

Switzerland

Switzerland is a mountainous alpine country in central Europe. This federal republic with a capital Bern has a population of 7 million predominantly Christian German, French and Italian speaking citizens. Switzerland enjoyed peace and democracy for five hundred years. As a neutral country it is attracting international organisations and many of them have their headquarters there.

Switzerland is known for its scenic beauty, delicious chocolates, precision instruments, international organisations and yodelling.

Helene

I have a wonderful life. Beautiful paintings, pottery and ornaments surround me. My pets adore me. Internet connects me to my friends on other continents. My work is interesting and my colleagues are friendly and kind.

I feel fully alive; I only have one life so I want to live it to the fullest. My late husband Bill said that we should not only exist and consume but extend ourselves towards others.

I reconciled with my past and draw my strength from it. I am so much better off than many that did not have to overcome the adversity. I no longer dwell on my misfortunes; I became a stronger, more understanding person because of them. The events stored in my memory may not be significant but these events made me who I am.

I believe that things happen for a reason. Perhaps I had to experience everything I experienced so I can help people who now rely on my understanding.

Sometimes the past is a heavy burden. You can run to the end of the world but this burden comes with you unless you face it and resolve it and use it. So I put my story on paper; I no longer have to carry it within.

People who are fortunate enough to grow up safe, secure and loved, these people will never be able to truthfully say: I know that pain; I have been there myself; you are not alone.

Feeling alone in suffering is devastating. One becomes scared and ashamed of the pain one cannot speak about.

I can see my life in Switzerland more clearly from the distance. As I grew up I was too involved in the events and could not see them dispassionately.

I was born as an unwanted illegitimate child in a Switzerland village in the middle of the Second World War. My mother was an eighteen years old farm girl who wasn't allowed to bring the baby home from the hospital. By becoming pregnant she brought shame on her family and on the family of her boyfriend. She had to apply for food rations because of me and that too brought shame on her proud family.

I never met my father. His family was disgraced by my birth. My mother and my father each had to pay half for my keep to the home that took care of me.

I only knew my mother vaguely. We never had any kind of relationship to this day. The idea of Mother is a kind of vacuum for me; I never called her mum. I missed having a mother, I wished I had one but I never did.

As a child I was selfish; children see only their needs and wants, they do not know that other people also have needs.
I was a rebellious, withdrawn, shy child. I had no reason to like or trust people. I never learned how to show affection and I did not do well at school.

I have very rarely received affection as a child; nobody paid any attention to my needs or enjoyed my achievements. What was the point of pushing ahead?

I suppose I could have achieved much more with a bit of encouragement and support, with a bit of love, acceptance and understanding.

For a long time I was rather afraid to get close to people and trust them. I laughed a lot to cover up. I learned to see a funny side to most things. Maybe I was born with a sense of humour or maybe I developed it for my protection, to cover up my real feelings. There are as many things one can laugh about, as there are things one could cry with. I chose to laugh, I feel fortunate that I can see a funny side. Someone once said: if you had nothing else to laugh about you can always laugh about yourself. I laughed about myself a lot and the older I get the more important it seems to me not to take myself too seriously.

I have nothing to be ashamed of and no reason to be afraid. There is something good and kind in everybody. I am looking for that good.
Perhaps it was easier for me to leave home because I never felt a part of a family. I think being illegitimate also coloured my attitude towards boys. I was horrified that I would get pregnant and end up like my mother. At times I regretted not having children, but I didn't want to do to my child what has been done to me.

Lately I wonder what pain this young farm girl, my mother, must have suffered when she had to leave her first baby in the orphanage under the Shire guardianship.

Ten days after my birth my mother had to leave the home for unmarried mothers and leave me in the care of the nuns. I stayed there until I was five. I wasn't put up for adoption. I clearly remember the elaborate head covering of the nun as she leaned over me when I cried at night. It was so scary that I remained as still as I could.

When I turned five my mother's sister and her husband, who were my Godparents took me to live with their family. They had three children my age.

When I was seven my mother became pregnant again. She married and had four sons but her new mother in law never wanted me near the place.

I haven't spoken to my mother for over thirty years now. I went home last year but we did not meet. Her husband had died. My half brothers are aware of my

existence but I never met any of them. Nobody in their family is allowed to mention me. I am a shameful secret that has to be kept hidden.

My first pleasant memory is of my grandmother's visit. She brought me a banana and took me on her lap and I lapped up the affection. I adored my grandmother. She must have liked me because I felt safe and protected with her.

I spent some time with my grandmother on the farm after my grandfather died. My cousins became jealous of my grandmother's affection so their mother, my Godmother, took me to live with them again.

I began to call my Godmother mum but her daughter told me that I had no right to call her mother mum. I never called her mum again.

My Godmother's husband was a very cruel man. He bashed me for no reason; he enjoyed seeing me suffer. As I left Switzerland at the age of thirty-eight, he said: good riddance. Nobody ever liked you anyway.

When he died in 1988 I was glad that I would not have to see him if I decided to go home for a visit.

Yes, I still call Switzerland home and I am proud to be Swiss!

I began school but I failed in the first class. My grandmother decided to take me home to her parents up in the country to start a new school year there at the age of eight. Just before she was to pick me up she died of a heart attack. My world came to a halt. I missed her so much.

I was back with my Godmother who was pregnant again. She said that she couldn't cope. I believed that she couldn't cope with the dumb child that failed in the first year of school.

I vividly remember the whole Godmother's family going for a meal in a restaurant. My Godmother had a new baby in a pram. As they entered the restaurant she told me to stay outside to look after the pram. The dog also stayed with me. After half an hour she brought a kind of cake and broke it in half, half for me and half for the dog.

The guardianship board decided to send me one hundred kilometres away to a home for slow learners.

In that home I was ridiculed for my dialect at first but after the initial shock I began to like it there. The schoolwork was not challenging but I enjoyed reading and daydreaming. I stayed there for seven years. For the first time I felt equal to all others around me; I felt that they treated me fairly. They did not favour one child more than the others. I was punished when I did something wrong and not just because I existed. The home mother showed me the first bit of affection and I was grateful for it.

I remember our home mother telling me that my mother came while I was asleep and that she cried as she watched me sleep. I was almost always

asleep when my mother came. Maybe she really came and cried or maybe our home mother just wanted to make me feel good. My Godmother also told me that my mother always wanted another girl but only had boys. People said that I look like my mother. I never had the opportunity to ask my mother how she felt and she never told me.

I still keep in touch with my cousins, my Godmother's children. One of them commented recently: it is amazing what became of Hilda despite her bad start in life.

This comment was probably meant as a compliment but there was a reminder in it that once upon a time I was their servant and an unwanted child. I felt the sting of a put down although I am happy now.

I kept in touch with the home mother and with people who worked there. I made my first friends in that home and I still keep in touch with some of them.

Monika is one of my friends from that home. She now lives in Sydney. When she came for a holiday to Switzerland she told me about Australia. Perhaps she is the reason I am here in Lightning Ridge.

We had a very religious Protestant upbringing in that home. After the confirmation they sent the girls out to service as domestics. Unfortunately for me, my Godmother claimed me. She said that she would accommodate me and look after my welfare.

The guardianship board decided that I had to do an apprenticeship. I wanted to become a cook but I was not tall, strong and 'smart' enough and so wasn't considered suitable. The teachers noticed that I had artistic talents so they recommended that I learn dressmaking.

So at the age of fourteen I started my adult life.

My Godmother accommodated me for a fee. By now she had five children aged from three month to eighteen years and there were four adults in the family.

I worked at the dressmakers and in my spare time I worked on the farm. What I earned I had to pay for the school fees and the train fare to attend the one day compulsory school and one voluntary evening design class per week. I loved designing and art.

My design teacher insisted that I attend the art school and I mentioned this to my Godmother. She said that I was mad. Who did I think I was? Where would I ever get four thousand franks to pay for the art school? End of discussion. There was no money to pay for art or design school.

I kept on sewing and working on the farm for the next two and a half years while my cousins enjoyed themselves. I very seldom had a day off. I had to work during the holidays.

Occasionally my Godmother would give me some pocket money for my labour but as soon as I saved a bit she would find a way of retrieving my savings.

She sold me something she did not want and I did not need or told me that she needed the money.

I never even had enough money to buy material to make a dress for myself.

You really never make money with dressmaking or art. Art always was a hungry profession and so was dressmaking.

The highlight of my life as an apprentice was when I broke my arm in a water driven spin drier. I was happy because I had a rest from the farm work and dressmaking for eight weeks. The nurses in the hospital were all so nice to me and I was often asked to sit with some one and read for them. I also had a real holiday in the Italian Swiss.

To the surprise of everybody I finished my dressmaking apprenticeship with top marks in the School of Zurich.

I bought my first sewing machine when I was thirty-two. If I had a sewing machine any earlier I would have to sew for everybody. I didn't really like sewing.

I started china painting when I was twenty-three and that was a source of much satisfaction.

At seventeen I became a live-in housemaid to a Protestant pastor. I earned more than I would with dressmaking and I had a free board. I worked from morning till night. The pastor was an autocratic father to three boys and two girls.

At that time my cousin got married and her husband's brother came to the wedding. He was adorable. We just looked at each other very much struck by our first love.

It was the first time I danced. My Godmother commented that I couldn't dance and I felt that people laughed at me. That remark must have hurt me very much. I think that remark made me self-conscious about dancing for the rest of my life. Maybe I would be a good dancer if I could only forget that first dance. I never felt comfortable dancing because I could not get it out of my head that I can't dance.

It was the same with music. I loved music and I carried my flute everywhere. This was the only instrument I could afford to play but the teacher kept telling me to stop blowing into it because I disturbed people. All the things I really liked were always out of reach for me.

At eighteen I began working in a French Swiss hospital near Geneva Lake on a geriatric ward for women.

I cared as a nurse's aid for a very colourful ninety-seven years old woman that cursed a lot so my first French words were swear words. I loved that old woman and when she died in my arms I was too upset to come to work for several days.

I began to work for aged men during a flu epidemic. Ten out of fifteen men died in one week. I became hysterical with grief and shock. Death was all around me. I promised myself never to work with aged people again.

At twenty I applied to do a nursing course in Zurich but I did not have enough education and had to return to old age care nursing. I did a two-year geriatric nursing course. I was always lumped with difficult patients.

After two and a half years in a geriatric ward I needed a change. I went into the hospital that cared for chronically mental ill patients. What an experience that was! I knew about the old people but I didn't have a clue about mentally ill. My Godmother said: What a stupid idea. You will go mad. What about dressmaking?

After twelve months I started on a medical ward in a private hospital in Berne. I met a neurosurgeon who insisted to take me to Zurich and work in his clinic. I did not feel confident enough to take that challenge but instead I enrolled in the training course with the university clinic for psychiatry in Bern.

I was happy and well paid for doing the course. I finished with a Diploma for psychiatric nursing and began working as an occupational therapist. After a couple of years they offered me a position with even more responsibility. I accepted on the condition that I would get three months holiday before commencing it.

I always wanted to travel, so in 1980 I went with my friend, Elizabeth on a tour of Australia and New Zealand. Elizabeth was a cook in the home where I lived and Monika was also one of us girls so we had a kind of reunion. I suppose we were a kind of family to each other.

Monika wrote to us that we didn't need to know English because all Australians were migrants.

Elizabeth and I were to stay with Monika for three weeks but we soon became bored and Monika suggested that we go to Lightning Ridge, which was only an eight hours trip by train.

I always liked to collect rocks so Lightning Ridge sounded wonderful.

The railway stationmaster warned us that in Lightning Ridge we would find only a bunch of criminals. I didn't understand what a bunch was. I insisted on going.

Instead of eight hours as predicted by Monika the trip took more like twenty hours with all sorts of delays. After sight seeing we were enormously hot and exhausted. We slept until late in the evening. We then decided to explore the nightlife in the bowling club. We sat there talking loudly in German to attract some German-speaking patrons but nobody came. We ordered beer because we didn't know the names of other drinks.

There were two characters eyeing us. They brought beers and we were happy to have company. We were not really used to drinking alcohol and for sure we did not enjoy it.

After midnight we were asked to leave because it was closing time. The men were Keith and Ruben. We later learned that they made a bet with each other that they would have a drink with us.

Keith was a charming, interesting and good-looking man. He promised to pick us up next morning and take us with him mining. We worked all day and then he took us home and cooked for us. He was a good cook and I thought that he was the most wonderful person in the world. The next day we went washing the opal dirt and specking for opals. I loved looking for interesting stones and stayed all day in the hot sun. Keith was most considerate and a real gentleman who did not push himself on me.

After Lightning Ridge we went on an unforgettable bus camping tour to Darwin. On our return to Sydney Monika noticed a Ute standing in her driveway. What the hell does that man want, she said. It was Keith and he persuaded me to go with him to Lightning Ridge for a week before we departed for New Zealand.

For the next eighteen months Keith and I corresponded and he phoned me often.

Keith came to Switzerland and wanted to travel all over Europe. He only had five hundred dollars but he brought some opals from other people to sell on consignment. I helped him sell. I was spending a lot of money on Keith. He never hesitated to use my money. I was a bit anxious about spending my savings. I should have seen that Keith was using me but I still wore my rose coloured glasses.

I already decided to go with Keith to Australia. I resigned from my job and vacated my flat. I really liked Australian climate and had fond memories of friendly Australians.

Keith wasn't keen on my going to Australia. I applied for a working visa and told Keith that I could work wherever I liked. I always had to Jode on my own feet and I did not want to change this.

We went to Australian Embassy in Berne. A lady there warned me to be careful. Apparently Keith had four children. Keith and I had our first serious argument because he lied to me that he only had one daughter. I should have turned back then, but I still did not see the warning signs clearly.

On our arrival to Australia we spent one month in Sydney with his old mates in a filthy flat. Keith found me work so I could earn my keep.

Before we returned to Lightning Ridge we went shopping. Keith chose many nice things for me but I had to pay for them. He chose a washing machine and other household items and we loaded his Ute. We drove all night and arrived exhausted to a hot filthy caravan on the opal field. Despite the poverty in my youth in Switzerland I never lived in conditions as appalling as that. I washed and bleached and sewed and cleaned before I could settle in my new home. The washing machine never even got installed.

I was still very much in love.

Keith was a compulsive liar. The truth would choke him. He was after vulnerable women; he wanted my money and someone to look after him. He did not want me to learn English and become independent. He was afraid that I would leave him if I found out what he is really like. He found me a cattle puppy dog Dinga for company and Dinga stayed my devoted friend for the next eleven years.

I learned later that apart from being married three times and not divorced from the last wife, who had three children with him, Keith also had a current girlfriend, a nurse. I met this nurse and she said: Keith lied to me that he had to go to a Swiss sanatorium for his health. She also told me how she left her job in Sydney to come to Lightning Ridge to live with Keith. He changed both our lives.

Keith was on an invalid pension but I had no income so I quickly began looking for work.

Keith was in hospital a lot and I found work as a home care worker. After two years I broke up with Keith.

Some of the opals Keith brought to Switzerland belonged to his friend Bill. I met Bill the first week I had been in Lightning Ridge. Bill was a gentleman and when things went from bad to worse with Keith, Bill became more and more my friend.

Keith's former girlfriend also became a great support for me.

The job in Switzerland was kept open for me for two years and I considered returning. When I was really down and decided to return, the job was no longer available, so I stayed.

I applied for a job at Walgett hospital as a psychiatric nurse. They told me that I had to become registered first.

Keith's ex-girlfriend helped me write the application for registration as a nurse. Bill organised a friend to buy a small car for me so I could travel independently.

I went to Orange hospital for five months and got my registration.

I worked in Orange for two to three weeks at the time without a break and then returned to stay with Bill in Lightning Ridge for a few days off. He also provided a home for my dog Dinga. Bill supported me when I was down and unhappy. My days with Bill were the happiest for me but I had become the subject of the town gossip and I was very unhappy about it.

When I complained that people talked about us Bill said: As long as they have us to talk about they will leave some other poor person alone. Bill also said: When you face the problem straight on it loses the power to upset you.

When I became registered as a psychiatric nurse, Walgett hospital no longer employed psychiatric nurses, so I took a job as a nursing aide. I hated it. Walgett is close to Lightning Ridge but people there are very prejudiced against Aborigines and non-English speaking migrants. They did not accept my nursing registration. They made me do whatever they didn't like doing. One day I was a cleaner and the next I was in charge of the ward if there was no other nurse on duty. I was always paid the least. I felt overworked, underpaid, under-appreciated and completely frustrated.

Bill and I married in 1986. He was a wonderful man and we had much in common. He was a businessman in Newcastle before he moved to Lightning Ridge with his wife. When his wife died he stayed here. We loved to travel and collect rocks. He was a very stable person and a great friend. He was of Scottish background and the first of five children to be born in Australia. I was happy with Bill, there has never been anyone like him. Bill enjoyed doing the same things as I; he supported me in things I wanted to do. All my friends and family adored Bill.

In 1989 we travelled to Switzerland. He developed a blood clot and had to be hospitalised there for three weeks. He came out of the hospital weak and his doctor said that he was running on one cylinder instead of four. Bill just wanted to return to Australia. In Sydney he was put into intensive care. After six months we returned to Lightning Ridge. Bill was still very ill but also very happy to be home. Sadly he only lasted two months.

When Bill died his son in law wanted to take everything Bill and I had. He even stole the rocks Bill and I collected.

After Bill's death I couldn't do anything for months, I was not able to leave the house. I knew I had to start to do something because I had no income.

My friend, Sue, prepared an art exhibition of cats. I sewed cushions with cats on them, painted cats and made cat pet rocks. One picture of a cat sold for \$350 and I felt really good about that.

I became a tourist tour guide and as a manageress of the Wallangulla motel for five months. I made curtains and leadlight windows for the bowling club. I painted rocks and taught China painting. People gave me their opals to take to buyers and they paid me a percentage.

For nearly three years I did all sorts of jobs. In 1991 I started again with home-care.

When the Day Care Centre coordinator position became vacant I got the job as a coordinator. I enjoyed my eight years looking after senior citizens.

I would rather starve than ever return to Walgett hospital.

In October 2000 I went to a meeting at Lightning Ridge Health Centre where I was introduced to the boss of the Mental Health Team as a Swiss trained psychiatric nurse. He offered me a job as a psychiatric nurse. By this time I cared for an old client for eight years and I felt reluctant to leave her. Just before I told her that I was leaving she died and I was very happy to accept the offer. I was put on probation for three months. After nearly twenty years I finally became permanently employed in a job I trained for.

I became a member of the Mental Health Team and I am happy in my job.

There are people of all ages referred to me for the initial assessment. The visiting psychiatrist comes once a month but we have videoconferences if and when a problem needs to be attended quickly. I am learning new methods and techniques, the work is exiting and I enjoy doing it.

There was no school for migrants when I arrived to Lightning Ridge. I learned the first words of English with old timers on the opal fields and on the street. I remember the word bloody being added to everything. I considered the bloody to be an enhancement that made the events and people more exciting and better. It was a bloody lovely dog and the beer was bloody good, it was a bloody nice day. Until one day I heard on television about the bloody accident. Two busses crashed and there was a lot of blood. I was surprised that the word bloody was used in such a serious case but Bill explained that this was how the word was meant to be used.

Not being able to write English was my greatest handicap.

In 1995 TAFE started English classes and I enrolled. In 1999 I enrolled in my first computer course. I enjoyed studying and my life became very interesting with all the new people I have met. Since I am on Internet I enjoy being in touch with my Swiss friends and cousins.

I still have problems with writing reports but people I work with are understanding and helpful.

Years ago I had to write reports about patients in the Bloomfield hospital and there was nobody to help me. I knew what I had to write and what happened but I had no proper words for it. Eg a mental patient defecated in the flowerpot and I tried to find the word defecate to describe the incident. I kept asking other medical workers to help me write the report but nobody listened to me.

Finally I told a doctor that a patient shit herself in a flowerpot and the doctor said: Oh, did she. People on the street don't normally talk about intimate personal things like that; they would either say bath or powder room to camouflage the basic human function. Where was I to learn?

Just as well I can see a funny side of everything and can laugh at life now. I learned to accept myself as I am and the people around me with all their problems and stories. You can travel the world but you have to take yourself wherever you go and until you solve the problems within yourselves you are never free.

Lightning Ridge is a colourful place with people from all over the world. You are likely to find an ex policeman or a doctor or a priest socialising in the pub or digging for opal. You never know what kind of person is hiding in a camp on the opal fields. Here I don't feel different because we are all different. Lightning Ridge is much like a psychiatric hospital only the people go home and cook for themselves.

Opal unites the people of Lightning Ridge but they remain strangers at some level; they feel vulnerable and lonely especially when they are sick or old.

Friends come and go and are soon forgotten in this itinerant mining town.

There is no permanency in relationships.

Being a migrant and a stranger I can relate to how these people feel. It is hard to create intimacy, it is hard to love a stranger. The diversity is interesting but the sameness creates familiarity and strengthens ties. We need someone to share the childhood memories and culture and background.

The hometown does not exist in Australia. There is no village life where everybody is part of the community. People in Australia often don't even know their neighbours.

The Australian country towns are service towns for farmers who live their isolated lives. The service providers may come from Greece or China and the service receivers might come from anywhere in the world.

During my first years in Lightning Ridge I joined the Bowling club. Someone once said that my bowling trophies only collect dust but I love to dust them because they remind me of the good times and people I met. I like to socialise with other bowlers because they have nothing to do with mental health and the work I am doing. They make me feel that we live ordinary lives in a normal world although I am aware that we all put out our brave public faces and hide the real stories of our lives. I get involved in the sport of bowling rather than dwell on all that goes on inside people. Bowling used to be a pensioner's game but more and more young people get involved in it now.

Lightning Ridge is a man's town and there are many lonely old men who would love to have someone to take care of their needs but they forgot how to care for a woman. I had some male friends but there was nobody I would want to trade my freedom and independence for. I don't really want to become a wife and serve any particular man. Men my age are set in their ways and want someone to follow them but I would also like someone to go where I want to be. I think it would be impossible for any man to replace Bill.

I learned to rely on myself and accept the challenges that come my way.

I think I fell in love with the Australia. Australians offer refreshments and readily chat about the weather and about the place you came from but they quickly tire of people. Now I realise that this instant friendship is not a lasting friendship.

In Switzerland it takes long before you can enter someone's home and be offered refreshments but when you have a friend you know that it is for keeps. I did not leave Switzerland because I was unhappy there but I was adventurous and in love.

Now this sunburnt country became my home. I love Australia and even the flies don't bother me any more.