



57th World Congress of Chess Composition August 23-30, 2014 in Berne

Special customs in Switzerland

Politics

Switzerland was founded as late as 1848. Before that, Switzerland was a confederation of the participating cantons. It started with Uri, Schwyz and Unterwalden around Lake Lucerne, and grew to 26 cantons (actually 23, but 3 of them are divided into half-cantons) till the 19th century. The founding of the federal state was the result of the “Sonderbundskrieg” of 1847, a civil war between catholic and protestant cantons. Switzerland is fortunate not to have been actively involved in any war since then.

Switzerland’s governmental system was drafted after that of the USA, with a few adjustments. We have a two-chamber parliament: the Nationalrat, where all the cantons are represented according to population, and the Ständerat, where all cantons have two seats. The cantons have a lot of power in our system and federalism is big: still today, the cantons get most of our taxes and are responsible for their school system, among many other things. This makes things complicated sometimes.

The main difference to the USA is our president: We have a council of 7 members who form the [Bundesrat](#) (federal council) who together are the executive authority. The combined National- and Ständerat elect them every 4 years, right after the election to those councils. They divide the tasks among themselves, so one of them is in charge of the finances, one other of the foreign affairs, and so on. The presidency changes every year, too, and is additional to the normal tasks.

It is not rare to see members of the Bundesrat walking around Berne or eating in a restaurant among “normal” guests. They usually don’t have any protection details. If you say hello, they will greet back ☺. As far as I know, there have never been any attempts on the life of one of the members of the federal councils.

You will probably have the opportunity to meet our [mayor Alexander Tschäppät](#) at the Erlacherhof, a beautiful sandstone palace in the old town. He is a rather easygoing person; I don’t agree with him in political opinions, though.

Very special in our political system is the extensive rights of the people. At least 6 times per year, we are called to vote about amendments to the constitution or about new laws. Sometimes about ridiculous things like if we want to change to daylight saving time during the summer like everybody else around us¹, some times more serious things like getting rid of

¹ The people said no to that and one summer we had another time zone than everybody else in Western Europe. The government decided to change this the next year, there were too many problems with being a time island.

the army (the people said no) or having at least 6 weeks of vacation every year (believe it or not, the people said no to that, too). These people rights is one of the main reason that Switzerland has a hard time joining the EU, we would have to give up a lot of these rights. Although sometimes less than 50% of the possible voters participate in referendums, the Swiss are not willing to give this up.

Sports

The most important sports (regarding number of spectators) in Switzerland are football (soccer), ice hockey and alpine skiing. Unfortunately, there are no home games of our local Super League Football Club "[Young Boys Bern](#)" (yes, that's their name) planned for the time of the congress (the football arena is only 200 meters away). Ice hockey season starts in the middle of September (this arena is even closer). There might be some friendly games: If somebody is interested to visit the biggest ice hockey arena in Europe, let me know, I will check for friendly games later.

Since [Alinghi](#) won the America's Cup and [Federer](#) 17 Grand Slam titles, Switzerland is a sailing and tennis nation, too.

I actually want to talk about some sports that are special to Switzerland like Schwingen and Hornussen

[Schwingen](#) (the best translation I could find was "Swiss wrestling")

Did you know that we have a king in Switzerland? Every three years there is an "Eidgenössisches Schwingfest", a huge event with up to 50'000 spectators per day and the winner after two days is the "Schwingerkönig" (König=king). The kings are celebrities after that and most of them get enough support to go pro.

The sport is very traditional; prizes are normally not money but animals or furniture. The king traditionally gets a huge bull (that he normally sells back to the farmer to still raise some money).

What is Schwingen all about? It is related to wrestling. The main goal of the sport is putting your opponent on both shoulders while holding on to the opponent's belt with at least one hand. Schwingen is usually an outdoors sports on rinks made of sawdust.

There is only one (weight) class: A "little" guy like [Graber Willy](#) (181 cm, 100 kg) has to fight against huge guys like [Stucki Christian](#) (198 cm, 142 kg) and since both of them are top athletes and have advantages and disadvantages (the "little" guy is very quick and agile), it is not so clear who is going to win. This [video](#) of the last big Schwingfest shows how it's done.

On Schwingfests they have another Sport that is unique to Switzerland: [Steinstossen](#) (rock pushing). They try to "throw" the 83.5 kg [Unspunnenstein](#) (Stein=rock) as far as possible. The best reach almost 4 meters! Most of us couldn't lift a rock like this at all.

[Hornussen](#) is a traditional team sport. This [video](#) explains it so well and even in English that I refer to it.

Language

Not many people know that there are [4 official languages](#) in Switzerland. German (about 2/3 of the inhabitants), French (about 1/4), Italian (about 1/10) and Romansh (less than 1%),

Romansh is “a Romance language spoken locally in the southeastern trilingual canton of Graubünden, is designated by the Federal Constitution as a national language ..., and as official language if the authorities communicate with persons of Romansh language (Article 70), but federal laws and other official acts do not need to be decreed in this language.”²

These 50'000 people who speak Romansh even divide into 5 different idioms and can't decide which one should survive. It is expensive to have all these translations into a language that will probably not survive, and 5 times the translations for schoolbooks in 5 different idioms, too. This is just my opinion and politically totally incorrect ☺.

The [Röstigraben](#) (Rösti = hash browns, Graben=ditch) is the “border” between the German and French speaking part of Switzerland. It's mostly used in the media if a referendum has brought very different results in the German and French speaking part of the country – a quite common phenomenon. The French speaking Swiss have the reputation to be somewhat laid back and to take life a little less seriously than the German speaking Swiss. This sometimes causes very different results at the ballot boxes.

Now back to “Swiss German”: You might be surprised to hear that there is no such thing as Swiss German. Every region has its own distinct dialect, and we can figure out from where somebody comes from after maybe a sentence or two. Thomas and I speak Bernese German, Andreas Nievergelt, Martin Hoffmann and Reto Aschwanden speak Zurich German, Roland Baier speaks Basel German, and so on. Some dialects like the one from the Valais or from the Appenzell are hard to understand even for us, but all other Swiss Germans understand each other without a problem. Germans on the other hand – except maybe some dangerous people from the southern part like Hans Peter Rehm – will not understand us. I have asked some German immigrants how long it took them to fully understand Bernese German; the standard answer usually is 6 months!

On a website like [this](#), they try to teach you some “Swiss German” words, but beware: If you greet me with “grüezi” (Hello in Zurich German) I'd be not very happy, because in Berne we would never use that word. In Bern this would be “grüessech” or – a little less formal – “tschou” (from the Italian “ciao”, but used for hello and good-bye).

Our dialect has a lot of “ch” sounds from deep down in the throat³. “Chuchichäschтли” (= kitchen cupboard) is proven way to test the pronunciation abilities of foreigners. I am sure all our Dutch and Belgium friends will have no problem with that one; everybody else will probably break their tongue ☺. If you are more interested in Swiss dialects, the [advanced part of the link above](#) is quite good, as long as you bear in mind that there is not one but many “Swiss Germans” and many different ways to pronounce the same word.

“Swiss German” is basically an oral language; the official language at school is what we call “High German”. This is the language we learn how to read and write in and all the grammar⁴. The younger generation likes to write SMS or E-mails in our dialect, but they simply write phonetically (and this way they can't make any mistakes). There seem to be rules, but we don't learn them at school.

Although we learn “High German” at a very young age, most Swiss have a heavy accent. This true story is an example for this: A friend of mine, a German woman who married a Bernese guy, told me the story of her parents meeting her fiancé for the first time and he

² Citation from Wikipedia

³ This is unrelated to the national shortcut CH which is derived from Confoederatio Helveticae.

⁴ Of course we made our own rules in High German as well.

spoke his “High German” to them. After a nice evening the parents told their daughter: “We don’t know what you were talking about, “Swiss German” isn’t so hard, we understood every word....”. ☺

Here is the link to what Diccon Bewes has to say about another language in Switzerland: [Swinglish](#).

(Folk) Music

Switzerland’s taste in music is very diverse. Berne offers lots of music halls for different tastes (most of them will be closed for the summer till the end of August, unfortunately). Berne has quite a big scene of music in Bernese dialect like

- “Züri West“ with their most famous song [“I schänke Dir mis Härz”](#) (I give you my heart)
- “Patent Ochsner” with their most famous song [“W.Nuss vo Bümpliz”](#)
- “Stiller Has” with their most famous song [“Znüni näh”](#)

These bands have been around for quite some time and are extremely successful (for Swiss bands with a small market anyway). Their concerts are usually sold out long in advance. Most of those musicians were influenced by Mani Matter ([Aus wo mir id Finger chunnt](#)), a singer / songwriter in the late sixties, early seventies. He died in a car accident in 1972 at a very young age, but his work has become part of our culture and his songs are taught at schools.

Of course I have forgotten many other bands and musicians like Polo Hofer, Philipp Fankhauser, Stephan Eicher, Steff La Cheffe, and so on. These are fan favorites of my generation or younger living in the city.

In rural areas the traditional alpine folk music is still quite popular.

- [Yodeling](#)
- [Schwyzerörgeli](#) (special kind of accordion)
- [Alphorn](#)

I am not much into yodeling and Schwyzerörgeli, but alphorn is a fun instrument. On our excursion we will have the opportunity to listen to an alphorn concert.

Besides the traditional folk music there is a trend to “pop folk music” like [“Oesch’s die Dritten”](#), definitely not my cup of tea.

For lovers of classical music there is the Bernese Symphony Orchestra, but unfortunately their season only starts on August 30.

There is an [organ concert](#) in the Münster (Cathedral) on August 26

For choir lovers: There is Orff’s “Carmina Burana” in “Kultur Casino Bern”, on August 23, 7.30 pm and on August 24, 11.00 am.

That’s all for today. More to come.