

«I came here with nothing»

Interview series about home (2) She cleaned the flats of the rich, then the single mother got the opportunity of a lifetime. Today Maura Wasescha is one of St. Moritz's leading real estate agents. She says, "Here is my heart."

Yann Cherix

She deals with chalets with a starting price of 10 million Swiss francs. Those are huge sums. What does that do to you, Ms Wasescha?

Nothing. That's simply my business. Just this morning I showed a chalet on the Suvretta hill to a prospective buyer that costs not less than 90 million Swiss francs.

But the proximity to such wealth does trigger something: Envy, admiration, disgust. Or all of the above.

I know where I come from. I know who I am. I am the daughter of an Italian tunnel builder. I came here 44 years ago - with nothing. I worked hard myself, it wasn't made easy for me, and yet today I have my own business in St. Moritz with four employees. I am not rich in the classical sense, but I have money to live a very good life.

That seems grounded. The immigrant has put down roots in the Engadine.

Yes. Up here is my home. My heart is in St. Moritz.

Not in Italy?

My parents' country is the most beautiful in the world. The culture, the food, the Made in Italy. I love going there on holiday, but try and go to a hospital in Italy. Or to apply for a new passport.

Do you lose your Italian heart because of such institutional problems?

Maybe my heart is just where I am at the moment. I also dream in German, Italian or English. When I was in Costa Rica for a longer time, I even dreamed in Spanish. And maybe I've always been very Swiss - or at least had the characteristics that are attributed to Switzerland. Punctual, organised, ambitious.

When did you come to Switzerland?

It was on July 21st 1978, a beautiful Sunday. I was driving with my uncle Pierino over the Bernina Pass, I saw this white glacier with a blue sky. I was 19 and on my way to a great adventure.

Switzerland was for you the land of opportunity.

Totally. My parents were simple people. I was born in Florence, but I grew up in Liguria and in the Valtellina. It was all too confining for me, I always wanted to get out into the wider world. When a cousin called and needed help in St. Moritz, I was immediately available. I had just finished my collage degree and actually wanted to go to the University of Milan.

But you became a waitress at the train station buffet in St. Moritz.

My cousin's wife had a serious car accident. It was her job. I was to stay there until she was healthy again and could take up the coveted job again.



"You can learn one thing above all from the rich: diligence. Maura Wasescha. Picture: Daniel Ammann

Real estate from 10 million

Maura Wasescha is one of the leading real estate agents in St. Moritz, one of the world's most lucrative markets. She only gets involved in properties worth 10 million Swiss francs or more. The 63-year-old runs her own office with four employees. Born in Italy, she has a Swiss passport, is married and has four children. (cix)

How was your first day at work?

I had a late shift, from 3 p.m. to midnight. All I did after work was cry. I did that often.

What happened?

There were guests who did not treat me with respect. Not all of them, of course. But some of them tested me, provoked me, on purpose spoke Swiss German quickly so that I didn't understand anything and had to ask questions. After all, I only spoke conventional German.

Anyway, it was hard for a young Italian girl back then.

How did you get out of there?

I wiped my tears in the morning and was behind the counter on time. I memorised the menu and stopped putting up with everything. Soon I had the restaurant under control, manning the tables three times over lunch. Even then, I was profit-oriented.

You met your first husband in the station buffet.

Yes, he was a railway guard from the Italian-speaking Poschiavo. He earned 1800 Swiss francs and our flat in St. Moritz cost 900 francs per month. Then we had two children. Massimo and Michela. I started cleaning holiday flats in addition to my housewifely work. We could use every franc. But the situation became more and more precarious.

Why?

My ex-husband had excesses with alcohol. I don't want to go into all the things that happened. But after seven years I filed for divorce.

That was a daring step back then.

Yes, especially as an Italian, a Catholic and without a secure job. I was afraid that I wouldn't get custody of my children. I hired a lawyer.

A divorced mother with two children in St. Moritz - and suddenly you were on your own.

I took every cleaning job there was, became caretaker of seven houses. At night I shovelled snow endlessly. I had many conversations with God at that time.

And how did these conversations go?

I often asked him why I was being tested like this. Why all this pain? But I still had the certainty somewhere that my path made sense, that it would all turn out good. My mantras that still apply today: I lose today so that I can win tomorrow. And: Never give up.

When did you start winning?

I cleaned the flats of the real estate company Interhome and

I met the boss there, Bruno Franzen. He saw my potential. I was always positive at work, spoke four languages. So I started doing small translation jobs for my superiors. One day the boss offered me a internship - for 450 Swiss francs a month. I was a single mother of two children. I asked: "Bruno, how am I supposed to live on this money?"

Yes, how?

Somehow it worked. I jumped into the water without knowing how deep it was, how cold. During that time I ate a lot of Cervelat, a lot of this traditional Swiss sausage.

Didn't you lose your appetite?

After a few months I had proved myself as a real estate agent, the clients liked me, I expanded my network and received my first real salary, 3650 Swiss francs. Later I made the branch in St. Moritz the best-selling in the country, and in 1987 I became branch manager.

You are profiting from the real estate boom in the Engadine. Today in particular, there is a heated debate in the region about its effects. Luxury flats and chalets for the rich are displacing the locals. That's exactly how you earn your money.

This is a complex socio-political discussion. Of course we need affordable housing. But all of us up here also benefit from this boom. And to be honest, this issue is almost as old as tourism. When I was a single mother, I had to pay 2800 Swiss francs a month for a 4-room attic flat in St. Moritz Bad. And that was in the 90s.

Times can change, improve.

Yes, but I don't like this demanding attitude. It's something fundamental, call it an attitude to life: I was always unfamiliar with resentment, and I was willing to work very hard. 14-hour working days, hardly any holidays. I never complained.

Where did you get this work ethic?

From my parents. But it's also my character. And I have learned a lot, I had to. That's why I can't understand the debate about a general four-day week. I wouldn't know how to finance it. As a 7-day business, I would have to have teams, i.e. 8 employees, each working 4 or 3 days a week. I could not afford that as an SME.

There are certainly arguments in favour of it. Better work-life balance, more effective work.

Yes, I understand these arguments very well. But there are many open points.

You sound, if I may say so, a bit like a big industrialist.

"Maybe I have always had Swiss characteristics in me: punctual, organized, ambitious."

I have no problem with that. In fact, I have learned a lot from these people.

What?

To have a vision and to work hard. Diligence.

But most of these people had better starting conditions than you.

That's probably true. But still, these people work hard. 90 per cent of my clients are from Europe, mostly entrepreneurs. They are expanding, doing a lot for society, but they don't talk much about it. I work with polite people who have a lot of resources but don't want to show off.

How do you deal with people like that?

These are "gente di mondo" - well-travelled people who know exactly what they want. So you don't have to bullshit them. It takes manners and self-confidence. A firm handshake is important. Obsequiousness goes down badly.

You have been Swiss for decades. What can you say about this country today?

As I said, Switzerland is my home. My four children live here. I wouldn't want to live anywhere else in the world: the best health system, the best schools. Living in Switzerland is probably more expensive than elsewhere, but we also have the best infrastructure and the most beautiful tunnels.

That's the tunnel builder's daughter talking.

(laughs) Yeah. But we should all see and appreciate these things. That's what I sometimes miss here: the appreciation for our high standard of living, for all that we have.

And there speaks the super Swiss.

One hundred percent. Well, maybe not quite: my blood is still one hundred per cent Italian. And I'll never eat Cervelat again either. (laughs)

Series: Home

This summer, in a series of talks, we will be looking at the big concept of home, which takes on a new meaning in uncertain times. We talk to refugees, migrants and expats - instead of about them. (red)