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ZONTA STORY – Area 4 in District 28

AREA 4

District 28, Area 4, covers the Zonta clubs of the German-speaking part of Switzerland and Liechtenstein. The oldest Zonta club of the area (and of the whole of Switzerland) is the Zonta Club Bern, which was founded in 1948 on the initiative of Magda Lang, who had worked at the Swiss consulate in Canada and the USA for many years. Thus there seems to be a direct transfer of the Zonta idea from the US to Switzerland. Further Zonta clubs were established in Basel (1951), Zurich (1953) and Schaffhausen (1955). In 1964, the Zonta Club Lucerne was launched, followed by the Zonta Club Vaduz in 1985. In the 1990s, a number of new clubs were founded: the Zonta Club Bern Ursa (1990); the Zonta Club Chur which was opened at the same time as the Zonta Club Liestal (1996); and the Zonta Club of Eastern Switzerland, which was established in 1998. Zonta Club Engiadina was launched fairly recently, in 2011. In 2014, the Zonta Club of Eastern Switzerland was dissolved.

Besides Magda Lang, there were also a number of other women who pioneered Zonta clubs in Switzerland. Among them were Maud Renfer, founder of the Zonta Club Basel; Vera Wegelin, who established the Zonta Club Zurich; and Gertrud Schärker, founder of the Zonta Club Schaffhausen. Sonja Herting, president of the Zonta Club Lausanne and the first European female glacier pilot, also contributed to a number of Zonta clubs in Switzerland. Dr Annaliese (Lule) Grütter from the Zonta Club Bern should rightly be considered one of the forerunners of women's emancipation in Switzerland. She had already been involved in the foundation of the Swiss Association of Female Academics (*Schweizerischer Verband der Akademikerinnen*) in 1924. This association was established on 22 March 1924 at the restaurant Daetwyler at Kramgasse 74 in Bern by delegates from Bern, Geneva, Basle and Zurich.



ZONTA AND WOMEN'S SUFFRAGE IN SWITZERLAND

Switzerland lagged behind Europe regarding women's political rights for a relatively long time. This backwardness stood in stark contrast to Switzerland's democratic tradition as well as to the very progressive measures taken in other areas, such as women's admission to university. In the 19th century, Switzerland had been the first European country to allow women to complete a higher education degree. The University of Zurich's first "trial" started in 1867. In Bern and Geneva, women were admitted to academic courses from 1872. The first Swiss woman to complete her degree was Nelly Favre, who in 1903 successfully finished her law studies at Geneva. The University of Basle, founded in 1460, was the most conservative of the Swiss universities, only admitting women from 1890 onwards.

On the other hand, women's suffrage on a federal level was only introduced in 1971. As late as 1959, political equality for women had been rejected by Swiss (male) voters. There are two factors which help explain the late introduction of women's suffrage in the "oldest democracy in the world": direct democracy on the one hand and the tradition of a militia army on the other. Opponents of women's suffrage used the extensive rights of the Swiss Sovereign as an argument against women's suffrage: in Switzerland—in contrast to other democracies—it is the political citizen who decides on every article of the constitution. Political equality for men and women therefore had further reaching implications than in parliamentary democracies. Moreover, thanks to the idea of a "citizens' army", political participation was closely linked to military service. As long as this paradigm was not questioned, the political exclusion of women seemed just and legitimate, on a cantonal as well as a federal level. The equation of army with citizens also contributed to the preservation of male power structures in Swiss politics, which lasted for longer than elsewhere in Europe. The long lived political discrimination of women also had implications for Swiss foreign politics: it was not possible, for example, to sign the European Human Rights Convention without serious reservations.

Tireless and persistent mobilisation of all the women's organisations of Switzerland was required in order to gain the active and passive right to vote. A prominent role was played by the Bernese Zontian Marthe Gosteli. She was president of the



Bernese Women's Suffrage Club (*Bernischer Frauenstimmrechtsverein*) from 1962 until 1968. She was from 1967 until 1971 vice president of the Association of Swiss Women's Clubs (*Bund Schweizerischer Frauenvereine*) and remained on its board until 1972. In the decisive years 1970/71, when the draft for women's suffrage was discussed in parliament and voted on by the Swiss public, Marthe Gosteli was president of the "Consortium of the Swiss Women's Associations for the Political Rights of Women" (*Arbeitsgemeinschaft der schweizerischen Frauenverbände für die politischen Rechte der Frau*). Due to her position in this organisation, she was able to advocate decisively the issue of women's suffrage.

THE GOSTELI FOUNDATION

In 1982 Marthe Gosteli founded the "Archive for the History of the Swiss Women's Movement" (*Archiv zur Geschichte der schweizerischen Frauenbewegung*) in her country house, which through the establishment of the "Gosteli Foundation" was funded by an independent body. The Gosteli Foundation promotes the independence, collaboration, mutual appreciation and solidarity of women in the public limelight on the basis of liberal principles and the rule of law. Gosteli's main concern is that women and women's history are given their due consideration in history books and that history is studied and presented as a history of both sexes. Gosteli has received a great deal of recognition: in 1989, she received the Trudy-Schlatter-Prize; in 1992 the citizen's medal of the Burgergemeinde Bern; in 1995 an honorary doctorate from the University of Bern; and in 2008 the Silver Merit Medal from the Economic and Charitable Association of the Canton of Bern (*Ökonomischen und Gemeinnützigen Gesellschaft des Kantons Bern*). In 2011 she received, together with the historian Beatrix Mesmer, the Human Rights Prize of the Swiss Section of the International Society for Human Rights. In 2000, she published the book "Forgotten History" (*„Vergessene Geschichte – Histoire oubliée“*), which focuses on the history of the Swiss women's movement from 1914 until 1963.



WOMEN'S EQUALITY BECOMES ENSHRINED IN SWITZERLAND'S CONSTITUTION

A further important step towards women's political equality was the Equality Act, which on 14 June 1981 became enshrined in Switzerland's constitution. The Equality Act guarantees the formal equal treatment of women and men and obligates authorities and lawmakers to get rid of existing discriminations. Work, family and education were explicitly named as areas in which discrimination existed. This act represented a milestone in the history of women's emancipation and offered an opportunity for the extension of equality into all the spheres of life and work (e.g. wage politics). Here, it was again a Zontian who was crucially involved: Dr. Lydia Benz-Burger from the Zonta Club Zurich. From 1957 she was on the board of directors of the Women's Suffrage Club Zurich (*Frauenstimmrechtsverein Zürich*) and editor of the "*Female Citizen*" ("Staatsbürgerin"). From 1960 until 1968, she was president of the press commission of the Swiss Association for Women's Suffrage (*Schweizerischer Verband für Frauenstimmrecht*). From 1968 until 1971, she was president of the Association for Female Swiss Academics (*Verband Schweizer Akademikerinnen*). She was a member of Zurich City Council (for the LdU, a list for independent candidates) from 1970 until 1974. A particular concern of Benz-Burger was equal education for both sexes: "There is no female or male work. There is only talent, which can be brought into fruition at work" (from the programme of the "women's list" of the Canton of Zurich). From 1975 until 1981 she was president of a committee promoting an initiative called "Equal Rights for Man and Woman" (*Gleiche Rechte für Mann und Frau*). In 1975, she had created a "women's list" in the Canton of Zurich for the National Council elections, but this list did not succeed in the elections.



ZONTA CLUBS 28/4 TODAY: ADVANCING THE STATUS OF WOMEN

a.) SPONSORSHIP OF TALENTED YOUNG FEMALE SCIENTISTS IN NATURAL SCIENCES AND IT

The Zonta Clubs of Switzerland and Liechtenstein (Union Intercity) have been awarding the PRIX ZONTA since 2005. Every two years, this prize worth 30,000 Swiss Francs is awarded to young female scientists who have achieved success in typically “male fields” of science (IT, engineering or biochemistry). The aim of the prize is to support the winners as well as to motivate and encourage other young women. Luisella Realini from the Zonta Club Lugano, and former president of the Union Intercity, said on 7 November 2005 in Bern, on the occasion of the first award of the PRIX ZONTA: “[...] connected to this prize is also the duty to recognise expertise in scientific areas which are of fundamental importance for the future.”

PRIX ZONTA award winners include:

2005: Dr Cornelia Halin, Postdoc at ETH Zurich, for her achievements in the field of biomedicine (migration of immune cells in lymph vessels and into the lymph nodes. Possible application in new immunization strategies and anti-inflammatory therapies).

2007: Dr Christina Fragouli, assistant professor at EPF Lausanne, for her achievements in the field of information theory and computer sciences (organisation and encryption of networks to optimize the flow of data and information).

2009: Dr Anja Bieberle-Hütter, senior assistant at ETH Zurich at the department for Materials Sciences, for her achievements in the field of electrochemical processes on electrodes (development of solid oxide fuel cells for the direct metamorphosis of the energy of a chemical reaction into electrical energy).

2011: Dr Stéphanie Lacour, assistant professor at EPF Lausanne at the Institute of Micro Engineering, for her achievements in the field of flexible electronics and its application in biology and bioelectronics (development of “electronic skin” which integrated connections and sensors. Possible application in the production of neuroprotheses).



2013: Dr.Tanja Stadler, SNF-Ambizione Fellow and Junior Group Leader at the Institute for Integrative Biology at ETH Zurich, for her achievements in the field of mathematical biology (analysis of viral pathogens and research concerning the phylogeny of the species).

b.) EXAMPLES OF SERVICE PROJECTS TO PROMOTE WOMEN'S EDUCATION IN SWITZERLAND AND ABROAD

Switzerland, traditionally an immigration country, has a large share of foreign nationals (over 22%), which is the highest percentage of all European countries. The cultural and social integration of immigrants who bring with them a variety of different experiences, beliefs and values, is a particular challenge for the federal government and the cantons. Therefore, dealing with the direct consequences of globalisation is an important and urgent issue for Switzerland. The Zonta Clubs of German-speaking Switzerland also get involved, not just by alleviating female poverty abroad but also by promoting better integration of foreign women at home.

Here are a few examples from these two fields:

The Zonta Club of Schaffhausen organised German courses for mothers of foreign-language pupils (winner of the district prize for the best local project in 2000). The support of the Club enabled the purchasing of teaching materials, which the women otherwise could not have afforded to buy.

Zonta Club Liestal paid, amongst other things, for the training of a laboratory assistant, which was part of the Shanti Med Nepal Project. The most important Project of the Zonta Club Liestal, however, is the support of Shuhada, an NGO which aims to improve the welfare of Afghanis in Afghanistan and abroad and mainly devotes itself to the emancipation of women and girls. Shuhada works in the fields of medical aid, education, the granting of small credits, the building trade and the distribution of aid materials. Shuhada is the oldest active NGO in Afghanistan and the most important Afghani NGO with a woman in charge. Zonta Club Liestal has been supporting this project for many years.

Zonta Club Vaduz supported, amongst others, young musicians from Bosnia, the project "Integra" (information and help for female migrants), and the project "German



for breakfast” in Vorarlberg (Austria) which aims to improve the integration of female migrants and offers German courses for female refugees. The Zonta Club Vaduz is also involved in supporting projects which are supporting women and children in Latin America and Eastern and South-Eastern Europe.

In 2012, Zonta Club Lucerne participated in the award ceremony for “Gender and Diversity” for young women at the Lucerne University of Applied Sciences and Arts. Romy Mathys received this award for her work on “HIV prevention for sub-Saharan Africans in Switzerland. Application of the ‘Information-Motivation-Behavioral Skills Model’”.

In addition, by supporting projects in aid of women’s refugees or helping in individual emergency situations, the Zonta clubs also contribute to the alleviation of globalisation’s effect on Swiss society.

c.) SUPPORT OF FEMALE ARTISTS

In 2008, Zonta Club Zurich organized, in association with the “artefiz art hall of contemporary artists” and the Zonta Club St. Petersburg, the “Zurich Feminnale”. For nineteen days, eleven artists from Russia and Belorussia presented their art at the artefiz art hall in Zurich. Thirty percent of all proceeds went towards “The House of Small Mothers” in St. Petersburg, an organization which supports underage pregnant women and underage mothers.

Together with six other Zonta clubs of the “border triangle” (Switzerland, southern Germany and France), the Zonta Club Basle awards the Zonta Club “Regional Art Promotion Prize” every two years to a young female artist of the region. The aim of this prize is to introduce the young artist’s work to a broad public.

d.) COMPATIBILITY OF FAMILY AND CAREER

On the occasion of its 60th anniversary on 6 September 2008, Zonta Club Bern organised a panel discussion with the title “Compatibility of family and career: yes!... but now action is required!”. Keynote speaker was federal councillor Eveline Widmer-Schlumpf, a Zontian herself and co-founder of the Zonta Club Chur. Participants included Christa MarkwalderBär (national councillor), Corinne Schärer (local



councillor for Bern), Joe Probst (director of the centre of excellence personnel of the management board of the Coop Bank), Daniel Eicher (manager of ABC-Karten) and Martina Schläpfer (State Secretary for Economic Affairs SECO/Federal Department of Economic Affairs, Education and Research). Before and after the panel discussion, many different organisations presented their work in the foyer of the town hall.

Zonta Club Bern Ursa took part in the “Initiative for family-friendly day schools” (*Initiative für familienfreundliche Tagesschulen*). Many clubs (Bern, Engiadina) fund crèches.

Looking back upon the history of Zontas in German-speaking Switzerland and Liechtenstein, it is evident that Zonta Clubs have, from the beginning, played an important role in the advancement of women’s emancipation in Switzerland. Also, Zonta women have marked a strong presence in the most important phases of the long process of obtaining political equality for Swiss women. Personalities like Marthe Gosteli and Dr Lydia Benz-Burger have a firm place in the history of the Swiss women’s movements. Also, federal councillor Eveline Widmer-Schlumpf has made history with her legendary acceptance to stand for election to the federal council in 2007 against her own party’s (SVP, Swiss People’s Party) will. As well as the active participation in the campaigns of ZI (Zonta Says No!, awarding of the prize for “Young Women in Public Affairs”, etc.), the Zonta Clubs of Area 4 have been able to set priorities according to their own interests, which reflect the variety and complexity of the Swiss “microcosm”..