
BUNDESHAUS BERN*

Charlotte de Gohan

I jump out of bed at the sound of the alarm, 0615. The weather forecast is for a clear day, expected 27° C. Since spring began this year the weather has never been so hot for so long. Not only for that reason though, the day promises to be a most interesting one.

Not wanting to become stressed at the last minute I arrive at the *Hauptbahnhof* (Zurich's Main Station) with 20 minutes to spare. The train going to Berne, the capital of Switzerland is organised by the Zurich *FDP, Kreis 7 + 8* (Liberal Democratic Party, Suburbs or Districts 7 + 8). At the beginning of the platform a woman wearing a long straight dress is giving two people what appears to be a train ticket. She could be Dr. Regina Sauter, President of the District 7 FDP who is to accompany the group. I approach her to find out. I'd guessed right.

The train pulls into Berne main station 1 hour and 9 minutes later at 0913. The walk to Parliament House that graces Parliament Square takes us approximately ten minutes. From across the street high above the front entrance I have often read the three words in oversized letters: *Curia Confoederationis Helveticae* (Parliament House of the Swiss Confederation). This is the very first time I'll see it from the inside. A long queue of school children is already waiting at the side entrance. We wait behind them. Moments later Dr. Sauter leaves us and walks to the end of the thoroughfare next to us where she speaks to a soldier in uniform. Sooner than you could possibly say Jack Robinson she requests that we follow her down that same passage. Security has been tightened since 11th September 2001. Before that, visitors were able to use the front entrance, but since that fateful day that entrance can only be used by the staff, the security teams, parliamentarians and official visitors. All other visitors must leave everything they bought with them. i.e. no cameras, pocket-knives, handbags etc are allowed. Everything is placed in tall lockers. The last person who puts an object in the locker locks it and takes the key on the tour. The group then has to go through a Metal Detector; the same way passengers do at airports. The security staff is made up of Army Officers who are armed and control incoming visitors and the building. Immediately I experience their clear instructions, reserved friendliness, skilfulness and strict awareness. I'm absolutely certain that anybody with a weapon of any kind would have a huge problem to get past them. Our group, ten in all are ushered along a long wide hallway by a male security guard. My eyes scan the surroundings - the walls, the floor, everything as one would expect. How could it be

* Parliament House Berne

any other way but polished to a shine and well proportioned? The halls and staircase are decorated with ornamental paintings on the ceiling and walls and the floor is covered with artificial and natural stone tiles.

At the end of the hall we reach the top of a spiral staircase that wound around the lift to enter the public gallery. We are directed to one of the rows and once seated I can concentrate on what's happening far below in the *Nationalrat* (National Council). This is one of two councils and consists of 200 members who represent the Swiss citizens. Each Canton constitutes an electoral constituency and elects at least one member, whatever the size of its population. Seats are allotted in proportion to the resident population of each constituency. On average, each member represents 35'000 inhabitants. Each member of the National Council is free to speak to the assembly and does it in his or her mother tongue. All information in Parliament House is written in German and French. The *Saal* (room) is huge, round and not surprisingly classically furnished. It brings back memories of the amphitheatre in *Avenches*. A town in the French part of Switzerland that was the Capital of Helvetia during the time Caesar ruled the Romans. As we'd arrived in the middle of a debate it's difficult to completely understand what they're debating. A week before this trip I had the opportunity to meet Vreni Spoerry Zurich. She's a Senator in Parliament House. At the time she wanted to buy a copy of my novel 'Terminal Baden' but I didn't have one with me. I told her I'd bring it to her in Parliament House. At my request to see her Dr Sauter tells me she will go to the Chamber of the Council of States and find out if she is there today.

She returns with Trix Heberlein a member of the National Council. I find out that Vreni Spoerry is present today, but she is in the middle of presenting a motion. We remain in the public gallery for about twenty minutes. Then we are expected to go on a tour.

A dark haired, friendly-faced lady joins the group at the bottom of the spiral staircase and introduces herself - Ms Egger. She belongs to the team responsible for taking care of visiting groups, or single persons who want to be shown around. Ms Egger accompanies the group to the base of the stairs that lead up to the main hall situated directly above, where we had come in. She explains in true *Bern Deutsch* (Berne Dialect). This room is known as the Hall of the Dome. The other name for Parliament House is The Federal Palace. It was built according to the plans of Hans-Wilhelm Auer, a Swiss architect and was inaugurated in 1902. The Hall of the Dome where many historical symbols are seen separates the chambers where both Houses meet. Vibert's sculpture 'The Three Confederates' shows Werner Stauffacher, Walter Fürst and Arnold von Melchtal swearing the oath of union. Four infantry soldiers guard the base of the statue. They symbolise the speaking groups of the Swiss

population. On the opposite side, a relief depicts the legend of the origin of the Swiss as told in Schiller's 'Wilhelm Tell'. In the niches, Winkelried (1386) and Nicholas of Flüe (1481) symbolise self-sacrifice and conciliation. In the apex of the glass dome is the Swiss Cross surrounded by the coats of arms of 22 *Cantons* (States). They surround a mosaic depicting the federal coat of arms with the motto *Omnibus pro uno, unus pro omnibus*, (All for one, one for all). The coat of arms of the canton of Jura is apart with the date it became a full member of the Confederation (1978). Four stained windows show four regions in Switzerland (Jura, Basle, Bernese Oberland and Eastern Switzerland) and their principal activities. Ms Egger goes on to explain about the actual building. The House was built in the neo-Renaissance style. A rusticated sandstone base characterises the building to the level of the windowsills on the first storey. On the upper storeys the facade is plastered. Doors and windows have round-arch openings. It's a U-shaped; two wing construction, enclosing a court of honour. The front of the building has four storeys; the two side wings have three. The central part houses the offices of the Federal Council and the administration. The chamber of the Council of States is in the east wing, the chamber of the National Council in the west. At the entrance to both wings one sees written. On the east wing is *Salus Publica Suprema Lex Esto Ost* (The public's happiness is the highest law). On the west wing is *In Legibus Salus Civitatis Posita Esto* (The happiness of the Country is established in the law).

The next chamber we are taken to is the *Ständerat* (The Council of States). The Council of States has 46 members who represent the Swiss Cantons. The half Cantons of Obwald, Nidwald, Basel-City, Basel-Country, Appenzell Outer Rhodes and Appenzell Inner Rhodes elect one Senator each. The other Cantons elect two Senators. Zurich, which has over 1 million inhabitants, elects two representatives, as does Uri, which has roughly 36'000 inhabitants.

The public gallery in the Council of States is smaller as is the number of *Ständeräte* (Senators), so it's easier to follow what is being said. Mr Pascal Coucepin, this year's President of the Swiss Confederation is also present. Both the National Council and the Council of States meet as the United Federal Assembly, convened by the speaker of the National Council for the following:

- Carrying out of elections
- Arbitration of conflicts of competence between upper federal authorities
- Voting on pardons

The United Federal Assembly also convenes on special occasions and for statements delivered by the Federal Council. The Federal Council consists of seven

members who are elected by the United Federal Assembly for a four-year term. The President of the Confederation is elected for just one year and is regarded as *Primus inter pares*, (first among equals), for this period. He chairs the meetings of the Federal Council and undertakes special representative duties.

Next on our agenda is a half hour meeting with two *Nationalräte* (National Councillors) Professor Felix Gutzwiller and Trix Heberlein. They are both in the Liberal Democratic Party and represent *Canton* (State) Zurich. Trix Heberlein plans to be voted into the Council of States and become the successor of Vreni Spoerry, who will be leaving. We are seated in the pressroom at a table that covers the perimeter of the large room. This room is seen on television whenever there is a press conference given by a member of Federal Parliament. The talk with these two experienced parliamentarians broadens my view on politics. Both of them are very approachable and answer the questions from the group clearly to everyone's satisfaction. Taking the time to shake each person's hand Professor Gutzwiller thanks each of us for the visit.

It's time for lunch, but I have something important to do before that. I go to the front entrance and explain to the security officer that Vreni Spoerry requested I deliver a book to her. As an exception I can go through the front entrance with my novel. Only I'm directed to go to the reception inside on the left. Naturally I go through the metal detector. Once inside the main hall I give the book to a man in the front reception who assures me that he will deliver it to her.

Restaurant zum Zähringer (Restaurant of Zähringer) is the oldest restaurant in the once poor area of Berne. When I arrive the group is already seated at a long table outside in front of a row of fully-grown Maple trees. At this point I'd like to inform the readers who the Zähringers were. Berne was founded in 1191 by Duke Berchtold V of Zähringen as the western bulwark of his territory and extended in several stages. In 1353 Berne became the eighth member of the Swiss Confederation. After the fire of 1405, the city was rebuilt in sandstone. The mediaeval architecture, which arose at that time is still largely intact. Berne reached the zenith of its power in the 14th to 16th centuries and was the most powerful city-state north of the Alps. 1528: Reformation. 1798: invasion of Napoleonic troops and downfall of Old Berne. 1834: Berne acquired a university charter and in 1848 became the Swiss Federal Capital. The city is also the capital of the *Canton* (State) Berne.

During lunch I get to know my neighbours a little better. We talk about the visit, politics naturally take an important part, general themes such as our occupations. After lunch it's time to go back to Zurich, only without me. I want to stay in the Capital for a while. The citizens to my mind here speak the most melodious Swiss German. I've been coming to Berne for years. It's for example the only city I know

that when it rains one can stay dry by walking under the arcades that cover the streets of the inner city.

In one of those streets called *Kramgasse* (Buying Street) I pass the Clock Tower. This is still one of Berne's most important tourist attractions. It was the first western city gate (1191-1256) and in 1530 a figure play, an astronomical clock and a bell ringer were constructed. The weather is very hot. I need a drink of water. It doesn't take me long to find a Tavern. I have always preferred to sit at a round table and knowing the majority of Restaurants have such; I order a mineral water and take a seat.

My bottle of water is almost finished. Three men walk in. One of them says to me, 'Sorry, but we reserved this table.' I apologise and tell him I'll finish my water and leave. The three sit on the remaining free chairs. In no time a bottle of white wine is ordered. The waitress asks how many glasses she should bring. The first man give me a quick glance, 'Will you join us for a glass?' I must be doing something right, I think. With my positive answer I get to know three men, two from Berne, Professor Hans *Braun* (Brown) and Dr Felix Weber and from Zurich Dr Rudolf Schubiger. The subjects we discuss are extensive. I'm really enjoying myself. A couple of jokes are told over which we laugh heartily. Business cards make the rounds.

I tell them it's time for me to go home. Felix Weber kindly pays the bill for everything. I thank him and promise to come back soon. At the next tram stop Rudolf asks me if I would mind if he accompanied me back to Zurich. The three men were all charming, though from the beginning Rudolf was more interesting. I was glad at this late hour to have someone accompanying me. Naturally I said yes. But that's another story.

That same evening at home I received the following E-mail from Vreni Spoerry.

Dear Charlotte

I was so pleased to find your novel 'Terminal Baden' on my desk today, accompanied by your personal dedication and your greetings. Your extremely kind attention makes me exceptionally happy and I will read your book with great interest in the first free hours after the session – at the latest during our holiday in Klosters. In view of the hectic time, may I convey my thanks in this unconventional way?

With very cordial wishes and greetings from Parliament House and once again many many thanks for spoiling me.

For the moment I remain your Vreni Spoerry

The day that had promised to be an interesting one didn't disappoint me at all. They were more highlights in my life in Switzerland. I am more enriched because of it. Even though Australia is South East of Switzerland and about a quarter of the circumference of the earth away, predominately one has to use an aeroplane to come to Zurich. A ship won't bring anyone to Switzerland because no ocean surrounds this land.



Charlotte de Gohan has had short stories published in German. Her first novel in English, *TERMINAL BADEN*, a psychological thriller is now available in all good book shops. Charlotte spent her childhood in Australia. Her adult life is being experienced in Switzerland.

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