

"We have to create good conditions for integration"

An interview with Eva Jaisli, CEO PB Swiss Tools & Admir Opardija, Management Consultant

Eva Jaisli, with your company PB Swiss Tools, you are producing high-quality tools in Emmental for the whole world - and the company is 30 percent women. At the beginning of the 1990s, you also employed twelve Tamil refugees - and now their children are already working at PB Swiss Tools. How did this come about?

Eva Jaisli: Actually, the situation was much like it is today. In the early 1990s, many people from Sri Lanka came to Switzerland and especially many went to Berne. Emmental was not very keen to accommodate these refugees and to provide the necessary infrastructure. We collaborated with the authorities and looked for solutions together with other companies. We proposed training and various forms of employment. In our company, however, the employees also engaged themselves. They supported the people and explained club life to them, since clubs in our country are important for networking. It was a common task, and we mastered it together as well as possible: authorities, employees, employers, clubs, and teachers were in close contact with each other. *Admir, you came to Switzerland in 1993 as a Bosnian refugee. When you were at the Kantonsschule in Zurich-Wiedikon in 1997, a committee decided that you could continue*



Eva Jaisli and Admir Opardija, on the Hardbrücke in Zürich



your education in Switzerland and not have to return to Bosnia. How was it to receive so much support?

Admir Opardija: I was fortunate enough to meet many people like Eva Jaisli. In 1997, the Bosnian refugees were called upon to return to their homeland. My father was happy to go back at the time, because he had never really took root in Switzerland. My parents let me decide whether to stay here or not. There were about 20 of us young people in Zurich who were at the midpoints of their education. It would have been difficult for us to continue our education in Bosnia since the educational system is completely different there. I came to Switzerland when I was nine years old and had my place of residence here, as well as my friends and my girlfriend. When we were confronted with the decision, relatively many people from our schools and circles of acquaintances immediately came to our support. Articles appeared in the papers and, within a short period of time, ten thousand signatures were collected. I received unbelievable support - even people that I did not know stood up for us, and invoked our right to education.

Mrs. Jaisli, you say that your Tamil employees are very loyal and an asset. How much effort on your part was required?

Jaisli: The integration proceeded very differently. If we take language as an integration criterion, then there are some people who now speak "Bärndütsch" fluently, others less so. The former, however, may have children who support them in everyday life. I believe we have been able to convey to the new employees that they are welcome and can settle down here because we offer them a long-term perspective. They realized that doors were open to them. We have introduced accompanying support measures, and training and language courses for example. We still offer the latter. Sometimes we put on the pressure; we convey to people that it is important not only to attend one

Eva Jaisli

Born in 1958, for 20 years has run the family-owned business PB Swiss Tools in Emmental, which produces high-quality tools for the whole world. She completed basic studies in psychology, and social work with a postgraduate degree in business management/organizational development. She also holds an MBA in International Marketing.

Admir Opardija

Born in 1983, he came to Switzerland in 1993 as a refugee from Bosnia. He passed his examination in economics at the University of Zurich and now works for a management consultancy firm.

language course but several. We formulate common goals. It is also our responsibility to ensure that employees can reach these goals in the end. We have to create good conditions, otherwise work integration does not function.

As the head of a company, you have called for more commitment from Swiss employers because it is one of the social obligations of businesses to hire refugees. What responses did you get?

Jaisli: Widely varying. I received very supportive and appreciative messages, but I also had to listen to many harsh comments. Certain people wrote that they would never again buy a tool from us. Others invoked the priority of Swiss nationals. At Swissmem, the association of Swiss mechanical and electrical engineering industries that I am a member of, we emphasize more and more in the context of bilateral agreements that it is not only about recruiting skilled workers abroad but primarily about offering work to people who are already

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here and live with us. I have had many discussions to explain this point. Basically the response to my call was very great. The topic polarizes: I had the feeling there was only black or white.

Admir, when your parents returned to Bosnia, you went to a foster family. Later, you completed an economics degree at the University of Zurich. In other words, you made a dream career for yourself. How did you manage to do this, and what are the conditions that are necessary to do this?

Opardija: I think the way was already paved right at the beginning: I came with my parents to a relatively rich community, to Uitikon/Waldegg. There were 15 children in my class and I was the only foreigner. My teacher said I should try to take part as well

as I could; I did not take any additional German classes. This method appealed to me because I was treated like everyone else from the beginning. My parents gave me the necessary support; they always said: "Your education is the most important thing." In addition, my teacher supported me very much. He later wrote a letter to the Kantonschule Wiedikon and described my situation to the person who was responsible. To be honest, I never felt my refugee status. When my parents returned to Bosnia, a friendly

"If we do not find a solution today as to how to employ refugees, then we know exactly what financial and social consequences this will have" Eva Jaisli

family from Uitikon/Waldegg agreed to accept me. I lived with this family for seven years. They treated me as if I were their own son. I owe a great deal to my Swiss family; they are role models for me. So if we refer to the black-and-white image from before, I have only really come to know the white side of Switzerland. **Jaisli:** I think you had the potential to meet expectations. Expectations can also be a drive, and the people around you believed in you, which is extremely conducive. **Opardija:** Yes, that is important. One actually often sees oneself as others see one, especially if one is a foreigner. My example also shows that investment in education is worthwhile. I have a good job today, spend my money in Switzerland and pay my taxes here. **Jaisli:** As a businesswoman who wants to be successful, I must also take the location of the company into consideration. So I also have to deal with the problems that exist at the location. "If we do not find a solution today as to how to employ refugees, then we know exactly what financial and social consequences this will have. That is why investing in the education and work integration of refugees is always worthwhile, I am convinced of that.

The refugee movement divides society: on the one hand, there are the angry citizens; on the other, the voluntary helpers. The fact that populism is a response to the negation of

problems through politics is also becoming increasingly evident. What do you feel is the mood in Switzerland?

Jaisli: Just like it was outlined: very controversial. I myself have four children, from 22 to 31 years old. The youngest is studying in Geneva and has been involved for months in offering assistance to refugees, including giving language lessons or facilitating access to university lectures. The middle daughter completed her law studies in Berne and works at Swiss Interchurch Aid (HEKS) legal aid for asylum seekers. Women that I know are active in asylum-related matters; they are looking for solutions in regards to assimilation and integration. On the other hand, I am also aware of angry citizens who greatly disapprove of the refugees. In our company, we offer internships and introductory courses for refugees. We show the young people our operation; management takes over our trainees because they are about the same age as the refugees and they match better. I see many people who are engaged in the search for pragmatic solutions. In my opinion, the positive and constructive forces predominate in society. **Opardija:** Among people, fear is always easier to generate than calm. That is why the angry citizens generally have it easier. It is where the fewest foreigners live - in East Germany, in the canton of Appenzell or in the canton of Uri - that the opposition is the greatest. The vote on the implementation initiative, however, has made me extremely confident. I felt that a jolt went through the entire society. People who had not until then publicly expressed themselves politically suddenly spoke out. I think the result was an important sign.

In the vote on the implementation initiative, various civil society groups have triggered a massive mobilization against the SVP party initiative. How do you assess the influence of these political actors that are not affiliated with any party?

Jaisli: There are many positive forces that carry out important work with their activities and initiatives, also in the field of charities and NGOs. Nevertheless, it would be a fallacy to believe that these forces could drown out the voices from politics. In the case of a vote, it is decisive as to who can specify the tone, and who brings on board those who do not yet have an opinion. And in the end, the result is also, unfortunately, often a question of money. **Opardija:** Should rules be set up as to how much money can be spent on voting? **Jaisli:** I am not the right person to be able to judge this. But I've been terribly annoyed regarding the result of the mass immigration initiative because we failed as employers. It should not gotten to that point. We should have expressed our opinion very clearly and met emotionality on a factual level. With our data and facts, we could have clarified a great deal. But such a campaign would, of course, have cost money. **Opardija:** From my point of view, politics is currently not as close to specific topics as the individual citizens are. In a democracy, however, this is basically nothing bad. From my point of view, it is even a plus, because the attempts by political actors

are also perceived in the public sphere, and politics generally responds to them at a later time. In my case, that was just the same back then.