Meeting with H.E. Prime Minister Tshering Tobgay in Brussels

On invitation of the European Commission, the Prime Minister Tshering Tobgay was in Brussels from June 2-5. The visit by the Prime Minister was the first made by a prime minister of Bhutan to the EU. On June 2, the Prime Minister met with the Honorary Consuls of Bhutan in Europe, representatives of Friendship Associations and business interest groups in Europe. While meeting the representatives of the friendship societies, the Prime Minister highlighted the importance of friendship in the world and was thanking for being friends of Bhutan. He mentioned that friendship cannot be taken for granted but has to be nurtured and celebrated. Friendship has to be kept relevant through interaction. The Prime Minister suggested to meet in future once a year with the representatives of the Friendship Societies to discuss relevant topics. The meeting was followed by a reception in honour of the Prime Minister.

Lecture by Dr. Hans van Noord

On June 12, SSB invited members and guests to the “Alpines Museum der Schweiz” in Bern for a presentation by Dr. Hans van Noord (Netherlands) on the topic „Melting Ice and Flash Floods. A real Threat for Bhutan“. The speaker had spent six years with his family in Bhutan and worked on issues related to natural disasters, infrastructure development, land degradation and water and soil conservation measures. In recent years he returned to Bhutan several times as a consultant to evaluate projects on Glacial Lake Outburst Floods. In his presentation in Bern Hans van Noord was focussing on the natural hazards of Bhutan and in particular the risks associated with water through floods. He was discussing the question: How well is Bhutan prepared for the challenges by natural hazards?

In Memoriam Karma Tobden

Karma Tobden, Manager of the Agromechanical Workshop and Proprietor of Mountain Lodge in Bumthang unexpectedly passed away on December 16th, 2014. We were all saddened by the event and we personally presented the condolences of the SSB to his family when we went to Bhutan in April 2015. Following an initiative of Dr. Pema Gyamtsho, the SSB Board started to collect funds among late Karma Tobden’s friends and colleagues in Switzerland to make a contribution to the Central school in Tang for a statue or for the altar within the planned prayer hall. A donation of CHF 2000 in the memory of Karma Tobden was handed over to Thinley Namgyel (Gup in Tang, son of Karma Tobden) and to Nidup Gyaltshen (Principal of Tang School) on May 4th, 2015.

Invitation of BSS President

The SSB Board is planning to invite Lyonpo Dr. Kinzang Dorji, President of the Bhutan-Switzerland Society BSS, to Switzerland in September to discuss and further develop our strategy 2016-18. We will be focussing on the future cooperation with BSS and look for possibilities how to strengthen our people-to-people approach. On September 12, 2015, the members of our society will have a chance to meet personally the President of our sister organization BSS.

Please note already this event on September 12; further details will be published as soon as possible.
SSB General Assembly 2015
By Silvia Hansel

On March 21, a rainy Saturday, about 85 SSB members and guests met for the annual General Assembly at the Federal Administrative Court (FAC) in St.Gallen. Rosemarie Frey and Julia Menk handed out passes and voting cards on arrival and showed the way to the welcome coffee and croissants in the lower floor lobby.

Quite on schedule the assembly took their seats in one of the courtrooms and was amused by the sight of the SSB board members sitting like judges on a raised podium.

The new board members Ruth Schwitter-Allenspach and Hanspeter Bürgi made their début on the panel after their election in 2014. As Jean-Luc Baechler, president of the Court, had asked to be excused, the meeting was opened by Dr. Christoph Bandli with a short explanation of the Court’s tasks. He also explained that the six Bhutanese students currently studying for a Master in International Law at the University of St.Gallen were attending lectures and would join us later. Two Bhutanese students currently attending the International School Schaffhausen (ISSH) were also present with one of their teachers.

In her customary charming way, President Marianne Frei lead through the Agenda points, which were all accepted by the assembly. In her Annual Report, she particularly emphasised SSB’s sister association BSS, who has recently renewed its board and members and its logo, now sporting a Himalayan blue poppy alongside a Swiss edelweiss. BSS has been able to secure a new, powerful support group of seven members. The BSS documentary on their activities, especially the Zhemgang school support program, drew a warm applause from the assembly.

Other salient points of the President's Report were the development of the Society’s Facebook site, which now counts 221 members, and the positive financial results of the past operative year.

The arrival of the six MA students in national dress drew a second round of applause from the assembled members. After discussion of the remaining points on the agenda, the assembly was invited to the customary apéro offered by the society, where individual members exchanged impressions and news.

The lively conversations were carried into the dining room, where the students served the lunch prepared by the Court canteen; so much so, that the assembly was somewhat late to reconvene for H.E. Ambassador Daw Penjo’s address. The Bhutan Ambassador’s speech touched on several aspects of the past year in Bhutan and on the relations between Swiss officials and the country; also reminding the participants that H.M. the Fourth King’s 60th birthday is being celebrated throughout the country in the current Wood Female Sheep year.

The Ambassador was followed by Dr. Christoph Bandli, who explained the Administrative Court’s program in cooperation with SDC, in which also the six Bhutanese court officials currently take part as MA students. The program enables exchanges of information as well as insights in the
Swiss judiciary system, and offers workshops and student exchanges (see below, Project Judiciary of Bhutan). The MA students then each held a short presentation on various aspects of the Bhutanese legal system and their part in it as court officials, a job, they said, “full of challenges and isolation”. Participants who could stay – despite being behind schedule – were treated to a visit of the Court building. Designed by the architects Stauffer & Hasler from Frauenfeld, the Federal Court building was completed in 2012. It is remarkable both through its position, which makes the most of being embedded in a very steep slope, and through its interiors, which combine modern linearity, high-quality materials and the constraints of the business into a serene and elegant whole. The visit ended on the roof terrace from where, on a more pleasant day, a wonderful view on the city of St.Gallen might no doubt be enjoyed.

Project Judiciary of Bhutan – Federal Administrative Court of Switzerland (FAC)
Oral presentation at SSB General Assembly 2015
By Dr. Christoph Bandli, Judge and former President of the FAC

In autumn 2010, I received a call from the Swiss Agency for Development and Cooperation (SDC). SDC was awaiting a delegation of the Judiciary of Bhutan and was looking for a court which would receive the delegation. After a quick research of where to locate the Kingdom of Bhutan on a world map, we accepted – and have never regretted it since. Shortly thereafter, during their visit in Switzerland in November 2010, the Chief Justice and three Justices of the Supreme Court spent a day at FAC. The visit consisted of a full day of information exchange and presentations about the FAC as well as of the Swiss legal system. After his return to Bhutan, the Chief Justice invited me to a reciprocal visit, and, in January 2012, an official Swiss mission went to Bhutan. The program of the FAC’s delegation primarily comprised visits to several courts, and contacts with Judges and their staff. Since the first official mission, my successor Markus Metz and I have visited Bhutan twice with the purpose to further deepen the relationship between the Judiciary of Bhutan and the FAC. SDC asked us to conduct two fact-finding

New SSB Members
By Julia Menk, Member of the Board
9 persons joined the Society Switzerland Bhutan since December. We are pleased to welcome the following new members:
- Christine & Werner Baumann, Matten b. Interlaken
- Juerg Mueller, Luzern
- Markus Stoffel, Gerzensee
- Monique & Matthias Wolfensberger, Stäfa
- Nathanael Ha-Vinh, Lausanne
- Russia & Igor Leuchter Ha-Vinh, Troinex

To them, and to all the other members of the Society, we would like to express our gratitude for their support of our Bhutan related projects.

Tashi delek!
missions which resulted in a mission report with recommendations. Subsequently a program of exchange and partnership, financed by SDC, was worked out.

Since then we received about 10 delegations from the Bhutanese Judiciary. Almost all the judges and justices have been here, and also two groups with persons responsible for the administration of the courts. A highlight was the presence of Chief Justice Lyonpo Dr. h.c. Sonam Tobgye at the inauguration ceremony at the new FAC building in St.Gallen in April 2012. Visiting the FAC in St.Gallen, the delegations are getting an introduction to the Swiss federal and legal structure, to the organization of our court, and an orientation about the Swiss Administrative Procedure and decision-making process at our court. We explain the responsibilities of the justices, the task of our bench clerks – all masters of law with the main duty of drafting the judgments – and the support and the assistance that we are getting from the general secretariat. The delegations visit the court building and attend workshops with the responsible persons of the building management and security, library, registration, archives, IT, HR, finance and controlling as well as communication and publication. Whenever possible, the delegations join a site investigation or attend a court hearing – not only at the FAC, but also at criminal or civil courts in St.Gallen or other parts of Switzerland. In addition, visits to a penal institution and the prosecution authorities as well as to the University of St.Gallen have been arranged. Twice a year small delegations of FAC are holding workshops in Bhutan for three to four days, on topics we are choosing together with the Judiciary of Bhutan. We are also supporting the Bhutan National Law Institute (BNLI) on designing, styling and editing the Bhutanese Law Journal and the Court Administration on setting up a Library and Archiving System as well as optimizing the existing Electronic Case Information System.

And last but not least, we are absolutely proud to have students from the Bhutanese Judiciary at the University of St.Gallen doing a Master of International Law. (See Interview in SSB Newsletter December 2014, p. 10, Meeting Point, http://www.bhutan-switzerland.org/pages/newsletter.htm)

The discussions between the delegations revolve around general matters, duties and functions of the judiciary in a constitutional democracy. First of all, we are interested in questions such as the position of the judiciary as third power in the state. Which are the indispensable conditions for institutional independence of the judiciary and what does judicial independence mean? What is the duty of the justice or judge on the job and outside his job?

The main goal of our partnership is the strengthening of the judiciary – in both countries. Cooperation and cultural exchange, picking ideas from one another, and benefitting from the other’s experiences can contribute to render the judiciary more trustworthy, solid, respected and accepted. To be successful justices and judges, bench clerks and administrative staff have to work hard, fair and independent. Liability, courtesy, engagement, humbleness must conduct our lives in and outside the courts. The judiciary is only as good as it is perceived in the public. This common awareness will be the leading principle of our fruitful cross-border collaboration across the continents.
Visitors from Bhutan in Switzerland

Visitors from Bhutan in Switzerland and guests of the Society Switzerland – Bhutan

By E. Werner Külling, Member of the SSB Board

**Lyonpo Dr. sc. techn. Pema Gyamtsho, Opposition Leader in the National Assembly of Bhutan, former Minister of Agriculture and Forests of the Royal Government (RGoB), previous Dy. Coordinator of Helvetas Bhutan**

According to Dr. Pema Gyamtsho, he enjoyed very much his private visit in Switzerland from April 13th – 25th, 2015. In his “second home” – as he always says and where he got his Ph.D. at the ETH in Zürich – he visited many of his Swiss friends in different parts of the country. In Zürich, he was a welcome guest of the Society Switzerland Bhutan SSB and had a working session with the SSB-Board. He got in contact and had discussions with the ETHZ, the City of Zürich and Helvetas as well as with SDC (Deza) in Bern. He met friends in the “Bernese Oberland” (arranged by Prof. Dr. Martin Menzi), in the “Swiss romande” as well as in the “Bündnerland” (arranged by Ruth Schwitter-Allenspach).

**Dr. Saamdu Chetri, Executive Director of the Gross National Happiness Centre in Bumthang, former collaborator for Special Duties in the Prime Minister’s Office in Thimphu and before Dy. Coordinator of Helvetas Bhutan**

In the first week of February 2015, a well-known visitor and longstanding collaborator of Helvetas Bhutan paid again a visit to Switzerland: Dr. Saamdu Chetri. He gave an interesting conference on “Gross National Happiness (GNH) – the amazing journey of the concept to assess and increase well-being” at the “Songtsen House” in Zürich-Albisrieden. This event as well as other contacts and meetings of Saamdu Chetri were organized by Dieter Zürcher (Partner KEK - CDC Consultants, former Resident Coordinator Helvetas Bhutan).

**Gyeltshen Dukpa, Chief Forestry Officer Social Forestry and Extension Division and Kinley Dorji, Deputy Chief Forestry Officer Social Forestry and Extension Division**

Gyeltshen Dukpa and Kinley Dorji are responsible for the Participatory Forest Management Project (PFMP) funded by SDC. They took part in a country led initiative on governing forest landscape in support of the United Nations “Forum on Forest” held in Interlaken. Afterwards they went on a study tour organized by Helvetas. Before returning to Bhutan, the two Bhutanese were guests at a dinner of the SSB in the Niederdorf in Zürich on February 12th, 2015.

**Books**

**Françoise Pommaret: Bhutan (new edition 2014)**

By Claudio Zingg

The totally revised new edition of the guidebook of Françoise Pommaret in French and in German (Edition Temmen 2015) allows a deep insight into the culture of Bhutan. With her profound knowledge and understanding of the country she explains the development of culture and politics. Even insiders will find a lot of new eye-openers. She guides us to well known sights as well as locations off the beaten track.
Bhutan is in the midst of a year-long nationwide celebration to pay tribute to His Majesty Jigme Singye Wangchuck, popularly known as His Majesty the 4th Druk Gyalpo, for the unprecedented peace, progress and prosperity that he has brought Bhutan within a short reign of 34 years. The fact that he was the youngest monarch at just 16 years of age when he ascended the throne in 1972, upon the sudden demise of his father King Jigme Dorji Wangchuck, unable to even complete his formal education when this huge responsibility was thrust upon his young shoulders, in addition to the fact that this small kingdom little known to the outside world was just coming out of self-imposed isolation and setting foot on the path of modern development, among numerous other enormous constraints, made his task all the more difficult and extremely challenging. Yet, he not only managed to overcome all these challenges due to his selfless service and dynamic leadership but went on to surpass the expectations of his prophesized destiny. He has not only brought Bhutan out of the shadows of poverty, illiteracy and backwardness into the bright rays of prosperity, peace, progress and hope but has also catapulted the then little known Bhutan onto the world stage as a confident, sovereign independent country and as a responsible member of the comity of nations, capable of giving back to the world in return for what it had received for its development process.

In his historic coronation speech of 1974, His Majesty had underlined two very important issues, which were to become the cornerstone of his policy and national goals to be pursued consistently. These were the need to achieve economic self-reliance and the need for the government and the people to join hands and work together with determination to take the country forward. Soon after he came to the throne, His Majesty decreed quite far-sightedly that Bhutan should maintain at least sixty percent of its geographical area under forest cover for all time to come, which is now enshrined within the sacred Constitution of Bhutan. Then came the very wise “high value, low volume” tourism policy, which is as relevant and in practice even today. In fact, His Majesty had many such profound mottos or slogans for various sectors namely, “small, compact and efficient civil service” to keep the government slim, “the middle path policy” to balance environment protection with development, “food self-reliance”, etc. But the most profound and outstanding development philosophy His Majesty propounded was when he said, for Bhutan “Gross National Happiness was more important than Gross National Product”, which has been the guiding policy for Bhutan’s development ever since, and has now caught the imagination of the whole world.

His Majesty Jigme Singye Wangchuck has been an unparalleled statesman, the greatest visionary and the most compassionate king. The Constitution of Bhutan and through it a vibrant democracy are His parting gifts. What makes him stand out as the greatest king is that he does not care for glory, fame or fortune nor seek reward or applause. History will speak of His Majesty the Fourth Druk Gyalpo as a monarch who persevered with great conviction, over the odds of his own remarkable popularity, to distance himself from the centre of power. His Majesty always believed that good governance can best prevail in a system where the people are the masters of their own destiny. Having put in place all the institutional arrangements for a vibrant democracy, and having supervised the crafting of a uniquely democratic Constitution, His Majesty retired at the early age of fifty-one in December 2006. Words can never express all the benefits that have accrued to the people and the country during his reign. His personal sacrifices, historic deeds and monumental achievements will never be forgotten but remain etched forever in the hearts of the Bhutanese people for generations to come.
It is only befitting, therefore, besides reflecting on His Majesty’s enlightened leadership and his selfless service, that the country comes together for thanking His Majesty for what he has given us and our future generations, and to pray for His Majesty’s health, happiness and long life on his 60th birth anniversary.

The full version of this text by Lyonpo Dr. Kinzang Dorji can be found on the SSB Homepage under “Downloads” http://www.bhutan-switzerland.org/pages/downloads.htm entitled “His Majesty Jigme Singye Wangchuck: The architect of Bhutan’s democracy and soft power”, as well as another text by the same author entitled “A personal tribute to His Majesty Jigme Singye Wangchuck”.

30-Year Anniversary of Diplomatic Relations between Bhutan and Switzerland

By Matthias Meier, Director of Cooperation / Counsellor, Swiss Cooperation Programme Office, Bhutan

In the eve of 8 May 2015, Bhutan and Switzerland marked the anniversary of 30 years official bilateral relations in Thimphu at the Terma linca Resort & Spa.

The Hon’ble Prime Minister Lyonchhen Tshering Tobgay graced the diplomatic anniversary as the Guest of Honor. H.E. Johannes Matyassy, Assistant State Secretary of the Directorate of Political Affairs for Asia and Pacific led the Swiss delegation. One hundred guests representing the Royal Government of Bhutan, Constitutional bodies, the Parliament, the Embassy of Switzerland in Delhi, the Swiss Agency for Development and Cooperation (SDC), Helvetas Swiss Intercooperation, the diplomatic, international and local Swiss community, as well as local partner organizations of Swiss organizations were in attendance.

H.E. Johannes Matyassy underlined the importance of personal friendships and people-to-people contacts in the Swiss-Bhutanese relationship, starting with the exalted friendship of the late Third King of Bhutan and the entrepreneur Fritz von Schulthess. He also highlighted that the Swiss people were commemorating a host of historic anniversaries in 2015, which take a special place in the collective memory of Switzerland. These marked moments of Swiss military prowess – as well as weakness –, the paradigm of political neutrality and the foundation of Switzerland’s global humanitarian engagement.

The Chief Guest, H.E. the Prime Minister Lyonchhen Tshering Tobgay sincerely acknowledged, among others, the many achievements of Swiss-Bhutanese Cooperation, in particular of the Pro Bhutan Foundation, Helvetas Swiss Inter-cooperation and the Swiss Agency for Development and Cooperation (SDC). Lyonchhen also emphasized the evolution of the long-standing bilateral relations of Switzerland and Bhutan.

Mr. Hansruedi Pfeiffer, Country Director of Helvetas Swiss Intercooperation, remarked on the occasion of Helvetas’ 40 years partnership with Bhutan the role of civil society and the concept subsidiarity as one leading principle in Swiss public affairs.

Cultural performances from both countries, including a joint musical production, enriched the evening. These were contributed by the Swiss Alpine Horn player, Mr. Thomas Rüst, the Ayang Music under its director and lead musician Mr. Jigme Drukpa and the Royal Academy of Performing Arts (RAPA).

The anniversary was organized and hosted by the Swiss Cooperation Programme Office of SDC in Thimphu.
Activities by SSB and BSS

Two Swiss teachers are starting the earlier planned SSB – BSS School Exchange Project. The key idea is to develop an interaction between students of the two countries.

Two Swiss teachers teaching in Bhutan
By Barbara Mühlemann and Christoph Schwitter,
Early Learning Centre, Thimphu

It has been almost four months since we arrived in Bhutan on a clear and windy day in January – and we knew it was windy because when we prepared for landing in Paro, it felt like a roller coaster ride. The pilot seemed to have his fun when he told us to sit back and enjoy; well, I was just glad when we landed in one piece.

The view however, flying into the valley, was breath taking and really something to enjoy. Since then, it has been no less of a roller coaster ride – every day still brings new discoveries and experiences.

We work as teachers at the Early Learning Centre, a private primary school in Motithang, Thimphu. Christoph teaches Math and Science and Barbara teaches English – and we are very excited about the exchange project that we have started with two classes in Switzerland. The first round of letters was exchanged in June, the students introduced themselves and our Bhutanese students had a lot of fun reading about and getting to know the Swiss students.

After a whole month of teacher training and preparation in February, the students arrived in March.

At least I (Barbara) found it a little overwhelming and challenging. But surprisingly, we got to know the children and the names pretty quickly. And even though we are far away from home – the children here are not so different from those at home: funny, active, curious, sometimes a little naughty and very open. But there are things that are different: We’ve never been addressed as “Madam” or “Sir” before (also by our fellow teachers). Or, in the beginning, I sometimes asked myself, why some of the kids would cover their mouth while talking to me – by now, I know that with this gesture, they show respect to us. Or another thing we enjoy a lot: All the children share, not only with us, but with all their friends – their snack and their lunch. During lunchtime, all the children sit together and have some kind of a big picnic. May be something that our kids back in Switzerland could learn from!

What else? We have to wear Kira and Gho to work: We can’t say how glad we are about Mister de Mestral’s invention of the velcro – it simplifies our morning routines enormously!

Very new for us was the Bhutanese curriculum that we had to study before starting to teach.

We had to get familiar with all the learning objectives and found that the Bhutanese students have a very packed schedule to work through. In general, the curriculum is something which, at least from our point of view, could need an update. Even though it seemed like we had a lot of time to teach, suddenly we are at a point where almost the whole first term is up and we have to

One of the biggest challenges in the beginning: We asked ourselves how we were ever supposed to learn all those names! Approximately 100 children, and in every class there was at least one Pema, one Sonam and one Tenzin...
prepare the students for their midterm exams – time really flies! But we guess that is a good sign.

By now we have settled in well and we are extremely glad about all the kindness and generosity that a lot of people have shown us. Via this article we take the opportunity to officially thank each and every one who helped us settling in. We were taken care of right from the start and felt a great hospitality which made it easy for us to get used to every day life here.

Activities of SSB Members

Stay and study in Bhutan
By Yvonne Straessle

It’s about a year ago that I came back to Switzerland from my adventurous stay and study abroad. Still I don’t really understand how this came about.

In my fourth semester at HWZ, a university in Zürich enabling the coexistence of work and study, I started fancying going abroad for a semester. But soon I realised that I’m not actually having the savings to do so – I mean covering the daily expenses and paying the frighteningly high amount of a semester fee while not working? Out of question! So I tried to stop thinking about it, but it didn’t really work... Only a couple of weeks later I found myself attending an information event about studying abroad. And there it happened. I can’t remember what I’d seen or heard but when I left the event the word Bhutan stuck in my mind and didn’t leave me again. Thenceforth hardly any day passed without me stumbling across anything that dealt with Bhutan. Fate decided: I quit my job, went through the Bhutanese college registration stuff, applied for a visa, booked a flight and sublet my apartment. By the end of July 2013 I landed in Bhutan, a country about whose existence I didn’t even know half a year ago.

Tsering Dolkar from the Royal Thimphu College (RTC), where I was registered to study, picked me up at the airport in Paro. She’d supported me a lot in terms of paper work and visa arrangements and I was happy to finally meet her in person. On our drive to Thimphu I became aware that my Bhutan study abroad is becoming true – I’m here! But where is here? That first night, which I spent all alone at the Helvetas’ guest house, I realised that I’m not having an idea of where I actually am. Nobody else than loudly screaming and scratching rats and noisy unfriendly barking dogs seemed to be around. But the fear and unease had lasted only one night. With the morning sun my excitement about what was expecting me rose and washed all concerns away. That day I managed to visit an apartment in town and I liked it from the very first moment. The best about it; I could move in right away. Thus I had a place to live – I had a home. The following days I spent discovering Thimphu so that my body and mind were reasonably acclimated by the time the semester at RTC started.

The first day at RTC Tsering Dolkar took over the role of a personal guide. She showed me around the college campus and explained everything to me. The campus lies about twenty minutes outside of Thimphu and is located up on a forested hill with a nice view over the town. Slowly but surely I got excited about meeting my new study groups. But before taking up studies, subjects needed to be defined. That sounds easier than it actually was. Study programmes at RTC differ from the ones at HWZ and hopping from one class to another to visit particular courses from different programmes wasn’t what RTC desired me to do. But due to my insistent reluctance of repeating lots of missed subjects
once back at HWZ, Tsering Dolkar and I somehow arranged that I could join subjects from different programmes. In the end I registered for Print Journalism, Creative Writing and Bhutanese Population, Culture and Economy. My new study mates were lovely and charmingly helpful in any way and the lectures were interesting. Cheerful girls from one class included me directly to their group and took me everywhere they went, introduced me to Chugo and Doma and invited me to birthday parties, their homes and even to a camping trip to Punakha. But it wasn’t all about studies! There is so much to discover in Bhutan; people, culture, sites, traditions, Buddhism, politics and last but not least the Himalayan Mountains. Never before had I been that fascinated by mountains. My Bhutan hobby was set! Hiking!

Luckily it didn’t take me long to find people with exactly the same intention, and together we climbed peaks almost every weekend; hiking and trekking turned out to be the best way to discover Bhutan! Because hiking in Bhutan does not only mean enjoying the beauty of nature and experiencing breathtaking views. It rather enables you to visit secluded monasteries, to participate in spiritual ceremonies, to get in touch with rural people and to become acquainted with traditional life. To boot it gives you the chance to free and open your mind, to step back and find yourself.

My time in Bhutan was just amazing and definitely mind broadening. I’m thankful and happy that I had the chance to go to Bhutan – and that fate doesn’t care about budgets.

You want more? Visit my blog and read ahead: https://yvonnestraessle.wordpress.com/

Meeting Point

Interview
By Otto Stern (OST)

This interview – given on May 16, 2015 – presents Dorjee Tso (17) and Kuendrak Tobbgyel (18), International School of Schaffhausen (ISSH), Class 11

The ISSH Junior College programme (www.issh.ch) is designed for both day students and boarding students, who stay in ISSH residence. Admission to the Junior College is open to students who have completed the IB Middle Years Programme or equivalent. The International Baccalaureate (IB) Diploma Programme is a challenging two-year curriculum, which comprises the final two years of secondary education (grades 11+12, ages 16-19).

Dorjee & Kuendrak: We are now in grade 11, actually almost finishing. We started in August 2014 and we have a scholarship for 2 years to complete the IBDP Programme, and then we have to look for universities and move on.

OST: Where did you go to school before you came here?

Dorjee: I started kindergarten and primary in “Little Dragon” school in Thimphu. I lived nearby and it was only about a five minutes walk to school. Then, in 5th grade I was sent to Taktse International School in Sikkim, and I spent one year there as a boarding student. Then, from grade 6 to 10, I studied in Thimphu at Dr. Tobgyel School. From there I applied to Yangchenphug Higher Secondary School, also in Thimphu, and I studied there for about 4 months. But together with my mother and my aunt we kept searching for schools in Europe – my mom was very keen of me going to Europe because it’s save and there are very beautiful mountains.
countries – and I applied to a lot of schools in Europe.

Kuendrak: From Kindergarten to grade 8 I studied in Bhutan in different schools. My first school was the Early Learning Centre in Thimphu, and then Druk School in the south of Thimphu, on the way to the Buddha statue. Then I went to Sikkim too to study in the International School, the same that Dorjee went to. I was there for 2 years, but because of several strikes every year, it was quite difficult to travel there, so I came back home and studied in Pelkhil private School in Thimphu. For grade 9 and 10 I studied in India, Kolkata, at Oaktree International School; it’s also an IB programme school, and has the same curriculum as we study here in Switzerland. Unfortunately the school had to shut down, due to complications with land and financial issues.

OST: How did you get here, to ISSH?

Kuendrak: Because of the closing down of my school in Kolkata I was looking for schools all around, and with the help of my mother we searched on the internet; because I always wanted to go to Europe, I applied for many European schools and took the admission tests through the Youth development Fund (YDF) in Bhutan. I was fortunate to get an admission and a scholarship here in Schaffhausen. The ISSH started its residential programme only this year, offering scholarships and boarding to students from abroad; before it was just a day school.

Dorjee: I applied to schools too, and I did tests, interviews, I tried an essay, and I got accepted here in Schaffhausen with a scholarship as well.

OST: What is your family background?

Dorjee: My parents separated when I was very young. My father has his own tour company, and he works also for the government as an advisor; my mother is working with the court and she too has her own business. I have a few siblings: my older brother is a Trulku and he is studying in India religious studies to become a Rinpoche; I have a younger brother and a little sister.

Kuendrak: I have three siblings; two sisters and a brother whom we adopted a few years ago, because he was abandoned in the hospital. My mother is the director of Bhutan Foundation, a NGO.

OST: Do you already specialize in a certain direction of studies?

Dorjee: We had a lot of universities coming to the school here presenting their programmes like Hotel Management, Medicine, Business, and recently we had a career presentation where different people came to the school and gave advise to the students. My major subjects are English, Biology and Chemistry. I have always been interested in Biology; Chemistry is quite difficult for me, but I really enjoy Biology, my favourite subject. Currently I am steering towards Medicine, but I’m also open to Hotel Management, because my grandfather owned a hotel in Thimphu and I used to work there. I helped with the staff, I used to help with the restaurant as well, and I really enjoyed this very much. But actually I am really open to all choices!

Kuendrak: I’m very keen on studying Economics or Computer Science; I’ve always had a passion for computers and technology; my three subjects in the IB are already Economics, Physics, and English. Also, in the future I would like to do something in Physics, Particle Physics and Engineering; I want to keep these options open as well.

OST: Did you do practical works beside the school?

Dorjee: Our boarding house head, Miss Fox, organized a programme during the ski-break where each of us had to volunteer. I was given a chance to work at a Veterinary practice. I was present for two operations at the operation hall, and I also helped with minor things like stitching and injecting vaccines, and also playing with the animals, mostly cats and dogs, and a few birds; it was very sad to see them in boxes! After this experience I have a very different look at animals and at working with animals as a doctor. Experience is very important!

Kuendrak: Here in Switzerland in our internship I worked with Spitex, helping to nurse the elderly, I went to different households – also my German is quite poor – it was a very good experience, the people where very nice; mostly I helped delivering food and medicine. Then, because my uncle is working at the UN in Copenhagen, Denmark, I visited him during my holidays, and I also kind of interned at the UN, helping out with computer jobs, like upgrading the computers of the staff. Back in Bhutan my grandmother helps in an organisation called Jangsa Animal Saving Trust, so I also helped with the animals and giving out clothes to the poor.

Dorjee: In Bhutan I also worked with Tarayana Foundation; we worked in a group for a cleaning campaign. We also went to houses of poor people and delivered things like coats and shoes and helped to clean their houses.
OST: Your life here, how is it organized?

Dorjee: We are living in a boarding house community, about 15 minutes from the campus, very close to the Munot.

Kuendrak: We are eight students of different nationalities, two boys from Slovakia, one boy from Poland and one from China, one girl from India and one from Austria.

Dorjee: Actually we are living in an apartment building, but after the summer we are moving into a property the school bought, a whole house. We, the three girls, share the biggest room with a balcony, and a separate room for studying. Along with us we have a supervisor, her name is Aina, she is from Spain, and she lives with us in the girl’s apartment as well.

Boarding Students with Dorjee and Kuendrang

We have a small kitchen we use mainly for breakfast. Together with the boys we also have a common main kitchen in another apartment where we cook ourselves. Each of us has to cook dinner once a week and also to do the dishes. This week we had the Asian week, a Thai week, and everyone had to find a Thai recipe. It was very interesting to see the colleagues from very different background cooking Thai! I cooked on Friday but my food was too spicy and they didn’t really like it!

OST: No wonder, when a Bhutanese is cooking!

Dorjee: I missed the burn, but still liked it a lot!

Kuendrak: During that same week I had to make something from Germany; so I made the Königsberger Klopse, kind of meatballs in a creamy sauce; it also was a lot of work, but at the end of the day it was very good.

OST: Do you have enough time for cooking?

Kuendrak: Sometimes it’s quite stressful, but it is part of the basic training for independent life, that is part of the ISSH College philosophy. – I also play basketball for the school team, and I’ve also joined the Club in Schaffhausen, currently I go there for training two times a week.

Dorjee: I play basketball with my friends on the weekends, we play at a basketball court near the Munot. There is also a running track, I love jogging with our German teacher, she does a lot of running and participates in Marathons as well!

OST: And what after the IB, do you already have plans for the future?

Kuendrak: I intend to apply to universities in Europe, and even in America but I am willing to keep my options open.

Dorjee: I’d also like to study in Europe, or maybe in Japan, or Australia or the States, I’m looking everywhere.

OST: When you where working for Spitex you said your German was not good enough, so how is your German know?

Kuendrak: At the school we are required to take classes of a second language, and I’m taking German; it’s getting better and I can understand much more. When we go out people are normally speaking in Swiss German and I can understand a few words, but it’s not very similar to the High German we learn at school! Before I had studied French for two years, but they recommended to learn German, so it’s easier to get along here.

Dorjee: I take German as well; we have 4 classes per week and it counts for the Bachelor. We are at the beginners level now, because we started only last year.

OST: Did you have a chance to travel in Switzerland or Europe?

Kuendrak: During my spring break I visited Geneva and stayed at the Embassy there, the Bhutan Mission, I had very good company, and enjoyed Bhutanese food (laughs).
Dorjee: I went to Singen, Germany, it’s not very far, we usually go there to do some shopping. I’ve been to Zurich as well, and during the winter break I went to Austria with a friend of mine, Jenifer, my roommate, her family offered me a place to stay in Innsbruck. And for a school excursion we went to Gland, near Geneva, visiting the Sustainability Management School there, it is where the IUCN (International Union for Conservation of Nature) is, an organisation of the UN.

Kuendrak: And we’ll be going to Bhutan during our six weeks summer holiday to see our families!

OST: Thank you for this very interesting interview!

Dear reader: Would you like to invite one of the students to your house during their school holidays or for a weekend? They would be really happy to get to know other places in Switzerland. Please contact Marianne Frei if you are interested. Thank you in advance.

And don’t forget!
Under the heading “Meeting Point” the SSB Newsletter regularly features interviews with Bhutanese and Swiss people working, studying and visiting in the respective host country. It will give insight in the experiences and activities of Bhutanese and Swiss people in contact.

Contributions to this rubric from members of SSB and BSS, as well as the circle of readers of the Newsletter are most welcome!