

## Homeschooling in Switzerland

Sarah Bachmann

Suppose we are studying Roman times and would like to see evidence of that culture's impact on our world. In the middle of nearby Zurich, we climb a hill, the Lindenhof, overlooking the Limmat River, to see the site of the Roman fort Turicum that became the biggest city in Switzerland.

Suppose we are studying medieval life and would like to look at street layouts, churches built in that era, castles, guilds, and rural artifacts. Again, in minutes by train, tram, and foot, they can be in front of us. The tiny, steep, twisting cobblestone Gassen (alleys) of Old Town Zurich are still there. The 10th to 15th century churches and monasteries, St. Peter's, the Fraumünster, the Grossmünster, still soar heavenward. Fully outfitted castles with moats, drawbridges, parapets, dungeons, hares hanging in the smoky kitchens, grand knights' halls, hand-hewn wells, immensely thick walls overlooking ring towns below, treasure chests, weaponry, and even a dragon are all there for our edification.

Every April the guilds are reincarnated in Zurich's Sechseläuten festival, in which a Snowman, called the Böögg, is paraded through the city and then burned on a huge stick pile to signal the end of winter. Accompanying his parade are dozens of historically themed wagons and coaches, hundreds of horses, thousands of period costumes, and hundreds of thousands of flowers.

Perhaps our subject is the development of the church. We can see where Zurich's patron saints, Felix and Regula, the brother and sister who came with the Roman legions and were martyred for their Christian faith, have been immortalized in church sites and street and ship names. We can see Ulrich Zwingli's church and his influence in the whole canton, which adopted his reformation. The neighboring Catholic cantons did not, however, although he tried to forcibly impose reformation with Zurich's troops.

Not only history, but the arts, ideas, and philosophies, a large range of architectural styles, a superb political system, a wonderfully efficient transportation system, an independent-minded culture, technology, some unique agricultural methods and products, and—impossible to forget—factories and shops making the world's best watches and chocolates, are all close by for educational immediacy. We look at some to commend and emulate: direct democracy in a federal system, preserving wooly pigs and other rare agricultural species, trains always on time, and delectable chocolates in vast array. Some other parts are notable to avoid: the “don't-rock-the-boat” attitude of the citizenry that is seeing its historical neutrality seriously eroded; off-beat movements such as Dada; political capitulation to EU pressure resulting in a wholesale loss of the agricultural base; too many refugees welcomed, with a directly linked increase in crime, filth, and cultural shift; and chocolates too cheap and omnipresent to resist their temptation.

So we learn where we live. Ours is a mixed family in the sense that one spouse is native to Switzerland, the other to the U.S. Our children learn to appreciate both cultures and can critique their strengths and weaknesses. The dual background is advantageous in that bilingual skills are automatic. The disadvantage is that the children are not able to fully identify with either culture, which results in mixed or uncertain loyalties and sense of self.

Those are typical pros and cons for home educators in Switzerland. Many families are culturally mixed. The wholly Swiss families who educate their own children often have a work or schooling connection to the U.S. or elsewhere where homeschooling is prevalent. The concept of home education is definitely not widespread here, either in Switzerland specifically or in continental Europe in general. Parents and children like the idea, but school officials, politicians, and policy shapers are assiduously working to convey to the general populace that homeschooling is a fringe movement, substandard, or needs major regulation or—their preference—restriction or elimination. Some cantons have recently accomplished that goal. Others, Zurich included, are trying to do likewise as they rewrite their constitution. Our numbers as home educators are small, but more families are coming out of the woodwork as the intensity of opposition increases. The Swiss are a very private people, but we are starting to see some open resistance to this push to restrict parental rights and responsibility.

For a relatively long time—the 150 or so years that public education and state schools have existed—the Swiss have had reason to be proud of their education system (though many of the commendable results were achieved by very high quality private schools). Quite recently, however, the education establishment has adopted—lock, stock, and barrel—the failed policies of American, British, and Australian education models, in a purported effort to keep abreast of the times. Parents, being more attuned to real life, are starting to see the pitiful results of these social manipulation-based policies, and are looking for alternatives. Most still do not realize that home education is an option. Some of us are working to keep it an option and let them know it exists.

Swiss chocolates keep the spirits up in the arduous effort.

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### **Biographical Information**

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*Sarah Boniek Bachmann is the mother and teacher of five children, ages 5 to 17. She lives with her family near the city of Zurich, where she is also a professional artist, writes for periodicals, rides her Haflingers, gardens, and mentors her children's efforts. She did the editing for the recently published 1,200-page where-the-world-is-heading novel of her eldest child. UPDATE: Areas of Switzerland, like Germany, are facing major efforts to forbid home education. The Bachmanns are battling to retain that right.*