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Susann Bosshard-Kaelin

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Exploring Life Paths: On Becoming an Interview Journalist

by Susann Bosshard-Kaelin

To give people a voice, a platform, and to roll out the red carpet for them...

...for ten years now that is my great passion; and I have been able to pursue it as a journalist and author for various projects in Switzerland as well as overseas. I invite you to explore the pursuit of life histories with me, or what is called oral history.

Ladies and Gentlemen,

I am truly honored to be given the opportunity to speak a second time at an annual meeting of the Swiss American Historical Society. The first time it was on October 20, 2009—four years ago in New York at the launching of Westward: Encounters with Swiss American Women. Now I am asked to talk about my work as an interview-journalist, and I thank President Fred Gillespie for his kind invitation.

My daughter Annina is present also—a special joy because she has taken the portrait pictures for several of my projects and accompanied me on my journeys not only as a competent photographer and expert in technical matters but also as a pleasant companion.

A dream becomes reality!

My great dream as a teenager: to become a speedy reporter, to travel around the globe, to encounter most different people, to chat with them, to learn about their lives, and to tell their story. It captivated me.
as a young girl already. But several years were to go by until I was able to find my way to it, to that dream job.

I completed my schooling as a public relations advisor and in comprehensive journalism in Switzerland and worked for years for Swiss Tourism. In 1984, I founded my One Woman Enterprise, had various PR mandates for example with Swatch and the newly founded Swiss Museum Pass. But for four years, I was above all housewife and mother. My husband and I became parents of two wonderful daughters, Annina and Catherina, and I very much enjoyed the time at home and the children’s growing up.

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But writing remained fascinating and had its hold on me. And I soon realized that writing was a craft that demanded practice and training. Write, and write again and again, that was the line . . . especially if one wanted to be successful.

Diverse reports for newspapers and periodicals in Switzerland provided me with editorial experience, with numerous “finger exercises” over the decades . . . thus it didn’t seem wholly impossible anymore to tackle a book project. A coincidence led me to it, or perhaps the time was simply right.

The dream turned real, the writing of a book. But that it would take on such dimensions over the years and lead to the realization of several publications, that I didn’t imagine in my wildest dreams. It was truly accidental, the possibility of my publishing a first unusual book.

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I drove from Einsiedeln, my hometown, to Zurich and heard on the radio of an imaginative journalist named Andrea Meade from Sarnen in Canton Obwalden. She had the idea to ask unknown older women in her Canton about their life stories and to publish them as a book.

I still remember it as if it were today. It had struck me like lightning: I will also realize such a book project for Canton Schwyz . . . the backward Canton in which women had little say! In which, however, there were many who had much to say!

I discussed the idea with my colleague, the psychologist Elena Hinshaw Fischli. Soon we began with eight authors to look for

I was wholly taken by exploring life histories by means of interviews. The women of Schwyz between the ages of 65 and 85 years were free to tell what they wanted. On our side, we merely constructed a general questionnaire. The talks were held in the familiar surroundings of the women, and quite often we would meet two or three times with the aged witnesses who would tell of life in their times. We taped the interviews, then transcribed them carefully, then shaped readable and enticing journalistic portraits out of the interview materials.
To be told their stories was engaging. And I myself learned much from the lives of these people. Most had been born between 1920 and 1935 and often told of their simple childhood and youthful years. Many of them did not have the possibility to learn a trade or pursue a profession, nor could they shape their lives as they wished. And in 1971 it meant for many tremendous progress that as Swiss women they could finally vote on the national level, not even to speak of the many technical innovations of the twentieth century. For young women—among them my two daughters—the life stories of these women were nearly unbelievable . . . important documents of a past epoch.

And I was aware, it was high time, a last chance: If those stories were not told and preserved today, they would be lost forever.

Now a second coincidence happened. In the summer of 2006, I had the opportunity of doing several reports by traveling to America, more precisely to Indiana, among them also for the Neue Zürcher Zeitung. At that time, the oldest Benedictine monk in the world, Father Theodore Heck, lived in the monastery St. Meinrad near Louisville, Kentucky, an institution founded by Benedictine monks from Einsiedeln. I wanted to find out more about the 105-year old monk as well as about nearby Tell City on the Ohio, also founded by Swiss emigrants. With my late friend, the photographer Liliane Géraud, I traveled therefore to Chicago—I also had in my hand luggage the address of the Swiss historian Leo Schelbert who is knowledgeable about Swiss migration history.

Leo Schelbert and Susann Bosshard-Kaelin—first meeting at O'Hare Airport, Chicago, June 2006.
At our meeting in Chicago I told him about the *spruchreif* project and even that I had taken the page proofs with me to the United States since they were due at the publishers on my return. When I told him about some of the stories, he spontaneously said: “We need such a book about Swiss immigrant women in the United States!” Too little was known about the lives of immigrant women, also about those from Switzerland. Would it not be a challenging project for me?

I returned to Switzerland not only with the Indiana reports in hand but also the idea of doing a book about Swiss emigrant women. During 2006 and in early 2007, matters became concrete. Leo Schelbert assisted as mentor and friend, identified Swiss women in the United States as did others, and we looked for financing possibilities. In 2007, I journeyed for the first interviews to the United States, accompanied by my daughter Annina. Based in Evanston, Illinois, we then traveled through the land for the hour-long interviews and picture taking, then also the year after, while Leo and Virginia Schelbert took turns as chauffeurs.

To ask people to tell about their life is less than simple; it demands patience and empathy. And most persons say that their life was quite ordinary and without special significance, a comment made often. And each time I know that it is not the case—life stories are fascinating: each is different, unique, and one-of-a-kind.

I took my time with interviews; I could not rush the talks because it took time to gain the trust of my interview partners. Several of them had never told an unfamiliar person so much private detail, and for years they had not thought of their childhood and even forgotten about it. I would never urge women to talk about a topic . . . they told what they wanted to tell; that was always the foremost intent of my work! The fifteen portraits that I was allowed to do between 2007 and 2009 in Switzerland and in America, were all based on trust, honesty, and good humor.

**Being an intermediary**

The most challenging work doing the portraits always begins when an interview has been accomplished. It is then when the time-consuming and demanding task of transcribing begins. I put every spoken word on the computer—it might mean up to fifty pages per person, depending on how much had been told. Often this task demands five to seven workdays.
Only then am I able to sketch a story that is enjoyable to be read and worthy to become part of a book. It is important that a textual flow emerges, actually a textual melody... so that the story makes for good reading but remains nevertheless true in all its parts.

However, I add nothing to the text myself, only the people interviewed are talking—the stage is theirs, it is they who are to be given a voice. I am merely the intermediary—that is how I see my task.

Next the creation of the portraits demands much time, from one to two weeks, until a story fills some ten to twelve pages. It is less than simple to select from all that has been told and what I think would do justice to each of the persons. Certain matters have to be left out or need to be shortened, which I often regret. In writing up the stories, therefore, I need to make decisions—there is no other way.

My work in most of these projects is part of a race, the battle against forgetting. It is the task to give people a say who in a few years might not be heard of again. It also means to acquaint young people with life stories that today seem hardly believable... it is like a “Spurensuche,” a search for traces.

A book accomplished from A to Z

In 2009, westwärts—Begegnungen mit Amerika Schweizerinnen was published in the eFeF-Verlag in Wettingen, Switzerland. For the external form of the book, I engaged the American-Swiss graphic artist Anna Taylor. She also oversaw the book’s production at the Einsiedeln print shop of a friend. Thus I had the opportunity to control every step of the way and to be part of deciding every detail from beginning to end. It was a unique challenge for which I am most grateful. I learned so much! Well received, a second edition of the book was required in 2010.

A ‘No’ to an interview-portrait

Those whose portrait I create on the basis of the interviews always receive the opportunity to review and approve its final form. It is a foremost condition that I tell to all who are willing to be interviewed. Small corrections
are usually requested. But in the context of *westwärts*, one person decided after reviewing the text that she didn’t want her story to be made public. It was a pity indeed—I regretted it much but respected the decision; the tape as well as the interview text were destroyed. I would never publish a portrait that had not been explicitly approved.

In 2010, the English version of *westwärts* was published by the Swiss American Historical Society with the title *westward—Encounters with Swiss American Women*, mainly in the translations of Marianne Burkhard and Leo Schelbert. The English version is out of print; the German edition is still available in Switzerland.
To give people a voice was also the purpose of the next project that I undertook in 2007 and could realize together with the photographer friend Liliane Géraud who, alas, has passed away far too early. It was a photo album devoted to seven portraits of people who were in close contact with the monastery Fahr at the outskirts of the city of Zurich. Again I had the privilege to enjoy intensive talks with those people and to integrate the seven encounters in book form. What emerged were textual pictures that gave a multifaceted look into the hidden world of Benedictines that is unknown to most. The oldest sister of the monastery named Regula, then approaching 95, mentioned that she never thought about whether she was satisfied with her life: “I live each day as it comes. And I enjoy what is and what I am just doing. . . .”

Yet again a new challenge came my way with the book about the Diakonissen of the Bethanien Werk in Zurich that is wholly unique. The book Unter der Haube (Under the Bonnet) offers 20 portraits of Diakonissen who tell of their touching lives. They are women who did not choose the traditional life of marriage, motherhood, and family. They went their own way and chose the life of a Diakonisse. What motivated them to choose such a path in the service of others? What drove those women of an Evangelical-Reformed persuasion to enter a community that bound them to a life of celibacy, poverty, and obedience? The book became more than the sum of impressive life stories. It became a socio-cultural documentary of a way of life that in a few years might be history.
I realized this book as a common effort together with Daniela Schwegler. She did ten portraits, I myself the other ten. The interviews gave me insight into a wholly new world. It was astonishing how varied the lives of those women were, although they initially declared that they had all experienced about the same. . . . Truly, the honesty and courage in telling their stories deeply touched and impressed me. With blunt openness, the women also told of bad and difficult experiences.

They gave an account of their times that gained my deep respect. To be content, even happy with little—to remain faithful to the path chosen, and not to become bitter: this is what nearly all the women stated and impressed me.
The world on a visit to Einsiedeln

In 2008, I started together with an acquaintance, Beatrice Künzi, a photographer from Einsiedeln, a long-term project that we did not want to rush. “Anything, but no haste or stress,” was our motto. We bought a small mobile home and often drove to Einsiedeln’s monastery plaza for years, at different times of day and night, in the summer heat, and in the icy winter cold. Einsiedeln’s monastery plaza is after St. Peter’s plaza in Rome the second largest in Europe. Here we met eighty-eight people from all over the world and portrayed them in word and picture—native people, passers-by, churchgoers, young and old, prominent people and tourists, women and men, children, even four-legged Miss Einsiedeln, the most beautiful cow of the village. “The world meets on Einsiedeln’s plaza.” Every person we portrayed granted us an hour—we wanted to create a careful image and a carefully done text.

“Why did you come to Einsiedeln? What do you think of the place? How do you see it?” Those interviewed answered such or similar questions. The talks were held in all kind of languages and I translated the answers given right away into German. People gave us their consent as to text and picture in the mobile home—and each received a Polaroid picture and could review the text right then and there.

The book Geschichten Gesichter—die Welt trifft sich auf dem Einsiedler Klosterplatz [Stories/Faces—the World Meets on Einsiedeln’s Klosterplatz] was published in April 2013 and was later complemented by an open-air exhibit on the plaza.

Pendant to westward

And, of course, Leo Schelbert and I, for a long time, had thought about a parallel work to westward on Swiss American women of the 20th century that would feature Swiss American men. Over the years, he had asked various Swiss to write an autobiographical sketch, six of which were then published in the SAHS Newsletter or Review. Given our previous harmonious collaboration, we decided in early 2011 that I would add several interview portraits to the autobiographies. The portraits would


cover mostly events from about mid-century on, while the autobiographies would also feature the century’s earlier part.

For me it was again a wonderful reason to travel to America and to encounter most different people. It was also quite a challenge because I never had such extensive and very personal talks with men. Would I be able to succeed? Would they trust me and talk about themselves? Would they tell a totally strange woman about their lives?

Today I can say, I am most grateful. The nine men I had the privilege to interview made it easy for me and trusted me. Magnificent! It was again a rewarding and fascinating task to conduct the long interviews for the book Emigrant Paths—Encounters with 20th Century Swiss Americans.

They told of their childhood and youth, of their learning and wandering years, of their emigration, of their joys and crises, there as well as here. They let me listen to their story in Comus, Maryland, as well as in Lucerne and Mancos or Aspen, Colorado. There will also be a shorter
German edition with the title *Nach Amerika. Lebensberichte von Schweizer Auswanderern*, to be published by the Limmat Verlag and available early next year. I am happy that also the project *Emigrant Paths/Nach Amerika* in collaboration with Leo Schelbert has come to fruition.

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People and their life stories—soon it will be ten years that I have devoted to the task—all an exciting and enriching task!

One occupational group that has been neglected for a long time: the Swiss farmwomen. Now they too have a voice—a platform—to spread out a red carpet. I am now compiling this work that will contain fourteen portraits of Swiss farmwomen between the ages of 25 to 85 years.

What unites them is that they all had attended the Bäuerinnen Schule, the school for farmwomen, of the monastery Fahr, a school so rich in tradition that it unfortunately closed permanently in the summer of 2013. There were no new entrants to the monastery—and without nuns as teachers the
school does not have the same attraction and background. It is a pity, but a reality.

Farm women from all regions in Switzerland and even one in Australia tell of their most varied and hard lives on the alp, in the valley, and on a banana farm in Queensland. I am impressed by the resourcefulness and energy of these Swiss farmwomen. What they accomplish day after day, often behind the scenes, is important and deserves to be shown and read about. There is, for instance, a woman who is spending the summer with her husband and four children on a remote alpine pasture, making cheese, and until last year had neither electricity nor a telephone. Or the farmwoman who besides helping her husband on the homestead takes care of the four children and in addition annually produces five tons of pasta. The book in German is scheduled to be published in the spring of 2014.

Thus, again I am pursuing with this newest book—featuring a piece of reality as well as recording experiences and memories that soon might be a thing of the past.

The school for farmwomen is history, and how farmwomen have worked yesterday and work today will again be much different tomorrow also in Switzerland.

And, of course, there are many stories behind the story of these book projects that all feature fascinating and interesting people. Connected with the interviews and the resulting portraits are wonderful journeys...
as well as encounters and experiences in foreign lands or in regions of Switzerland I did not know.

For instance, do you know where to find the “Alp Dreckloch” (Alp Dirty Hole)? And from there comes the smoky alpine cheese that is popular in various delicatessen stores in New York under the label “dirty hole cheese”?

Working as a journalist and author has extraordinarily rewarded me as a human being. Certainly, such work demands sensitivity and tact as well as perseverance and iron discipline when I am alone in the quiet study and put the conversations to paper until they have become useful stories for a book.

Without a doubt, what I was allowed to learn and experience from many different types of men and women has truly enriched my life. How much I learned from them—about life, the times, work, love, joy and hope, patience, sadness, the letting go, in short, about being. . . . Without those precious encounters and talks, I would not be what and who I am today.

- Translated by Leo Schelbert

Talk given at the Annual Meeting of the Swiss American Historical Society (SAHS) at the Swiss Embassy in Washington, October 12, 2013.

An alumna of the Monastery Fahr school for farm women with her son.

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