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A tribute to Swiss women, past and present – telling their stories

The sheer scope of *Swiss Maid. The Untold Story of Women's Contributions to Switzerland's Success* (New York: Peter Lang, 2017) is breathtaking. This weighty tome (more than 400 pages) — the culmination of extensive research, data collection, demographical analyses and many personal interviews — is a tribute to all Swiss women, past and present, named and unnamed. The only study of its kind in either German or English, it is a crushing riposte to R. James Breiding's *Swiss Made. The Untold Story behind Switzerland's Success* (London: Profile Books, 2013), which focuses more or less exclusively on the contributions of Swiss men, only mentioning a handful of Swiss women.

Author Margrit Zinggeler, Professor of German at Eastern Michigan University, has made it her gargantuan task to attempt to collect in one volume the contributions of Swiss women towards the economic and social well-being of Switzerland, to have them acknowledged as the “forgotten backbone” (p. 41) of the nation. The result is a myriad of fascinating narratives, information, facts and figures. A few facts are well known (e.g. Swiss women only got the vote in 1971, though Appenzell did not grant cantonal voting to its womenfolk until 1990), but most are not (the renowned ETH in Zurich appointed its first female full professor as recently as 1985, gender equality was not enshrined in the Swiss Constitution until 1996, today more women than men head up Swiss SMEs...).

The eye-catching cover design depicts a caricature of a muscular woman toiling uphill, pushing a red pram-cum-wheelbarrow-cum-bathtub containing male doll figures from the different professions. The container is covered in golden hearts and festooned with the white cross from the Swiss flag, and has clock-faces for wheels. This brilliantly satirical image, like the equally brilliant pun in the title, immediately piques the reader's interest.

The twelve chapters present women in practically every walk of life: from the domestic homestead to politics, from the caring professions to the army, from religion and education to the corporate world — with many more in between. The span attempted, from pre-history to the present, is ambitious. The foreword — a touching but very detailed account of two ordinary Swiss women from the twentieth century, Mathilde Zellweger and her daughter Hulda — sets the personal tone for much of what is to follow. Later on, it transpires that these women are the author's grandmother and mother.

This blending of the personal and the academic is one of the hallmarks of the volume. Though written from the heart and often subjective and indignant in tone (especially when looking at the US), the book also draws on important scholarship in the area of gender studies, historiography and feminist theology as well as literary narratives. Quotations from a variety of text-types placed at the head of each chapter whet the reader's appetite. In addition to numerous accounts and tantalizing facts, each chapter contains several narrative interludes in the first person (italicized to indicate the deliberate change of style and perspective) and which either contain the author's reminiscences from her childhood in Switzerland or recount her meetings with some of the many Swiss women she criss-crossed Switzerland to interview. These range from nuns, pilots and politicians to key figures such as Marthe Gosteli (1917–2017), archivist and activist for Swiss women's rights and founder of the Gosteli foundation. All this ensures that autobiography and biography are added to the heady mix.

The original German quotations are translated into English, and references are supplied as notes at the end of each chapter, many of them giving links to further reading, websites, TV talk-shows, organizations, exhibitions and festivals. A comprehensive list of abbreviations alongside their English translations is supplied at the start of the volume (though it is a pity that the original German [or French, or Italian] could not also have been included), and the questionnaire used with the interviewees is appended. Given the immensity of the content, it is particularly regrettable that the volume has not been provided with an index.

While the extent of detail and description remains impressive, more signposting or subdividing of the rather lengthy chapters would have resulted in greater coherence and navigability as well as emphasizing key findings. In general, some rigorous copy-editing and a pruning of some of the content would surely have resolved certain linguistic and orthographical lapses and enhanced the overall readability.

Despite these misgivings, the volume — which speaks to an enviably wide readership, both academic and non-academic — is undoubtedly a highly significant addition to the (regrettably still predominantly patriarchal) history and sociology of Switzerland. It also stands as a tribute to the many Swiss women whose stories it tells — most of them for the first time.

Bibliography

Joy Charnley, Malcolm Pender (eds): *Intellectual Emancipation: Swiss Women and Education* (Oxford, New York: Peter Lang 2001)

Elisabeth Joris, Heidi Witzig (eds): *Frauengeschichte(n): Dokumente aus zwei Jahrhunderten zur Situation der Frauen in der Schweiz* (Zürich: Limmat, 1986, 2001)

Heidi Lotter: *Leben und Wirken der Frauen in der Schweiz, unter Mitarbeit zahlreicher Persönlichkeiten aus Berufs-, Sport-, Militär-, Kunst- und Kunstgewerbekreisen* (Zürich: Heimatliteratur, 1944)

Iris von Roten: *Frauen im Laufgitter: Offene Worte zur Stellung der Frau* (Zürich: eFeF, 1991)

Margrit Zinggeler's website: <https://www.margritzinggeler.com/swissmaid>

Margrit Zinggeler's short video on *Swiss Maid*:
<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=WSqVWK8XQCO>