Ernst Bromeis

EVERY DROP COUNTS

Swimming for the right to water

rüffer & rub visionaries

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Swimming for the right to water

For those who thirst for life

The author and the publisher wish to express their
thanks for the generous support provided by

Elisabeth Jenny-Stiftung

First edition Autumn 2016

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Font: Filo Pro
Printing and binding: Books on Demand GmbH, Norderstedt
Paper: Cream white, 90 g/m²

ISBN 978-3-906304-23-6

"You are naive"— a passion is born

My devotion to water was the product of neither a revelation nor a near-death experience. Nor did I experience a fall from a horse on my way to Damascus, one that caused Saul to become Paul.[1] The fact that I became a swimmer with a penchant for expeditions and, subsequently, an "ambassador for water" is, rather, the end-product of a series of minor events. These built up to the point that the dam holding back my will had to break.

Some find what I do and how I do it to be logical. Some—those who have known me for a long time—say "That's got you written all over it, Ernst!" The latter include those who studied physical education with me at university, during which time I completed a degree in the training of high-performance athletes. The latter also comprise my colleagues at the K-11 school in Zuoz, Switzerland, at which I taught.

Many from a third group have gotten to "know" me through the media's reports on my first expedition in the canton of Graubünden. As I have had repeated occasion to learn, this group has had a hard time grasping why I have chosen to take this course of action. Their "explanations" include that I am having a midlife crisis, that I am dropping out of society, that I am on an ego trip or that I am a publicity hound.

A woman came up to me after I had given a lecture, and said, in all frankness: "You are naive! Why are you doing this?" Her tone was patronizing and accusatory. Its implicit question was "how can anyone give up everything near and dear for a vision or for a mission?"

As is probably the case with all of us, the seeds of this revolutionary change in my life were planted in my childhood. I well remember an important moment in my life. It took place at a small brook, which ran through the vicinity of Ardez, a village in Switzerland's region of Lower Engadine. This was where I grew up, where my father was the teacher at the village's school. My father had two great hobbies: making music and keeping bees.

All throughout my childhood, in August and the end of the summer holidays, it was my job to help my father harvest the honey produced by his bees. My father and I would lift the honeycombs from the boxes containing the bees. We would then knock the remaining bees off the honeycombs. This would send the bees tumbling into the containers designed to catch them. Our next job was to place each of the honeycombs in their designated places in the large-sized box, which was capacious enough to keep them separate from each other.

The center of our beekeeping was a hut that stood all by itself on a meadow located near Ardez. The hut was surrounded by bushes, flowers and deciduous trees. In my mind, I recall the honey harvest's as always having taken place on sunny days whose warmth would turn the interior of the hut into an oven. My father's philosophy was to not harvest all of the honey, but, rather, to leave several full-length honeycombs for the bees. This enabled them to survive the winter in their sanctuary of their box. My father was very close to his bees, even though there were thousands of them, all completely anonymous, each lacking a name. Despite this, my father was involved with each and every one of his "lady employees". I believe that my father placed great importance on being a member in good standing of a large cycle of activity. This "membership" required his respecting and caring for "his" bees in ways—such as the leaving them enough honey to thrive mentioned above—showing his

gratitude for and appreciation of them and their work. My father was neither plunderer nor exploiter. He was, rather, a "co-exister", one cultivating a reciprocity of utility and protection, of living and let live.

During such "honey harvesting", our wont was to work for two hours in our hut, and then, as a relief from its sauna-like temperatures, to take a break. We would walk for ten minutes to the Valdez. This little stream tumbled downwards to the En river. Prior to our sitting down on the stream's banks, we would check to make sure that no bees had hidden themselves in the other's jacket or under the protective veil. The harvesting—which yielded a large range of quantities of honey—left the bees aggressive. We had no intention of being stung by them. This would hurt us—and cause them to die.

Once we were sure that we were bee-free, we would then unpack our picnic basket, which held sweet cider, coffee and cookies, and have a snack, during which we would let our feet dangle in the water.

Once during such brook-side snacks, I posed the following question to my father. Speaking in the local language of Rhaeto-Romanic, I said "Dad, if you could do it all over again, what would you change?" His answer: "I would have showed less respect for authority." My father did not mean by that he would have been more impudent or arrogant, or less law-abiding. His wish was, rather, to have displayed more courage when living his life.

The brook rushed past our feet. Its water did not, however, take my father's words with it. These words stayed, rather, with me, shaping my life in the process.

I have now reached the age of my father at the time of this conversation. Even in those days, though still a boy, I grasped the import of his words. These words have never stopped gaining

pertinence to my life. My being an "ambassador for water" has caused me to expose myself more and more to the general public. That requires my repeatedly calling upon my courage. There are times when criticism or the failure of an action to proceed as planned cause me to want to hide. This wish is always countered by the realization that my failure to stand up for my objectives and values would cause me to regret my having given in to my fears my life long.

Once our break was over, my father and I packed our basket, donned the white overalls and the veils, made sure that everything was intrusion-proof, and walked slowly back to the beekeeping hut. The next beehive awaited us. Later on, after we had brought the honeycombs back home and had placed them in the basement, it was time for my mother to do her thing. She was responsible for two key phases of honey harvesting: the spinning of the comb to release its honey, and the latter's being filled into preserving jars. The honey was a yellow miracle.

Milk and honey—figuratively and literally—do thus flow in Switzerland's Lower Engadine region. But no one swims in either liquid—nor anywhere else in the canton. In my childhood, no one knew how to swim. Sports were in those days already a great passion of mine. I was a passionate cyclist. Swimming was simply not an option—and remained such until I at the age of 25 encountered Gunther Frank. He was a lecturer on swimming at the University of Basel, which is located on the Rhine. This opened up a new world for me.

I am convinced of the following. Had I learned to swim as a child and had this been in swimming pools, I would have never become a long-distance swimmer. Those who swim in pools see the water as being another piece of equipment. They see swimming as being an athletic "competition", one whose "rules" they observe while pursuing it. When I am on a swim-

ming expedition, I feel more like a sailor than a swimmer. I pick a course and swim in the direction that I myself choose.

It was Gunther Frank who kindled this passion in me. His face would light up while discussing even the tiniest of turbulences and underwater currents formed by the swimmer's hands and feet. His passion caused him to give hours-long talks from his vantage point on the edge of the pool. Gunther's audience was his swimmers, and his subject was their—often tiny—errors in form.[2]

During my study of physical education at the University of Basel, I never went—not a single time—swimming in the Rhine or in a lake. Despite this, it was my studies and specifically Gunther Frank which and who gave me the deep-seated trust in my ability to go my own way. I of course had no way of anticipating at that time that this way would take the form of expeditions in Graubünden, in other parts of Switzerland, and in other countries traversed by the Rhine—Gunther was in fact very negative about swimming in the river. Had I not gotten to know Gunther and had not learned from him the ability to "read" water, there never would have been a "blue miracle".

Many years late, Gunther was about to retire. He asked me whether I wanted to be his successor at the University of Basel. After a long period of careful consideration, I turned the offer down. I was not enthusiastic about a future comprised of teaching swimming from the edge of a pool—and of working in a regimented environment. The search for a challenge worth mastering went on.

Notwithstanding the words uttered by my father on the banks of the stream, what I lacked for a long period of time was the courage to finally go my own way. This is never easy to do, especially when you've grown up in a world in which everything—even the smallest of things—is governed by society-imposed imperatives. Switzerland's Lower Engadine region is beautiful. Its society is tightly controlled. The region's people are there for each other—and watch each other closely. Courses of lives are often determined at their inception. Or at least that used to be the case. Maybe things have changed in the interim.

I left Ardez thirty years ago. Despite this length of time, a feeling of constraint still overcomes me when I think of my years in the area, which is traversed by the River Inn.

My native tongue is Rhaeto-Romanic. I love the timbre of its words. The language also symbolized for me the situation of my life in my homeland. The word "Romanic" is a synonym for me for "preserving" or "protecting". Why? Because the small minority speaking this language in Switzerland often devotes itself to preserving and protecting it and the past in which it grew up, to the administration of its culture and traditions. This concentration leaves little room for the creation and implementation of new approaches to living. Living in my homeland was for me like living in a jar containing conserves.

One encounter symbolizes for me my life in the Lower Engadine. I ran a couple of years ago into an artist from the region. He is world-famous. He is a world traveler, one who owns prop-

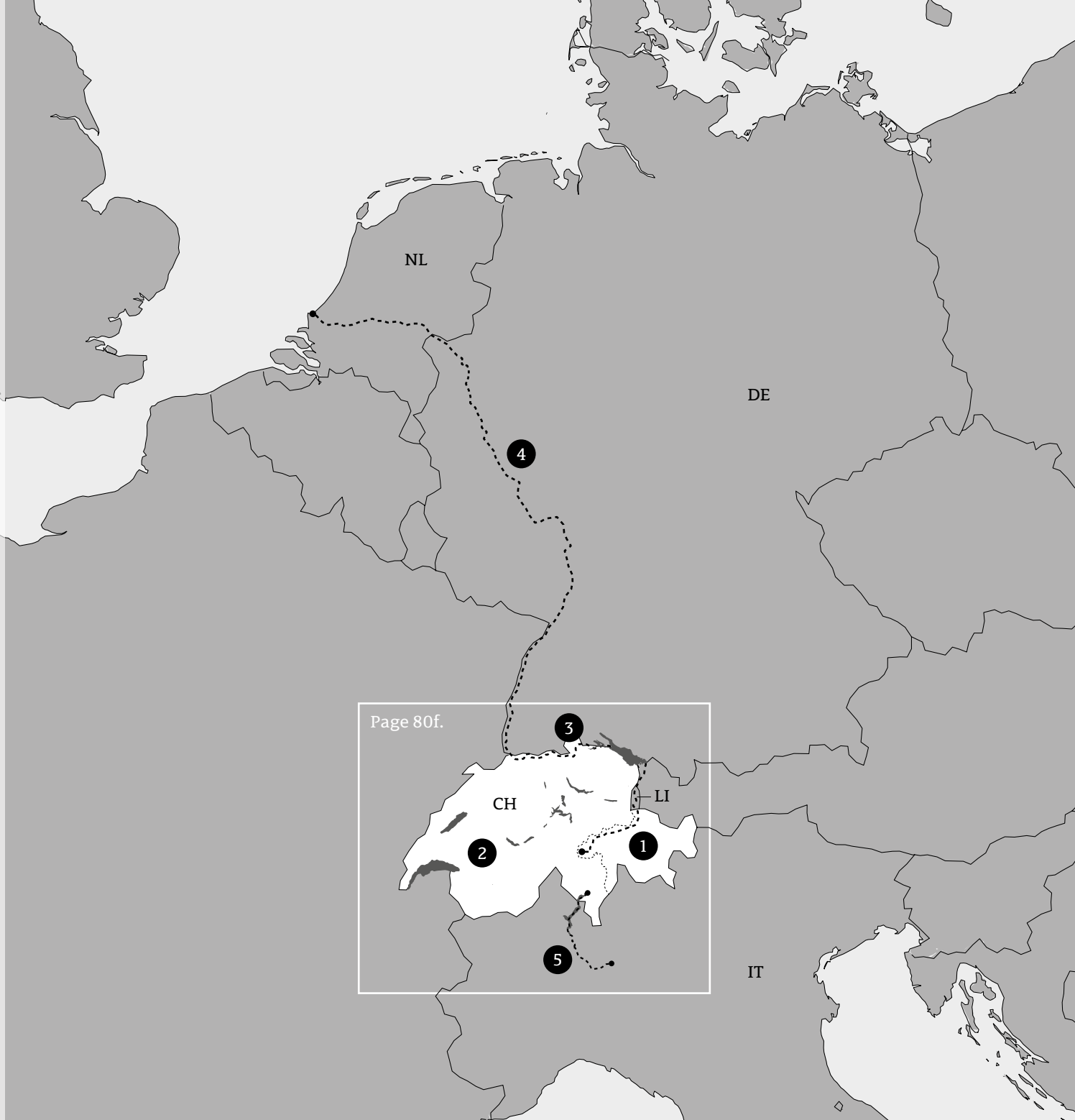
1 ***Il miracul blau—Grischun 2008***
Start: Lägh da l'Albigna; Finish: "Tränen der Lucrezia", Chur; 200 lakes in two months

2 ***Le miracle bleu—Suisse 2010***
Start: "Rütli" pier, Lake Lucerne; Finish: Chapel bridge, Lucerne, Lake Lucerne; 13 lakes in various Swiss cantons, 300 kms in 32 days

3 ***Das blaue Wunder—Rhein 2012***
Start: Lag da Toma; Objective: Hoek van Holland; End: Breisach (Germany); 426 kms in 13 days

4 ***Het blauwe wonder—Rijn 2014***
Start: Lago di Dentro; Finish: Hoek van Holland; 1247 kms in 45 days

5 ***Il miracolo blu—Milano 2015***
Start: Locarno/Tenero; Objective: Milano Darsena; 135 km, End: 12 kms prior to finishing line; Lake Maggiore (65 kms), Ticino River (20 kms), Naviglio Grande (50 kms); 123 kms in 58 hours



1 ***Il miracul blau—Grischun 2008***

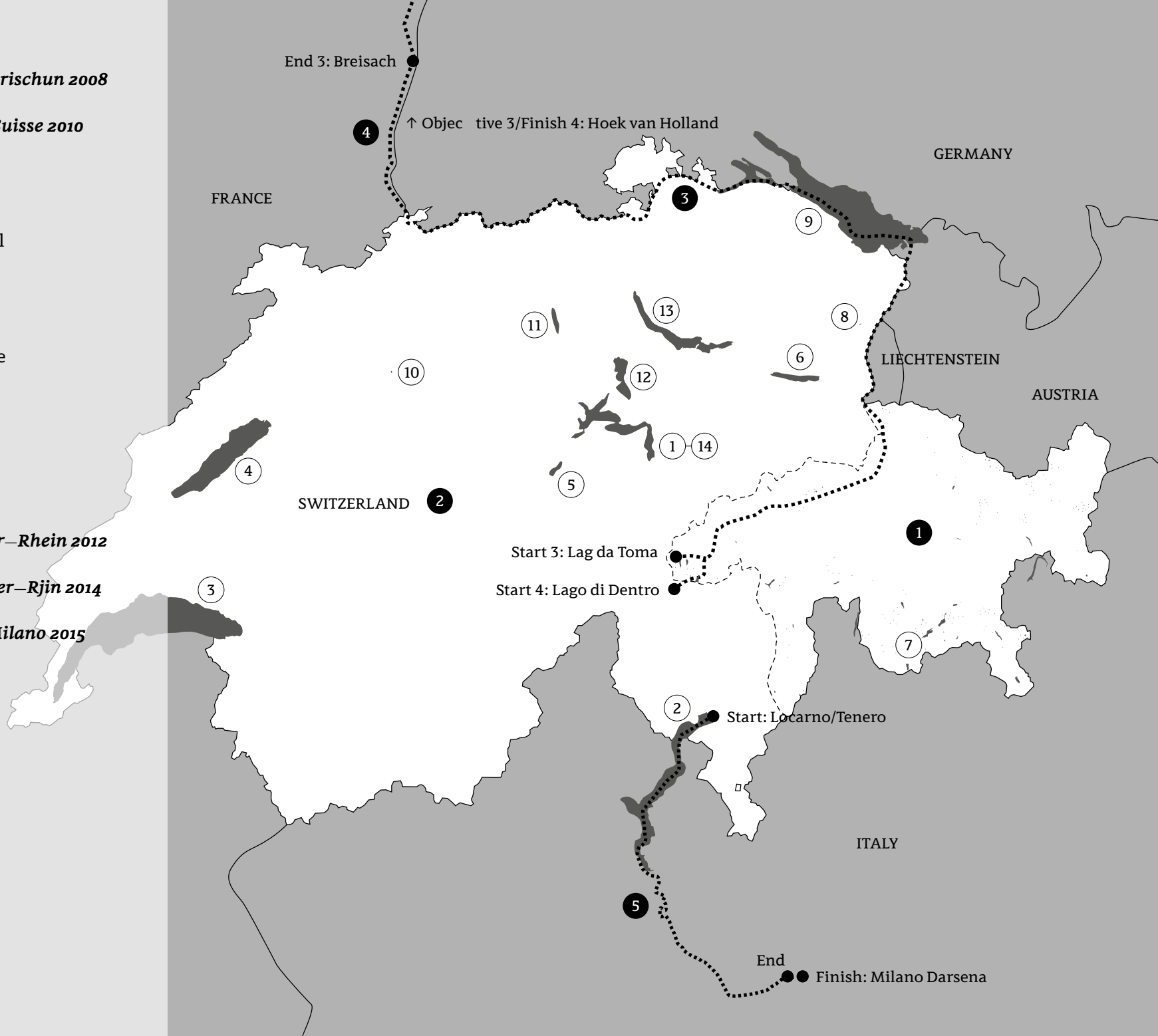
2 ***Le miracle bleu—Suisse 2010***

1 Lake Lucerne
2 Lake Maggiore
3 Lake Geneva
4 Lake Neuchâtel
5 Lake Sarnen
6 Walensee
7 Lake Sils
8 Sämtisersee
9 Lake Constance
10 Burgäschisee
11 Lake Hallwil
12 Lake Zug
13 Lake Zurich
14 Lake Lucerne

3 ***Das blaue Wunder—Rhein 2012***

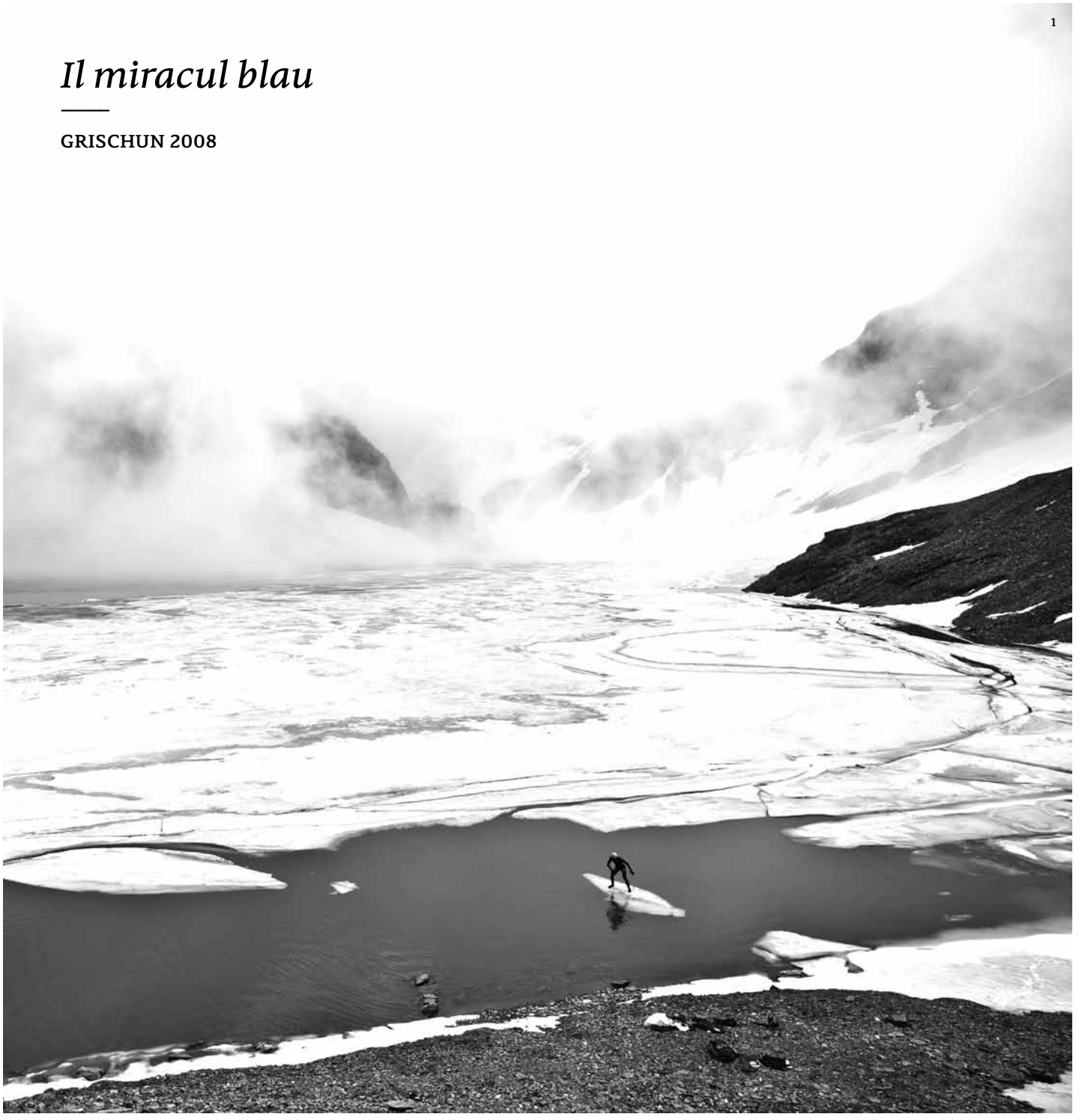
4 ***Het blauwe wonder—Rjin 2014***

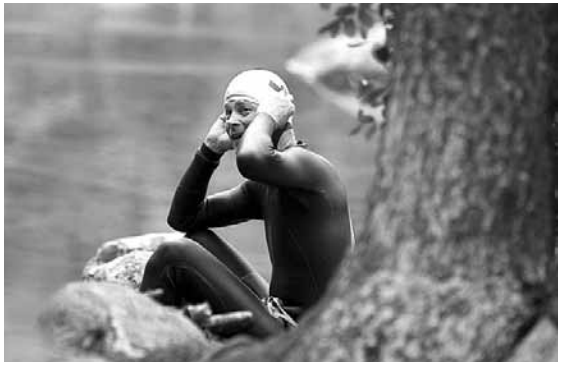
5 ***Il miracolo blu—Milano 2015***



Il miracul blau

GRISCHUN 2008





1 | Putting on a show for a later swim in “Laghet la Greina”
2 | I used my bike, whenever possible, to make my way from lake to lake.
3 | Diving into my expedition on the Lägh da l’Albigna
4 | Coming full circle at the christening in 2016 of “Laghet la Greina”. I visited the lake in 2008. In those days, the lake lacked a name.
5 | Water-related games took place at a variety of places. They were staged to playfully showcase the topic of water.
6 | A wonderful welcome on Partnunersee

4


Greina, 15. August 2016
Seetaufe „Laget la Greina"
Schweizerische Greina-Stiftung (SSG)
Fundaziun Svizra dalla Greina (FSG)

5


ewz

6


Wir wünschen
Ernst Bromais
guten Sch
artnuniersee
Sulzfluh

Our daughter Damaris was seven years old. We were eating lunch. She posed us the question: "What does 'blue miracle' mean?" She had read a children's book. In it, a knight experiences a "blue miracle" (translator's note: this is a German idiom for "getting the shock of your life"). My wife and I tried to explain to her why the idiom actually means "having a horrible experience/an awful surprise". We used examples to convey such. I suddenly had an inspiration. I now knew the name of my project: "The blue miracle—il miracul blau".

I had tried out lots of titles prior to my first expedition, which would be comprised of my swimming across 200 lakes in Switzerland's canton of Graubünden. They included "Seeson" (a pun on the German words for lake and season) and "Seensucht" (a mix of "lake" and "yearning" in German). But it was the combination of "blue" and "wonder" that won the day. As we saw above, "blue wonder" does have a negative connotation in German. But the two words do succinctly express all of my ideas. The words also express the quintessence of my ideas in French ("Le miracle bleu"), Italian ("Il miracolu blu"), English ("The blue miracle") and Rhaeto-Romanic ("Il miracul blau"). The words denote the planet Earth, upon which no life can come into being without water.

"Eu stögl cumanzar davant mia porta!" was the motto with which I launched my first great expedition. Its translation from Rhaeto-Romanic: "I have to begin in front of my own door!" The expedition bore the name "The blue miracle—Graubünden 2008". It was preceded by months of planning. The expedition started with the Lägh da L'Albigna. This reservoir is located in the Italian-speaking part of Graubünden. It is situated 2100 meters above sea level. It would be the first of 200 lakes in the canton that I would swim across.[79]

The lake is some two kilometers long. It is fed by water trickling down from glaciers and bubbling up from springs. The lake is the source of electricity and prosperity for the Val Bregaglia lying below it, and for regions farther down. The lake is embedded in a landscape of rocks, snow and ice. I had a stroke of luck. The sun was shining on July 4, 2008. The lake was nevertheless not inviting. The water's temperature was 4°C. This posed a challenge to my body and my mind. I would have to swim between the brook flowing down from the glacier into the lake from the south and the fear-inciting concrete walls to my north. This swim changed my life. It was first time that I was going out for me and for my vision.

After I had crossed the lake, a journalist from Zurich wanted to know what it was like to swim a half an hour in a refrigerator. I told him what it felt like to be so exposed. I told him of my hands and feet, and how I had no longer perceived them as being part of my body. I told him of my head that felt like it was being stabbed by the icy cold, of the confusion of thoughts running through my brain, a confusion caused by the impairment of the flow of blood in it, and, finally, of my fear of losing consciousness and dying.

The journalist obviously wanted to nail me down. He posed the following leading question: "You swam across a dead body of water. That can't be fun, can it?" I answered by saying "This dead body of water brings life to regions stretching to Zurich!"[80] And I spoke of my mission of making the people living in Graubünden aware of their being blessed by having so much water and so many lakes. This water constitutes the base of economic life in the Alps. It is water in its various forms that has given us the prosperity that we have built up and enjoyed over the past 150 years.

Our dependency on it is complete. Tourism is based on water, be in its liquid or frozen forms. Ever since the falling of snow in winter became unreliable, we have required the production of artificial snow to maintain our highly lucrative tourism industry. To accomplish this, water in great quantities has to be supplied to the cannons shooting the artificial snow. Each hotel and each resort in our region has by now created attractive offerings of wellness programs, so as to keep the local beds filled in all four season. An important employer in our region is the mineral water industry. The jobs it has created are found in regions that would otherwise have none. Hydraulic power plants form the financial backbone of remote valleys.

The Alpine culture of Graubünden (and of Tyrol) has been shaped for many centuries—back to the 15th century—by living on and from water. Andreas Rauchegger wrote a book that bears the title "Wasserträger. Wasserverkäufer. Wasserschenker. Der Homo aquamportans". Translated, this means: "Water carriers, sellers and donors. Homo aquamportans" (the latter is Rhaeto-Romanic for a "person who carries water"). This book describes how the people of Graubünden came to have their water-related occupations[81] and how these imparted to them a fascination with water—a fascination to be seen on the houses of the Lower Engadine, which feature the "Sgraffiti" decorations showing nymphs and waves.[82] In the region's villages, the wells were the place for people to meet, and to have their cattle, goats and sheep drink. This livestock was the base of farmers' lives in those days. An experience that I had every day during my childhood in Ardez was Chasper's and Annina's, a farmer couple, bringing their sheep to the well for a drink. Another one was my grandmother Chatrina's doing her laundry at the same well. To this very day, there is a schedule for the cleaning of the well. "Well neighbors" rotate taking care of this task every Saturday. When it was the turn of my family—the Bromeis-Hatecke clan—to do the cleaning, I was "allowed" to take part, and to clean the "bügl"—"bracket".

My expedition in Graubünden was designed to showcase all of this, and to make people aware of the importance and beauty of water. "When I see something as being beautiful, then I appreciate and value it" was the official message of the expedition. "Beautiful" and "beauty" can be replaced by the word "love". I believe that our getting to know and to love a person is the basis for finding a new way of dealing with each other. Our finding a thing to be beautiful or "lovable" means that we will show a greater degree of respect when dealing with it. Appreciating water—realizing that it is a resource that gives us life—in a habitat that has a surplus of water is a challenge, as is valuing, and therefore not simply using it as if it will always be there. Few people were in attendance during my swims in the lakes. To attract people, I organized water-related games on the banks of the lakes in Scuol, St. Moritz, Savognin, Lenzerheide, Via Mala/Thusis and Chur. These games enabled me to get to know tourists and local residents. The games were designed to give participants a feeling for amounts of water and for the work that it requires. One game featured 162 one liter bottles of water. They were to be used to build a tower that went as high as possible. Another game set up a chain of people. Their task was to fill a bucket whose capacity was 162 liters with water as quickly as possible. Why 162 liters? Because that is the average amount of water consumed every day in our latitudes. The games were attended by people of all generations. They were publicized by my partner organizations.[83] They were successful, with this especially applying to Scuol and Lenzerheide. The children showed a great deal of dedication in playing them.

A suggestion was broached to me during my expedition to Lägh da L'Albigna—that I should undertake this project in Africa, where people were dying of thirst. I never planned on drilling wells in Africa, as this is already been done by a great variety of organizations. My objective was always to show the people living in this region how lucky and privileged we are, and how we can share this. I considered staging a water-related project in the "water pumping station" of Europe, at the source, to be a true challenge.

When I am in an ice-cold lake, I am swimming. At that moment, I am swimming for myself. In the moment when I fight with the cold, I am having this experience solely for myself. At such times, I am not an ambassador for water, but rather, a swimmer on an expedition. When I am swimming, I am not changing the world as a whole, but, rather, my own. I swam all the lakes in Graubünden under my own responsibility. There was no security back-up. Andrea was my photographer during these swims. He frequently reminded me that he would not be able to save me, should I experience difficulties. I was aware of this. Medical experts also warned me about the dangers. A cooling dip in water whose temperatures are in the single digits requires courage. Doing such every day for weeks on end is, by way of contrast, a true challenge. This repeated exposure to icy water can give rise to cramps, to heart stoppage and drowning. I was, however, convinced that I had the experience requisite to dare this. To train for my swims, I descended into wells, or traversed ice-cold rivers. My days involved up to 14 hours of travel. This time was spent reaching the lakes and swimming in them. I was often by myself when doing such. Risk was my faithful companion. This is because there is no such thing as 100% security.

I had the greatest respect for thunderstorms. Looking at a thunderstorm in the making and deciding whether or not to swim is not always an easy task. The perils of a thunderstorm notwithstanding, the most life-threatening situation that I experienced did not involve such.

The situation arose in Lago di Poschiavo. I was exhausted from a 12-hour day, which I spent riding my mountain bike and jogging to the mountain lakes in the vicinity of Pontresina and the Diavolezza, and then swimming them. The day concluded with my climbing over the Bernina pass to the above lake. A TV team accompanied me for the first half of the two kilometer swim. After having completed their shots, the boat zoomed off to the end of the lake, which was in the town of Miralago.

I love being alone in the middle of a lake. I experience during such moments a feeling of absolute freedom, and this although I am actually a "prisoner" of the water. The environment in which I find myself at such moments is a source of life and death. Both are irretrievably linked to each other. Together, they form a whole. While I was swimming, the sun was going down over the Piz Palü range. I didn't notice this romantic scene. In my mind, I saw the people on the banks of the lake, a kilometer away, enjoying the vistas. But for me, who was still in the middle of the lake, there was no time for dreaming.

I still had some 15 to 20 minutes to swim before reaching the shore. Exhaustion began spreading its way throughout my body. Cramps starting roiling my arms and legs. Everything hurt. Panic arose in me. None of the people on the banks realized that I was experiencing difficulties. I had to repress the panic. I turned off my feelings, and turned on my mind. Experience told me that one doesn't die immediately from cramps. I told myself while I was in the middle of the lake: "Let the water carry you. You will not immediately drown." I attempted not to fight the water, but, rather to reconcile myself with it. This was predicated upon the water's always being stronger than you. I

began stretching my muscles, which then caused their counterparts to cramp. I had no choice but to swim with the pain. I made it to the end of the lake. I told no one what I had just experienced. I wanted to keep it for myself. At that moment, I had the feeling that the others would not have understood it. We humans can bear cramps when we know how long they will last. The banks and the salvation that they offer have, however, to be in sight.

The expedition's two months were a wave of ups and downs. These were emotional in nature. I experienced a succession of absolute highs and the downs caused by unpleasant physical complaints. These ups and downs were thus also physical in nature. I had to overcome thousands of meters of elevation to reach the lakes. Most of these had yet to be "discovered" and existed in tranquil isolation. Hardly anyone had ever ventured into them. In many cases, the only way to get to them was making my way down narrow paths—or bushwhacking. My MO (modus operandi) was to arrive at the lake, make my preparations, swim across it and then leave. After my wake had dissipated on the lake, there were no traces of my visit to it. The path I had taken was no longer to be seen. It had vanished. My expedition was long. It repeatedly gave me the feeling that each lake has a soul of its own, that it was permitting me to be a guest making a brief visit to it. I was being allowed to dive into it, with this permission's being granted under the proviso that I would depart from this special place. The relationship I had entered into with the lake remained, however. We had become friends.

I took a "souvenir" from each lake. I filled a little bottle with its water. That gave me a collection of two hundred bottles. It is not for sale. Its value is that of ideals and thus not commercial in nature. The question arises: does one kind of water have a value greater than another? Is the water from a large-sized reservoir worth more than that of a small mountain lake which lies hidden in a recess? I was repeatedly asked whether I had had the water analyzed. My answer was always "no". I was not at all interested in the water's chemical composition. I wanted to disseminate values and not figures. The latter impact only over the short term. The telling of stories has a more lasting impact.

I gave lectures. At them, I reported on my expeditions, and attempted to embed facts on local and global water-related challenges in these accounts. Such figures and the analyses built around them were abundantly available. Melding them with stories about history and about the expeditions in the lakes' waters gave them a soul, gave them a value transcending that of the figures themselves.

The stories of how the lakes got their names have retained to this very day their fascination for me. Some two thirds of the lakes in Graubünden have names. These tell stories and relate lore of a dark and frightening nature: Il lai Mort (The sea of death), Lai Sgrischus (The terrible lake) and Lai Pers (Lake of loss) are names that definitely do not embolden swimmers to cross them. This was also the case with the horror stories related to me prior to my swimming the lakes. I was told of vortexes and maelstroms and dangerous currents. None of them turned out to be true. I never tired of my daily encounters with the lakes. Every day brought something new and fascinating. Case in point:the Lai Grisch. This "gray lake" lies high above the Val Tuoi in the Lower Engadine. Its name had led me to believe that its water would turn out to be gray. I was therefore surprised to see that its name must have stemmed from its bottom, which was sand whose graffiti-like shapes were produced by Nature's pen. The water was so clear that I couldn't see it.

Two months after I had started my expedition in Lägh da l'Albigna, I concluded it by making my way from Arosa and

Rothorn to Lenzerheide and Chur. That enabled me to visit the last lakes in the expedition: Obersee, Untersee, Schwellisee, Älplisee, Totseeli, and, by way of conclusion, the two bodies of water in Lenzerheide. This expedition's final event was my official arrival in Chur, which is the capital of Graubünden. This put an end to my toils.While writing these lines I recall the emotion that I felt as I climbed into the "Tränen der Lucrezia". This was the symbolic end of the expedition. My emotions: I had experienced a thousand adventures during my expedition —and had gotten a great realization. All of my swimming took place in drinkable water. It is no accident that we in Central Europe speak of stopping for "a bite to eat" and not "to have a drink". I often experienced hunger during my swims through the Alpine lakes. This was due to my high amount of calorie burning. I was, conversely, never thirsty. This was due to my being able to satisfy my thirst with lake water while swimming.