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“Der Ogi” and matters of the heart

He has not been part of the Federal Council for over a decade. He steers clear of politics. Former Swiss President Adolf Ogi is nevertheless still considered by many people today as the embodiment of a decent politician. He is much in demand and has a high media profile. Switzerland sees in him the last down-to-earth father of the nation with old-school values. So, what exactly is he doing? Focusing his efforts on helping the disadvantaged and those in need. – We take a hike to meet Adolf Ogi in the wilds of Gasterntal.

By Marc Lettau



Adolf Ogi with children from Eastern Europe who receive medical care thanks to the Swisscor foundation

You sometimes have to observe things at a sufficient distance. For example, in summer 1992, NASA's space shuttle Atlantis sped around Earth 127 times. Claude Nicollier, Switzerland's first and only astronaut to date, was aboard. It was a big step for Nicollier and a giant step for Swiss space travel. The shuttle hurtled around the planet at 30,000 kilometres an hour. It is just that what Nicollier did in the freezing depths of outer space left no mark on Switzerland's collective consciousness. In contrast, the words that Federal Councillor Adolf Ogi shouted to Nicollier through the ether on 7 August 1992 via a sophisticated radio link remain etched in the mind: "Freude herrscht, Monsieur Nicollier!" (Joy abounds, Monsieur Nicollier!) – the words of congratulation immediately became a turn of phrase. Quoted thousands of times, it has become part of Swiss German vocabulary. Joy is even more wonderful when it not only exists but is ubiquitous, when "joy abounds".

Distance from politics

The roles could not have been assigned more perfectly, as Ogi is not one for exploring the

cosmos. He is very much grounded and has a strong attachment to his homeland. He has mountain roots and a way of aptly expressing emotion and facts in just a few words like the inscriptions carved into wood on the old farm dwellings near his home in Kandersteg. Ogi does not hold any political office today. Nor has he been pulling the strings behind the scenes for his party, the Swiss People's Party (SVP), since standing down from the Federal Council. "Der Ogi" has nevertheless remained a prominent figure in Swiss life, almost like the embodiment of a father of the nation. The politician who was ridiculed as much as he was admired comes across as a man with no hidden agenda – Ogi does what he says. And Ogi says what he thinks. Making calculated statements is not his way. Ogi continues to dependably and tirelessly inspire confidence.

Ten enquiries, eleven refusals

"I receive ten invitations every day and turn eleven down," remarks the 71-year-old. The eleven refusals do not seem to tally with Ogi's constantly high public profile. He is in great demand. Seven books have been writ-

ten about Ogi the politician and the man. The English translation of the biography already available in German and French will appear in the autumn. A non-academic, Ogi, who his political opponents constantly alleged came from a poorly educated background, is today found on tens of thousands of Swiss bookshelves.

Greater acceptance than when actively engaged in politics

It is typical of Ogi to be pleased about his enduring appeal and popularity but to also put it into perspective: "I was never the textbook politician. I was a political newcomer, an interloper to some and perhaps a bearer of hope to others." The deeds of those who bear hope are sometimes glorified. Ogi reflects: "I have the impression that acceptance of my political achievements is greater today than when I was actively engaged in politics. Perhaps the level of approval is even unjustifiably high today." The traumatic events suffered by the Ogi family may well also have brought him closer to the people. In 2009, Adolf and Katrin Ogi lost their son. Mathias Ogi died at the age of just 35 from a rare form of cancer. This was a tragedy for Ogi, a man of great faith and hope: "I know that a great many people have to deal with terrible strokes of fate. But the death of Mathias is my greatest heartbreak. It leaves you searching for answers but finding none." His loss has made him appreciate how important young people are to him.

On Ogi's trail in Gasterntal

But which young people does he mean? The best way to get an answer to this is not by looking in the archives but instead by hiking through Ogi's local area – taking in the Bernese Oberland, then walking to Kandersteg and on to Gasterntal, this wilderness with its rugged rock faces and raging waters. Ogi invited all the leading world figures here

when he was a Federal Councillor. He went hiking here with UN Secretary-General Kofi Annan. He comes here when in need of reinvigoration: "It is a valley of strength. It is a special place that brings you closer to nature, puts our achievements into perspective and forces us to reflect. Why are we here? What is our purpose as human beings?" This year he has come here on a rainy summer's day to show underprivileged children from Moldova his "valley of strength".

Rain, thunder, lightning – and Ogi

Highly animated, Ogi talks to the young visitors about the importance of respect and showing consideration to people in need. He draws their attention to the beauty of nature. Spray falls down the mountain slopes on both sides of the Gasterntal. Ogi points to the force of the water and underlines that "nature is always more powerful than man". Right at that point, the landscape is lit up by lightning and a great clap of thunder rolls down the valley: "And nature answers when Ogi speaks." Some of the youngsters laugh. The children later thank him for the trip with a round of song. He is touched and wipes away tears.

"I want Switzerland to show it has a heart"

Seated at a table later, Ogi says: "You must have noticed – that brought me to tears. The struggles of these children really moved me. It was like a film suddenly playing in my mind." A film about children in need, in poverty – poor in terms of material possessions, poor in terms of prospects. This was not a chance encounter; it is a legacy from Ogi's time on the Federal Council. As Defence Minister, he set up the Swisscor foundation in 2000. Swisscor invites needy and disabled children from Eastern Europe to Switzerland and provides them with medical care here: "I want Switzerland to show it has a heart. I want these children to receive Swiss-quality care. I don't want money to be sent off somewhere simply to appease our conscience."

Contribution to a "better world"

Swisscor is Ogi's social legacy from his Federal Council days. The "Freude herrscht" (Joy Abounds) foundation, which he also founded, combines social and sporting aspects. This institution aims to encourage children to participate in sport and exercise.



During the direct link-up with Claude Nicollier in the Atlantis space shuttle in August 1992



New Year's address as Swiss President in front of the Lötschberg tunnel in Kandersteg in December 1999



Embracing former UN Secretary-General and friend Kofi Annan at the WEF in Davos in 2007

By focusing on young people in his projects and efforts, he is trying to make something good come from the death of his son: "We will not make the world a better place overnight. But we can improve it by focusing on young people." Ogi, once committed to elite sport and the architect of Swiss Olympic success in Sapporo in 1972, today primarily sees sport as "part of the school of life, an expression of solidarity and a contribution to integration". Ogi says: "All children should be allowed to make mistakes without this affecting the rest of their lives." Sport affords this opportunity, explains Ogi, the former UN special adviser on sport for peace and development.

He says nothing, but his thoughts are very clear

Such commitment is, of course, ultimately profoundly political. But what about his political commitment in general? Ogi remarks: "I am still a political person. But I no longer comment on day-to-day developments." The world of politics has changed since his day: "Politics has become more complex. It requires rapid decision-making, and we are no longer surrounded by friends as in the past." This indirectly reveals how Ogi has always perceived and conducted politics – the building and maintaining of friendships. When recalling anecdotes, François Mitterrand, Helmut Kohl and Gerhard Schröder emerge not as "official counterparts" but instead as friends "who understood our political system extremely well", and as friends who also sometimes made demands of him. When he wanted to leave after a reception at the White House, Bill Clinton ordered him to stay: "I got drunk in the interests of Switzerland that evening." Such good rela-

tionships made dialogue easier. Switzerland is today met more with a mixture of "envy and respect". The fact that "we are not members of anything" – not of the EU, not of NATO, not of the G20 – makes itself felt. He believes that any nation seeking to establish good relations with the rest of the world cannot afford to remain on the outside. Ogi says: "I'm not saying that we should join the EU now, but we must find a *modus vivendi*. That's the only way forward." This brings him into conflict with his party's official line. That happens occasionally. Ogi, a man in touch with the people, has also always dismissed as nonsense the popular election of the Federal Council called for by the SVP and since rejected by the Swiss people.

A man from the mountains with a cosmopolitan outlook

Ogi is a mountain dweller. And mountain dwellers have horizons that are limited – by mountains. So, where did he get his heart-warming cosmopolitan outlook that gave him a hangover after drinking with Bill Clinton? Ogi explains that he learned to develop a global outlook, respect and tolerance in Kandersteg, rectifying the distorted perception of mountain dwellers as people cut off from the outside world. His father, a forest ranger and mountain guide, taught him to show respect for tourist "outsiders". Tourism also brought prosperity to the valley: "My father went hiking with tourists while working as a mountain guide. But they meant more to him than a wage. They were his gateway to the world." It is this acceptance of outsiders during his youth that has always prompted him to take a strong interest in the lives of Swiss citizens living abroad: "There are few major Swiss clubs in Asia and

the Americas that I have not visited," he says. He always explicitly addressed his speeches to the "chers Suisses de l'étranger" as well.

Confident but without huge dreams

What major goals remain for Adolf Ogi? Sitting in the candle-lit "Waldhaus" restaurant in

ADOLF OGI

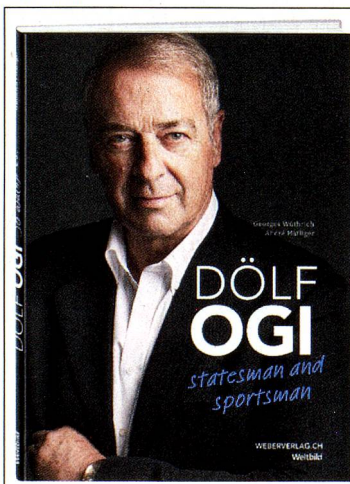
Adolf "Dölf" Ogi was born in Kandersteg in 1942, the son of a forest ranger and mountain guide. After compulsory schooling at Kandersteg primary school, he spent three years at the business school in La Neuveville on Lake Biel. Ogi worked for the Swiss Ski Association from 1964 and was its director from 1969. A promoter of sport, Ogi was elected to the National Council in 1979 as a representative of the Swiss People's Party (SVP). In 1984, he was elected president of the SVP. He was a member of the Swiss government from 1988 to the end of 2000, initially as Minister for Transport and Energy and from 1995 as Minister for Defence and Sport. Ogi was responsible for Switzerland's accession to NATO's "Partnership for Peace" programme and for sending Swiss soldiers to Bosnia and Kosovo. After stepping down from the Federal Council, Ogi became the UN's special adviser on sport for peace and development. In this role, he had an influence on the UN Year of Sport (1995). Today, Ogi focuses his efforts on humanitarian and charitable organisations.

Gasterntal, he waves the question away. He has in fact just said that he has yet to climb Mont Blanc: "But the time for that has now passed." He has no particular dreams left: "I am not fighting old age. I do look after my health – I still have it in me to climb the Blüemlisalp – but I do not feel I have to prove anything in old age at any cost. I don't think to myself that there are tasks that I really must complete." It is still pouring down outside. "I've seen the world and I'm content," says Ogi and reflects before continuing somewhat tentatively: "I am happy. I have experienced the worst tragedy that any one person could go through. But otherwise I look back on a life that I am extremely grateful for. I've been very fortunate."

It is time to go. Some rather undecided, drenched hikers are standing outside the "Waldhaus" in the driving rain. Ogi goes over to them and says: "Look at this magnificent scenery! These mountains! This landscape!" Everyone agrees that he is right.

MARC LETTAU is an editor at "Swiss Review"

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