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SWISS GERMAN



READING BOOKLET

.....
: *Travelers should always check with their* :
: *nation's State Department for current* :
: *advisories on local conditions before* :
: *traveling abroad.* :
.....

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VOICES

English-Speaking Instructor *Jordan Weinstein*
Female Swiss German Speaker *Ursula R. Godwin*
Male Swiss German Speaker *Mark Graf*

COURSE WRITERS

Lieselotte Anderson, M.A., M. Ed.



Elisabeth Heinrich

EDITOR

Beverly D. Heinle

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Speakers of Swiss German

Although Switzerland is only about half the size of Maine, it is a very diverse country. The Swiss federation is composed of 23 “cantons” (states) which function with a large degree of political autonomy. Each canton, for instance, has the right to determine which is to be the official language within its boundaries: German, French, or Italian. The majority of the population, about 65%, speaks German. It is spoken in 11 out of 23 cantons. The so-called “German speaking cantons” are the cantons of Aargau, Appenzell, Basel, Berne, Lucerne, St. Gallen, Schwyz, Thurgau, Unterwalden, Uri, and Zurich.

French is the language of 18% of the population, while 10% speak Italian (figures established by the Union Bank of Switzerland, 1997). About 1%, mainly in the Engadin, speak Rhaeto-Romanic (Romansch), the fourth national, but not official, language.

The first language of all German-speaking Swiss is not the standard German that is the official language of Germany. It is rather one of the many Swiss German dialects, generally referred to collectively as Swiss German, *Schwyzerdütsch*. Swiss German is a spoken language only, inherited

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Speakers of Swiss German *(continued)*



Switzerland: language areas

	German
	French
	Italian
	Romansh

from Alemannic ancestors more than a thousand years ago. Characteristic of all spoken languages, it preserves a strong feeling of group identity for each individual, township, and valley. Unlike dialects in some other countries, Swiss German is not limited to a particular social class, but constitutes the spoken language of people in all walks of life. Lawyers consult in Swiss German,

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Speakers of Swiss German (*continued*)

professors use it in discussions with their students, families converse in it, and many television and radio stations broadcast in Swiss German. Each German-speaking canton of Switzerland has its own distinct pattern of speech; between cities and rural areas, and even between one mountain valley and another, people will proudly use their own traditional variety.

The Swiss German language has no writing system. In spite of an attempt in recent years to produce a written Swiss German, so far all written materials such as newspapers, books, plays, letters, and announcements are written in standard German, appropriately also called *Schriftdeutsch* — “German for Writing”— which is also the official language of Germany and Austria. For many German-speaking Swiss, standard German is virtually a foreign language which they learn at school. When the Swiss Germans use it in speech, it tends to sound rather stiff and stilted. The spoken Swiss German language differs significantly from standard German in grammar, vocabulary, and pronunciation.

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Why Learn Swiss German?

In one sense, English could be called the lingua franca in Switzerland, but most publications, forms, warning signs, etc. are printed in the three official languages and seldom in English. English isn't taught as a mandatory subject in Swiss schools and therefore isn't as widely spoken as in many northern European countries. However, since English is such an important business and commercial language, many people do speak English, and you will find that almost all Swiss Germans will eagerly practice their English with you. You may now ask yourself, "So why am I learning Swiss German?" Well, learning Swiss German will help you feel at home in your Swiss surroundings.

Although there are substantial differences between the Swiss German dialects, the phrases you will learn through this program will allow you to begin to understand the Swiss Germans and to be understood by them. They will allow you to feel included in the daily activities of Swiss life. It is a magic moment when you switch from the role of an observer to that of a participant insider, whether you are there on business or for leisure. As you develop relationships with Swiss German colleagues, neighbors, and friends, as people recognize you

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Why Learn Swiss German? *(continued)*

and make small talk with you in English, you will invariably feel the desire to reply with a few cordial words spoken in Swiss German.

As you travel through small towns and more remote parts of the country where you encounter fewer English speakers, you might need to ask for directions or order a meal in Swiss German. On other occasions, you might wish to extend a special invitation or reply to your Swiss hosts with a few words in Swiss German. Your interest in Swiss German culture and your willingness to speak the language will win you the respect and trust of the Swiss German people. If you plan to settle for a period of time in a German-speaking area of Switzerland, you will find that Swiss German opens doors, both in business and socially.

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Courtesies to Remember

Remember that there is a humorous and endearing side to the mistakes a language learner makes! When you learn to laugh with your Swiss listeners at your pitfalls, they might become the memories of a lifetime. But some essential courtesies are worth knowing about Swiss German life.

Swiss Germans take formalities seriously and disregarding them easily results in feelings of personal insult. Here are five basic rules of conduct:

- Always shake hands when you greet or take your leave of people, even in short encounters, and even if this means reaching out for a dozen hands across the table. This includes children and people of all social classes.

- Greet men with “*Herr*” and women with “*Frau*” and with their last names unless you are explicitly encouraged to use first names with close friends. Use “*Fröilein*” only for girls in their late teens, or for waitresses and hotel maids.

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Courtesies to Remember *(continued)*

- Knock before entering any room in a home or office and wait for the response to enter. Excuse yourself as you step through the doorway. Close the door behind you. Open doors mean carelessness and disorder.

- Be on time for all social and business engagements! The Swiss Germans consider being late an insult. Not only people, but all forms of transportation in Switzerland arrive and leave right on time.

- If you are there on business, bring business cards. Hand your card to the receptionist and to the person you are meeting, even if you have arranged the appointment in advance. Have your professional degree printed on the card, alongside your name. If your company is long established, have the year of its founding printed on your card. The Swiss respect formal education, diplomas, and degrees; and they tend to value continuity and tradition over innovation and change.

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Beginning a Conversation

To start a conversation in English, we frequently use the polite greeting, “How are you?” The Swiss equivalent for “How are you?” is, however, not a rhetorical, but a personal question. It should only be used to start conversations with people you know well. The answer is also personal — a statement about one’s actual well-being.

A general and popular conversation starter is to talk about the weather. Since it rains often and for several days at a time in northern Switzerland, it never fails to elicit a response, even from the most stubborn stranger!

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Getting Around Swiss German Towns

The center of most towns is the train station and the market place, and major roads and other public means of transportation all lead to these two destinations. In small towns they are also the center of public activity. Most towns have fruit, vegetable, and flower markets on various days of the week, and major cities have open markets on most days of the week. And a train station might be the only place in town where you can buy English newspapers and a snack after hours.

The Swiss are justly proud of the fact that they have the densest public transportation network in the world. It allows for easy distance traveling and local commuting; many season tickets and special discount tickets are available. Although most people own cars, they are generally luxurious and are more frequently used for leisure transportation rather than for work. In fact, since distances are much smaller in Switzerland than in the United States, and people have become more aware of the necessity for environmental protection in recent years, many people even cycle to work.

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Swiss German People

Swiss Germans are generally proud of their country's internal social and political stability, its neutrality, and its independence in relation to international affairs. They are also proud that their country is one of the wealthiest countries in the world, and they try hard to maintain its beauty. They appreciate if these achievements are noticed and mentioned by visitors, but they are reserved, to the point of understatement, in their own comments.

Similarly, Swiss Germans are meticulously correct in their behavior toward each other, although the formalities are subtle and easily misunderstood by visitors. They present a composed posture toward other people, which is easily misinterpreted as cold treatment of others. They value hard work, thrift, and punctuality and expect a high degree of responsibility, especially in the public domain. Cleanliness, neatness, orderliness, and a keen sense of privacy are seen as expressions of good citizenship and personal character.

The frequent use of polite forms in Swiss German greetings and requests can be regarded as a softening effect in an otherwise stern social environment.

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Extending a Personal Invitation

The Swiss generally are geared to long-term planning and solutions. Whatever they build, it's meant to last a long time, if possible forever. It is therefore not astonishing that they are generally somewhat reluctant to make friends with foreigners and even other Swiss, but once they get to know you, they may turn out to be your life-long friends. If you would like to get to know a Swiss person better, it's a good idea to ask that person to go out to a restaurant, cafe, or bar with you. Since many Swiss Germans have their day more or less completely planned out, set up the appointment well in advance.

When you move into a new house in Switzerland, don't be surprised if you aren't welcomed by your neighbors. They are not unfriendly, but respect your privacy. It's up to you to introduce yourself and to invite them over for coffee, and don't be surprised if their visit is short. Except for occasional invitations between relatives and very close friends, many Swiss Germans prefer to go out together rather than being invited to someone's house.

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Eating Out in Switzerland

In Switzerland it's customary to use greetings when entering and leaving a restaurant (as well as small shops). Contrary to American custom, there are no hosts or hostesses in Swiss restaurants to seat you. Ordinarily you look for a free table yourself. In restaurants of the higher price range, however, a waiter or waitress will approach you and suggest a table or lead you to the table that has been reserved for you. Don't be surprised if someone asks for permission to sit at your table when there is a shortage of free tables. By saying "*bitte*" you allow him / her to share your table. Don't panic, diners don't usually strike up conversations, unless you want to practice your Swiss German!

The custom of automatically serving ice water is not known in Switzerland, and people normally don't drink coffee with their warm meals, but afterwards. All Swiss restaurants are obliged by law to display their menu and prices outside. Most offer a *Tagesmenü* at lunch time, usually from noon to 2:00 **PM**. Dinner is usually served from 7:00 to 9:30 **PM**. Cafés don't sell alcohol. Bills include a service charge of 15%, so the price you see on the menu is the price you have to pay. Although tipping has officially been abolished, people generally do

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Eating Out in Switzerland (*continued*)

reward good service. Most people round the bill off to the nearest Swiss franc or more. Large tips, however, are regarded as ostentatious (except by the recipient, of course). Usually the tip is given directly to the waiter or waitress when paying and not left on the table.

The *Röschi* is a delicious Swiss potato dish that also serves to define the whole German-speaking area of Switzerland, especially as distinguished from the French-speaking area. These two regions are separated by the so-called “*Röschi* Trench.”

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Swiss Money, Numbers, and Dates

Swiss banks and financial institutions are world renowned for their efficiency and range of services, and Zurich is one of the world's major financial centers. The Swiss unit of currency is the Swiss franc, which is one of the most stable currencies in the world. Usually the Swiss do not pay bills with checks or credit cards, and they use cash more often than in the U.S. (approximately 95% of all retail purchases are paid for with real money). Most large Swiss businesses, however, do accept major international credit cards, although they don't always advertise the fact.

Numbers in the thousands are marked off by a space or a period rather than a comma. Thus, one thousand is written as 1.000 or 1 000. In contrast, the decimal point is written as a comma. You would read: Fr. 10,50 and say: *zä Franke fufzig*. The monetary unit after the decimal mark is called *Rappe* in Swiss German. The Swiss franc is divided into 100 *Rappe*. So the price Fr. -,50 would be *fufzig Rappe*.

Dates, too, are written differently: first the day, then the month, and finally the year, with periods and no commas. For example, 30.12.1995 is December 30, 1995.

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Visiting a Swiss Home

Many Swiss German people live in a rather narrow and close network of social relationships. Home life is both a shelter from the stress of the outside world and an expression of one's own standing. Since privacy is very important to the Swiss, it is a gesture of friendship to be invited to a private Swiss home. You may expect that your visit has been carefully prepared. Because everything must be spotless and in perfect order when the Swiss entertain a stranger, they generally don't like it if someone drops in on them. They value punctuality, so don't arrive too late (and don't overstay your welcome — the Swiss are early for work!).

If you are invited for dinner or coffee, it is customary to bring a small bouquet, a box of chocolates, or a bottle of wine. If you bring flowers, there should be an odd number and you should unwrap them before presenting them to your hostess. Remember also that red roses signify romantic love and chrysanthemums are for cemeteries!

At a small party everybody will greet all acquaintances with a handshake, beginning with the hostess and the host. Children also shake hands and are greeted with *sali*, *hoi*, or *tschau*. If you don't know anyone, wait until the host / hostess introduces you.

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Casual Conversation with Swiss Germans

The Swiss Germans are generally rather uncommunicative and tend to meet everything foreign with a certain reserve. They rarely start a conversation with people they don't know. In business, expect them to come right to the point, without any small talk. At dinner parties, when you have exhausted the topic of the weather, you may wish to go on to the following: participatory or spectator sports such as skiing, hiking, sailing, soccer, tennis, or bicycle racing; what you like about Switzerland; and your travels in general. You should realize that the Swiss (in spite of or because of their neutrality?) are generally well informed about world politics and love to discuss it. Remember also that the Swiss are passionate in their opinions about military service. Discussing it could lead to a major argument.

If you would like to get more tips about how to integrate into Swiss German life, you can participate in orientations for newcomers, run by the American Woman's Clubs. These clubs are located in Basel, Berne, and Zurich. Their orientation courses are open to both men and women.

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Websites with Information on Switzerland

Swiss National Library SNL - *Questions about Switzerland - SwissinfoDesk*

<http://www.snl.admin.ch/slb/dienstleistungen/swissinfodesk/index.html?lang=en>

The Source for Parents for Information on Switzerland

<http://www.thestork.ch/>

Information about Switzerland

<http://www.about.ch/welcome.html>

Information about Switzerland, the Swiss, the Culture and much more

www.traveling.ch

Information on Living in Switzerland

www.isyours.com

