismantling the “special case of Switzerland” and exposing it as a false myth, it was carried to the opposite extreme: the cliché of an undamaged, intact Switzerland grew into a defense neurosis, one that manifested itself in opposition to anything new or critical. If we aren’t the best of people then we want at least to be the worst. In Switzerland it is still a subversive act to claim that we are about average on the international scale, with regard to either our good or our bad qualities.

Demystification was necessary. A part of Switzerland’s defense against Nazi Germany had been the so called Geistige Landesverteidigung (intellectual national defense). The Cold War that followed so hard on the heels of the Second World War seemed to justify a newly defensive attitude.

The Cold War and neutrality produced an ideological mixture that resulted in turn in an intellectual narrowness, as charged by Karl Barth. This Swiss clergyman, a leading theologian of our times, who had suffered severe censorship and suppression because of his anti-Nazi writing and preaching during the war, warned Switzerland after 1945 not to become “the village idiot of Europe.”

Demystification was inevitable. Writers participated to a decisive degree, in accordance with the traditional role of the writer and his political engagement – let’s take for instance Max Frisch.

Frisch is not only the author of prose works such as “The Sketchbooks,” novels like I’m Not Stiller and Montauk, or plays such as “Andorra.” His essays, speeches, statements, articles and interviews pertaining in any way at all to Swiss affairs are collected in Switzerland as Homeland? – with a question mark. The compilation is an intensive and unremitting accounting

by an engaged author, and comprises all of his ambivalent feelings. There is talk about Switzerland's irrelevance, yet there is also reproach for young authors, who are not more responsible in their use of Swiss themes. There is his remark "For my part, I'm through with Switzerland," which is however followed by the famous epigram "We called for manpower and human beings arrive." Faith in renewal, "Attention Switzerland" – and in the end resignation: "The Enlightenment has failed," he declares, and affirms the "right to be a writer...that is rooted in contemporaneity."

When Frisch was awarded the Grosser Schillerpreis, a high distinction, he chose to speak about Heimat (homeland) in his acceptance speech. He used the opportunity to attack a prominent professor of literature, the author of the book *The Small State and Its Discontents*, who had in his turn attacked Frisch's criticism of Switzerland and written the following in his book: "[W]hen one experiences narrow conditions, one has to be cautious, because one effect can be that you react out of resentment; but resentment obstructs critical judgment and can result in confirmation instead of negation, binding you to what you wanted to reject."

As a contrast we could quote C.F. Ramuz, a classic writer of the Romandie, French-speaking Switzerland: "Besoin de grandeur" (Need for greatness) was the title of an essay written in 1937, when fascism and communism were spreading across Europe:

"I express a need without seeing where it leads, or what it consists of, or by what means one may achieve it. We are a small community, or rather several small communities, linked by a common fate; and we shall have to perish together or return to life together. Shall we succumb to our smallness, for we are very small? We are very small in a material sense, very small in our territory and our history; where can we find the greatness which alone can rescue us?" One might

add: “It is not the smallness that leads to our passivity, it is our passivity that brings about our smallness.”

In his speech, Frisch focuses also on Heimat in the 1970s:

How much of a Heimat the state is will always depend on the extent to which we can identify with the state institutions and, what is more, with their present administration. In many cases we succeed. And then again not. A democrat has difficulty identifying with Swiss military justice, where the army sits as judge in its own case. Should I nevertheless dare to combine my naïve desire for Heimat with my citizenship, that is, to declare that I am Swiss – not just the bearer of a Swiss passport, born on Swiss territory, and so forth, but Swiss by confession. In that case disgrace is also part of my Heimat – for example, the Swiss refugee policy in the Second World War, and other things in our time that are happening, or not happening. Heimat is not defined by comfort. He who says Heimat takes more upon himself. If I read, for example, that when in Chile the military putsch took place, our embassy in Santiago had no beds for adherents of a legitimate government who were looking not for beds but for protection against barbaric lawlessness, torture and execution (with assault rifles of Swiss origin), then I see myself as Swiss through and through, bound to this, my Heimat – once again – in anger and shame.”

Shall we choose this attitude as a model for Swiss identity? Or shall we take it rather as one more proposal in a long list including authors like Friedrich Dürrenmatt, the playwright of “The Visit” and “The Physicists.” In his speech for Vaclav Havel, the Czech playwright, dissident and president of Czechoslovakia, Dürrenmatt said:

“Man makes everything into a paradox; meaning turns into absurdity, justice into injustice, freedom into bondage, because man himself is a paradox, an irrational rationality. Thus Switzerland can be juxtaposed with your tragic grotesques as another kind of grotesque: a prison,

albeit very different from the kinds of prisons into which you were thrown, dear Havel; a prison in which the Swiss have taken refuge. Because there was instability outside the prison and because only in prison can they be safe from attack, the Swiss feel free, freer than other people, free as prisoners in the prison of their neutrality. There is only one problem for this prison, namely that of proving that it is not a prison but a bulwark of freedom, since, seen from the outside, a prison is a prison and its inmates are prisoners, and thus not free. To the outside world, only the guards are free, for if they were not free, they would be prisoners. In order to solve this contradiction, the prisoners have introduced universal guard duty: by being his own guard, every prisoner proves his freedom. The Swiss, therefore, have the dialectical advantage of being at one and the same time free, prisoners, and guards.

This was one of the most provocative speeches ever made about Switzerland, and the scandal was inevitable, albeit not the only time Dürrenmatt caused a passionate discussion. He asked once what is worth defending in this country, and did not offer an answer. I myself felt obliged to attempt one: I would defend two things. First, the schoolhouse where I learned to read and write, and where I got my first ideas of history and geography. And I am all the more convinced in this choice when I realize that, today, hundreds of millions of children have no chance of attending school at all.

Besides the schoolhouse I would defend what we call a kiosk, near to my home, a newsstand, where you can find every imaginable example of the print medium, in all languages and of all qualities, dailies, weeklies and monthlies, covering everything from politics to porno, from meditation to gardening and cuisine. In a Swiss newsstand, you could during the Cold War even buy the Soviet Russian newspaper The Pravda.

Settling accounts with Switzerland is not always, or not principally, addressed only to the establishment. It may also take place among the intellectuals themselves.

Peter Bichsel, a master of short prose, wrote a famous pamphlet entitled “Switzerland of the Swiss,” in which he outlines how the Swiss love to be viewed. He wrote the following: “We have grown accustomed to seeing Switzerland through the eyes of the tourists. The opinions of an average Swiss about Switzerland are exactly the same as those of an average Englishman. Our picture of our own country is a foreign product. We live in legends that others have spun about us.” These remarks by Peter Bichsel require amplification. If it is correct that outsiders have spun the legend, it is also correct that we sold them the Heidi yarn with which to spin it.

Twenty years after the publication of that brochure, in 1992, the same author had the following to say: “When I wrote ‘Switzerland of the Swiss’ I said I could not imagine that after twenty years Switzerland would still be the same. And now I am living in a country that still hasn’t changed. This frightens me. Because what cannot change will die. And what frightens me even more is that I, too, deep down, am a little afraid of having to relinquish a small portion of this ever-unchanging Switzerland.”

Bichsel later picked up this idea of an unchanging Switzerland in his essay “Switzerland, a state without history.” A statement that I would like to debate. An unchanging Switzerland alludes to the fact that the country has a slow development, that we were very late giving political rights to women, or that we are one of the last members of the United Nations. Taking this into account, I usually prefer to claim that we don’t have a democracy, but rather a history of democracy.

And with this history comes a history of identity. When I was a student I felt obliged to correct the general perception: Switzerland is more than cows and chocolate; today I would say:

Switzerland is more than a banking house. It is amusing and astonishing to note what the world associates with Switzerland.

Swissness has become a novelty. The new European situation forces one to reflect about “what makes Switzerland Switzerland.” A question that elicits a dangerous answer: rely on history and its traditional values, make an ideology of them, and use them to construct a reactionary conservatism.

Considering all the identities we have mentioned, it is evident that nobody has just one identity, but rather that we all have identities in accordance with our linguistic, ethnic, social, religious or sexual conditions. Astonishing that a contemporary official document, a statement published by the integration office of the City of Zürich, proposes this very formulation:

“Every human being has various identities and various homelands. This must be respected. Switzerland must be willing to be a homeland for all who live here among us. This constitutes an opportunity for us, and it is also our future. We need lots of Swiss, whatever else they may also be. Furthermore, homeland is something you can take with you everywhere, as well as something you can find wherever you go. Without giving up or being forced to relinquish any homelands you may already have. Quite the contrary: in principle there are as many combinations as you like, even if they seem to be contradictory. It is a feature of human culture that we can take on a range of different identities, and feel at home in a range of different places.”

“Heimat” (homeland) is here used as a plural. In the standard German dictionary, the so-called Duden, you will find the following warning under the keyword Heimat: “Plural is not usual.” But what once was unusual has become usual, regarding not only Heimat, but also identity. In this context a recent art exhibition in Zurich is revealing: entitled “Shifting

Identities,” it dealt with the movement and dissolution of identities and the transvaluation of values as a result of the shifts brought about by globalization.

Such formulations reflect the contemporary philosophy that has replaced essence with existence. What has long been regarded a fixed and definite reality, an essence, is now being questioned, along with the historical process of essence. That is why the essence of nationhood cannot be eternally valid. My identification with Switzerland aims at a country of tomorrow, at a Switzerland that is a member of the European community.

Besides the Existentialists, one philosopher who has contributed to this shift in thinking is Jacques Derrida. With his deconstruction he has shown that words and ideas never have an absolute meaning. And this is true of a concept like identity, too. To put identity in plural makes a publication like *Judeities: Questions for Jacques Derrida* possible, in which Jewishness is put into the plural.

We have to be cautious about total identification. While total identification may be the prerequisite for a fan club, which is more or less harmless, total identification also provides a basis for orthodox and fundamentalist believers, even in the name of a lost cause. In the worst case, total identification supplies the justification for war – total identification wearing a uniform.

Identity, viewed not as a safety belt but rather as an orientation aid and a reference. If identification is not totally identical there remains a residue, a surplus, and this surplus is the ground for the not-yet-realized, the marshalling place for youth and the future, and to that extent an opportunity for freedom.

I have always lived my identity as a field of tension. “Myself” has been a crossing point or intersection of identities. My solution has been neither to cancel nor to neutralize this tension, but instead to fructify it.