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RUTH DREIFUSS
Switzerland's first woman President
Ruth Dreifuss: Charting a new course

Quick - name a country that will greet 2000 with a woman at the helm. Time's up; pens down. And the correct answer is ... Switzerland.

Switzerland, the country that first gave women the right to vote on federal issues in 1971, has been making up for lost time. Fifty-one of the 246 seats in the Swiss Parliament are now held by women, and on January 1, 1999, Ruth Dreifuss – 58 years old, single and Jewish – became the country’s first female President.

Of course, everyone is quick to point out that the job of President in Switzerland is essentially symbolic. Other than chairing meetings of the seven-member Federal Council, the President has no real responsibility for the affairs of the country. Switzerland puts extraordinary emphasis on local government, and the Federal Constitution defines the Swiss people as the supreme political authority.

Still, Dreifuss sees value in symbolism. “Having a woman as President is a step on the way to equality,” she says. She sees her Presidency as a chance to inspire the female citizens of Switzerland and ultimately to further the belief that “nothing should be more normal than the sharing of power and responsibility between men and women.” It is an enormous privilege to be the first woman President of Switzerland, she says, and she is “proud to be the figure at the bow for a year”.

Not just a figurehead. In the meantime, Ruth Dreifuss is not without power. As Chairwoman of the Federal Department of Home Affairs, a post she has held since 1993 and will continue to hold during her term as President, she oversees the Federal Social Insurance Office, the Federal Office for Public Health, the Federal Office for Education and Science, the Federal Office of Cultural Affairs, the Swiss Federal Archives, the Federal Statistics Office and the Federal Office for Equal Employment Opportunities for Men and Women – among others. In that position, she serves as one of seven members of Switzerland’s executive government branch.

Among the programmes which fall under Dreifuss purview are health insurance, made mandatory in 1996, disability insurance (IV) and retirement insurance (AHV), which celebrated its 50th anniversary in 1998 and will undergo its 11th revision this year. In addition, it was Dreifuss who spearheaded the recently renewed push for maternity insurance, a social benefit first mandated in the Swiss constitution in 1945.

Maternity insurance. Although she has no children, Dreifuss counts her involvement in the passage of maternity insurance among her greatest accomplishments. That legislation, approved by both chambers of Parliament in 1998 and foreseen to take effect in January 2000 (if the Swiss people don’t veto it through a referendum), would pay working women 80% of their salaries for 14 weeks following the birth of a child. At present, in a situation Dreifuss calls “absurd and revolting”, women in...
Switzerland are forbidden to return to work for the first eight weeks after a birth, but receive no guarantee of pay during that time.

A great many people - not only mothers, but also fathers and employees - stand to be affected by such a law. The number of women in the labour force is increasing in Switzerland. Women comprised 42.2% of the work force in 1996, and according to the Federal Statistics Office there were 123,000 more Swiss women and 14,000 more foreign women in the job market in 1996 than in 1991.

**Women and work.** Gradually, the needs of working women are beginning to be communicated. In June 1998, Federal Councillor Ruth Dreifuss was a featured speaker at "Stepping Into the 21st Century: A Conference for Women." One of the major topics of discussion at the conference, which drew more than 300 English, German and French speaking women to Berne, was the dilemma faced by women in Switzerland who want to have both children and a career.

"Switzerland has perhaps remained, longer than other European countries, a prisoner of traditional paradigms which confine women above all to the role of mother and wife," Dreifuss claims. The working world does not do enough to enable new mothers to continue their professions, she claims - thereby "squandering precious resources" - and Switzerland's childcare infrastructure is insufficient for the needs of women who work.

Unfortunately, she says, such issues are not a priority of the private or the public sector in periods of economic difficulty. The situation, she goes on to explain, must therefore be changed through a series of small steps. These include measures to improve the position of women through social insurance, to create programmes that promote women in administration and business and to design fiscal policies which are more favourable for families.

**Paving the way.** Ruth Dreifuss has certainly not allowed herself to be hindered by traditional Swiss expectations. In 1981 she was the first woman elected as Secretary to the Swiss Federation of Trade Unions. A little more than a decade later, she became only the second woman and the first female Social Democrat ever to be elected to the Federal Council and is currently that body's sole female member. And as the country's first female President, she will be remembered in history books.

But Dreifuss' list of firsts includes another item, less acknowledged but perhaps more striking. Switzerland, a country in which only 0.26% of whose population are Jewish, has elected its first Jewish President.

**Jewish heritage.** As the daughter of an activist who helped Jewish refugees escape Nazi persecution during World War II, Ruth Dreifuss grew up with an acute awareness of the problems of Jewish people in Switzerland. "I was born in 1940, where the air my entire family breathed was marked by fear, an existential fear; it was a question of life and death," she says. "One never forgets that. I carry that in me."

The flight of Jewish refugees to Switzerland at the time of the Second World War can in some way be likened to the recent influx of refugees from war-torn countries such as the former Yugoslavia. Switzerland has publicly apologised for its World War II policy of stamping J's in the passports of Jews - a practice which led to the extermination of many in concentration camps. In a 1997 interview in the SonntagsZeitung, Dreifuss cautioned that the Swiss government must now "take care in our policies toward foreigners that we don't call up

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**Federal President Ruth Dreifuss**

Ruth Dreifuss was born in St. Gall on January 9, 1940, but grew up in Geneva. After earning a commercial diploma she went on to work as a reporter and editor for Coopération, the weekly journal of the Swiss Union of Cooperatives in Basel.

Later she returned to Geneva and earned a degree in Economics (Mathematics), which led to positions in Accounting at the University of Geneva, as a civil servant with the Federal Ministry of Foreign Affairs in Bern and as Secretary to the Swiss Federation of Trade Unions, in the same city. Dreifuss joined the Social Democratic Party in 1965 and from 1989 to 1992 served as a member of the Municipal Council of Berne.

On March 10, 1993, she was elected to the Swiss Federal Council, and on April 1 of that year she became Chairwoman of the Swiss Federal Department of Home Affairs, a position she holds currently. Dreifuss became Federal President on January 1, 1999 and will serve for one year. She is of Jewish origin and single. Although she speaks German, English, and Spanish and understands Italian, her native language is French.
The newly sworn-in President

The foreign influence. Close to 20% of the Swiss population are foreigners. Not all foreigners in Switzerland are refugees, however. Many Swiss are married to non-natives, and many foreigners are highly skilled and highly educated workers needed to fill openings in fields such as computers, the sciences and dental hygiene. In the years between 1991 and 1996, according to the Federal Statistics Office, 700,000 foreign workers entered Switzerland and 690,000 left. With the foreigners and their families has come an influx of foreign languages.

Dreifuss, herself bi-lingual in French and German, has strong feelings about the importance of Switzerland’s four national languages - German, French, Italian, and Romansh - to the national identity. In an interview published in Berne’s daily newspaper Der Bund last February, Dreifuss described as “regrettable” the decision by Zurich’s local government to make English a required subject for students in the upper classes beginning in October 1999, replacing French as the first foreign language to be taught. Asked how she felt about the fact that English is becoming the world’s lingua franca, she commented: “The richness of Europe is the mutual appreciation of cultural diversity. For me the advance of English in Switzerland is not a sign of broadening horizons, but rather one of subordination.”

A year later, when asked why she fails to see the addition of English to Swiss life as an example of cultural diversity, Dreifuss replies: “The discussion doesn’t concern the teaching of English in general, but the teaching of English as the primary foreign language. In a country which bases its identity on regional and cultural diversity, I think it is fundamental that the language of one of the regions of Switzerland should be the primary foreign language taught in school.”

Part of a community. A working knowledge of English has become a necessity, however, for an increasing number of employees at the thousands of multinational companies which have a presence in Switzerland. The global economy is coming (albeit slowly, as many things do) to the tiny country in the heart of Europe. Switzerland does not currently belong to the European Union, but bilateral negotiations are under way, and one of Dreifuss’ priorities during her year as President will be to persuade the Swiss that they have much in common with the rest of Europe in such areas as culture, trade, and history.

Opening up to the rest of Europe could be difficult for a country with a centuries-old tradition of keeping to itself. “We must come to understand that we are part of a mosaic of minorities that will find alliances there which will make us stronger,” says Dreifuss.

Those are words - from a woman who knows much about being in the minority - which have significance for all foreigners trying to chart a course of their own in Switzerland.

Jeannie Wurz

Ruth Dreifuss unveils monument, gives Grüniger Prize

Two days after her election as President of the Swiss Confederation, Ruth Dreifuss unveiled a sculpture in Geneva offered by a group of World War II internees in Swiss labour camps. The group was represented by Ken Newman, a former internee who had travelled from Australia for the ceremony, and was intended both to thank Switzerland for its hospitality during the war and, at the same time, to remember those who were unable to enter the country.

The sculpture, entitled Wings of Peace by Israeli artist Dina Merhav, represents a spiritual being, symbolising the yearning for the unattainable: a utopian universe without evil, violence, aggression or wars.

In a second ceremony, marking the 50th anniversary of the Declaration of Human Rights, the city of Geneva attributed a Paul Grüniger Prize to Anita Khadka, a 19-year-old Nepalese girl who had been forced into a child prostitution network. After escaping, she set up “Maiti Nepal Child”, an organisation to fight such networks and rehabilitate their victims. The Grüniger prize is named for the late St. Gall police commander who was condemned and dismissed from his post for illegally helping refugees enter Switzerland during World War II. Ruth Dreifuss took up his family’s fight to have him rehabilitated posthumously, and was clearly delighted to welcome Grüniger’s daughter, Ruth Roduner-Grüniger, to the prize-giving ceremony. Dreifuss reminded her audience that Switzerland had been able to offer protection to many during the Nazi era, but failed fully to help and welcome many others. She expressed gratitude to Paul Grüniger, Anita Khadka and all those who had the courage to remind us of our humanitarian duty.

Sally Alderson