

Confederación Helvetica

I came to the Los Alamos Scientific Laboratory (LASL) to help with their Meson Physics Facility (LAMPF), which was just being built. I soon learned that elsewhere physicists were building similar pi-meson-producing accelerators at Vancouver, Canada, and at Villigen, Switzerland. Furthermore, we soon became aware that the Russians were seriously thinking about another “meson factory” outside of Moscow. It was natural that I would be interested in seeing what was going on at these other facilities. For the non-physicists, the activities at these accelerators were funded under the name “medium-energy nuclear physics.”

My visits to TRIUMPF (standing for the Three University Meson Physics Facility) in Vancouver were only short visits. The Russian facility at Troitsk prompted a five-month exchange visit to the USSR, which I have written about in detail in a separate essay. This essay is about my interactions with Switzerland and, to a lesser extent, its facility called SIN (standing for the Swiss Institute for Nuclear Research).

It started back in 1971 when, after a medium-energy conference at Dubna in the USSR, I dropped in on the SIN theory group. At that time they were situated at the University in Zurich, as the building they were supposed to be housed in was still under construction at the SIN site. The outcome of this visit was that I was invited to come spend a year with that group starting in the fall of 1973.

Thus it was that Maggie and I would spend a whole year in Brugg, a small town about seven km south of the SIN laboratory in Villigen. Milan Locher, whom I had met in 1971, had suggested that we stay in their apartment in the SIN-Brugg apartment complex while he and his family spent *their* year away at MIT. What with leaving their cherished Persian rugs hanging on the walls, it looked like the Lochers left things more or less like they were only going away for a week, rather than a whole year. All the comforts of home. We arrived there on September 11.

We quickly fell into a routine of me going up to work at the Lab on weekdays, while Maggie took the train into Zurich, at first for German lessons at the Audio-Visual Speech School. As a result of those classes she (and as a result I) became friends with her teacher, Helga Hilmer. Maggie rode the train into Zurich with a classmate, Berrin Aksan. We became fairly close to Berrin and her husband Nusret, a Turkish nuclear engineer working at the research institute across the river from SIN. Later, as she became more proficient with the language, Maggie went to classes at the University.

Weekends, however, we spent exploring Switzerland, and I'll describe some of our excursions below.

One thing that should be mentioned is that we arrived in Switzerland with a number of Swiss friends already in place. One couple was Ruth and Kurt Zuckschwerdt, whom we met on the terraces at Machu Pichu. There were also several couples we knew from when they were in Los Alamos while doing experiments at LAMPF. So a lot of those excursions involved seeing these friends. Or, newer friends we came to know from their working at SIN. I also want to mention one Swiss couple that we became quite close to, and they *didn't* have a SIN connection. They were Ortrud and Hans Dössegger, about whom I'll fill in details below. Anyway, we had a lot of social interaction with Swiss folks that year, most often in the form of dinner parties or hikes.

One interesting aspect of life in a Swiss apartment complex is the rules for using the washing machines down in the basement. We were allotted the use of the one for our block precisely *one* morning of the week. Since Maggie was off early on the train to Zurich, I would do our washing. The Swiss ladies in our block, however, were joyous in their disapproval of that – running a washing machine is *not* a man’s job. (They also disapproved of my doing our weekly washing down of the common stairwell, also not a man’s job.)

A LAMPF colleague, Mahlon Wilson, a gifted engineer, was also visiting SIN for the year. They were also living in the SIN complex. Mahlon *also* ended up being the one using the washing machine in their apartment block. If I remember this right, he once forgot to close the lid properly and the clothes inside got jammed somehow and the washing machine was frozen! Much consternation among the Swiss ladies. Which was not at all relieved when Mahlon went home, brought back his toolkit, and he began taking the machine apart. He freed the stuck clothes and put it all back together again. Gut, Alles wieder in Ordnung! But the Swiss ladies were not amused when Mahlon made disparaging remarks about Swiss engineering that didn’t provide for fail-safes on their machines.

After a long search Maggie finally found a pair of Raichle hiking boots that fit her. The Swiss like to go on hikes, Wanderungen, on particular trails marked by Wegweiser signs showing where to go and often how long it should take. So, she and I started going on a lot of longish walks in the Brugg vicinity and elsewhere in Switzerland, sometimes by ourselves but often with friends.

In the fall we had two visits from our families. Wes Lincoln, Maggie’s father, came for two weeks in early November. This was the only time he went beyond the borders of the U.S. There was a problem getting him a passport, since the courthouse in Big Rapids, which held his birth certificate, had long ago burned down. We rented a car for the occasion so he would see different parts of the country. In Windisch, on the other side of the tracks from Brugg, he was much amused by the “downtown cows.” A high point of his visit was going up the cog railway to the snowy top of Mt. Pilatus to see views of the Alps.

Another family visit was that of my uncle Howard and his wife Claire Rae over the Christmas holiday. I’ve already written about this in my essay about “My Crazy Uncle,” so I’ll not say any more about that here. In June their 19-year-old daughter, i.e, my cousin Ann, and her friend Carol were bumbling around Europe on a Eurail Youth Pass. They did most of their sleeping on overnight trains (who needs to pay for a hotel?) and ate most of their meals as cheaply as possible. They arrived, starving, in Brugg on a Monday, which in Switzerland is (or was) a terrible time to go out and buy some real meat for them. They survived on the polenta we had in the refrigerator, and by the time we took them up to see Interlaken they were not so starved.

One of the perks about this year abroad was that I was invited numerous times to give seminars at various physics departments away from SIN. One of these was as far north as Trondheim, Norway, but mostly they were short train rides away, usually in Germany. I presume the reason for these invitations was because I had come to be considered an *exotic* foreign physicist who was willing to travel. Anyway, Maggie and I enjoyed the opportunity to be tourists in all the places we visited.

Another of the perks was being able to ski in the Alps. We had, of course, thought to send along our skis and equipment to Brugg in anticipation of that. Our first time out was on January 18 with a colleague in the SIN theory group who took us to Engleberg. It was here that Maggie’s left K-2 started to delaminate, necessitating an epoxy-repair. Not a good repair, as the next time out, in Gstaad, that ski broke entirely. A problem which was solved by buying her a new pair of Swiss-made skis.

For our next ski trip we went by train with her new skis to Pontresina in the Graubünden canton, where the *fourth* official Swiss language is Romanche. After some searching Maggie had found a relatively inexpensive place for us at an old but well-maintained hotel, the Languard. The package came with two meals a day and an eight-day ski pass for all the ski areas in the vicinity of San Moritz.

We had assigned seats for dinner and at the table next to us was a pleasant older Swiss couple, the Dösseggers. They were also on an eight-day vacation, from Basel, where Hans had been a commissioner in the police force before retiring. They were willing to speak to us in German (instead of Swiss dialect). That was unusual. In our experience, most Swiss would prefer to speak with us in English rather than in schoolroom German. The Dösseggers, however, didn't speak English. And we couldn't function at all in the Swiss dialect. All to the good.

The next evening they invited us to join them the next day to ski at Diavolezza. We did. And our friendship blossomed. We continued to ski with them the rest of the week. Among other things, in the evenings that week they taught Maggie and me how to play Jass (a Swiss version of the German card game called Skat). Our spoken German improved considerably. As did our Jass.

We continued to see the Dösseggers frequently after that Pontresina week, either in Basel or Brugg, often for hikes or skiing in either area. And Jass. In May we joined them for a week at their son-in-law's cabin in a little town named Loco (I'm not kidding) in the Italian-speaking Tessin. More hiking. We maintained good contact with them over the years until they passed away, first Hans, and then Ortrud a few years after the last time we saw her in 1988.

I should say we were very pleased with the Languard. We returned for another week of skiing, by ourselves, in March of our long year, 1974. And again, with the Dösseggers in January of 1977.

In due time the ski season came to an end and it was Spring. The Zurich people have a peculiar way of celebrating Spring. It is called Sechseläuten, and in addition to the usual street fairs and parades, they burn an effigy snowman called Böögg, signifying the end of Winter. It struck us as a lot like the burning of Zozobra here in Santa Fe.

One spring fling, mentioned above, was our stay with the Dösseggers in Loco, about 15 km northwest of Locarno. We were rather taken with Tessin. Locarno is a lovely town, and we returned there for a week in July of 1995. As another Tessin thing, with our friend and colleague Edith Borie, we returned in June to hike the Alta Strada route along a ridge beside the Fiume Ticino river. This classic *Wanderung* goes from Airola down to Biasca. However, for reasons I can't recall, we decided to do our three-day walk *upstream* and *uphill* to Airola.

Another notable *Wanderung*, also in June, was one we took with the Grüeblers up and over the Altmann, a mountain in the eastern part of Switzerland. The trail there, in places, had cables mounted for hand-support in the parts with exposure. We got to the top, at 2436 meters, and signed the register. After a sack lunch, we started down the other side, a narrow chimney until we came to a steep cliff that would be impossible without a rope. Willy, of course, had one in his pack. Thus, Maggie and I learned for the first (and last) time how to rappel down to a flatter place. I still regret not having taken a picture of Maggie on the rope, as she was very timid about starting down. We finally re-assembled at the top of a long snowfield, still fairly steep. But we could do that by glissading, i.e., sort of like skiing on one's boots. About halfway down, Maggie fell and she started sliding on her butt toward an ugly pile

of rocks at the end of the snowfield. Fortunately, I was below her, was able to dig myself in, and stopped her descent after thirty-odd feet of slide.

The summer of this year in Switzerland was mostly spent visiting and saying goodbye to the many friends we had developed. And in finishing up projects at the Lab and in getting ready to return to Los Alamos. On August 22 we flew home.

Epilogue

Upon our return Los Alamos, we obviously stayed in contact with our Swiss friends, both those we knew from before the 1973-74 year and from during. We also became better acquainted with those Swiss who were temporarily stationed in Los Alamos while working as experimentalists at LAMPF. Naturally, we wanted to re-kindle those friendships, as well as our intrigue and appreciation of Swiss culture. As a result, we were able to arrange, over several decades, about a dozen shorter-term visits to that country, often as an add-on to trips we made to other European countries.

The last time Maggie was in Switzerland was in the fall of 2006, and that will probably also be the last time for me as well. Farewell, Switzerland, it was a pleasure to get to know you.