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Second World War: the intellectual defense of the country

Glorified fatherland

The experience of the 1939 national exhibition – a path-breaking adventure for the wartime generation – was programmed by a man close to fascist thinking. A journalist has caused uproar with this thesis.

Hardly any occasion so strongly marked the world war generation and the intellectual and political development of Switzerland up to the end of the Cold War as the 1939 nation-

Alice Baumann

nal exhibition. A “national shrine” which the Swiss found it a “national duty” to visit, as president of the Confederation Etter called it in retrospect in the “Landi Book” (Atlantis 1940).

In contrast to that of 1914 in Berne, which was a mixture of trade fair, fun fair and kermes, the 1939 national exhibition in the lake Zurich basin was presented as an ideological teaching event, organized by topic. The exhibiting firms were not allowed to use their own names, but had to adapt to a concept which, as was stated in the official guide, will show “to the Swiss people and to foreigners in an impressive and easily comprehensible way what we can and wish to do”. Expressed more clearly, “to convince the Swiss people of its moral value and its abilities is one of the main missions of this national demonstration”. The effect of the Landi on the Swiss self-confidence was accordingly high.

So far so clear: this is generally known, but now Charles Linsmayer, an editor at the Berne daily, “Der Bund”, has brought further explanations which have provoked a flood of verbal protests and angry readers’ letters. In his contribution, which covers three newspaper pages, rich in quotations, we get to know more closely the intellectual background of the Landi and of its godfather. Linsmayer postulates that Armin Meili, an architect and politician, was not only covered in praise but possessed almost dictatorial power.

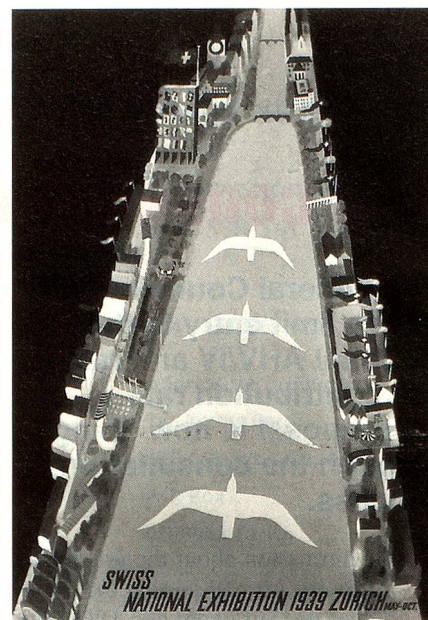
According to the tradition by which Meili was the creator of a patriotic counter-position against National Socialism, the persistent researcher puts forward the thesis that Meili’s Landi had possibly not had the effect of an antibiotic that nipped the illness in the bud, but worked as “a type of vaccine which fought the threatening poison by actually bringing it into the body”. Linsmayer buttresses his criticism with arguments from the mouth and pen of Armin Meili which coincide with the blood and soil pathos of German National Socialism and Italian Fascism.

Executions glorified

In addition, Meili’s quotations are brimming with declarations of love for and oaths of loyalty to the homeland and the fatherland. The contribution on national defence becomes horrifying at the point when Meili emphasises that the introduction of the death penalty has worked wonders and takes pleasure in reminding readers that “about fourteen traitors have had to be shot”. Clean, orderly, ideologically uniform: that is how Meili sees his ideal Switzerland.

Meili, body and soul an artillery lieutenant, had been born aloft by an incredible enthusiasm when the First World War broke out. During a visit to the German defense staff in 1929, he recognized that “nowhere in the world is the art and technique of war so well understood and pursued so thoroughly”. And he described his satisfaction about being amongst career soldiers.

In addition, from today’s viewpoint, Meili’s picture of women was reactionary. The Bund journalist-researcher even compares it with the ideal anchored in National Socialism. Any woman who was not young, untouched, with a silky blond body, apparently ran the danger of being described by the Landi director as “carrion”, a “vampire”, a “blue stocking” or an “unattractive old maid”. He thought that a woman should “in the first place put herself under the protection of a strong man”. In addition, “sentimental proverbs were mostly untrue” and a woman



existed to provide a good life for her man.

As racially pure as possible

Meili, who devoted a good 130 pages of his memoirs to singing the praise of his forefathers, was proud that he came from a family which had not been affected by the great migration and still lived in the shadow of mount Pilatus. He was convinced that he came of pure “Aryan blood” and never tired of referring to the French as Gauls, of comparing the faces of Russian generals with “Kalmuks and other half-Asian rascals”. He referred to the Mexicans as “half-castes of disturbed Aryan descent”, black-skinned people reminded him of sea-lions.

When Armin Meili rejected other people as employees or compatriots – among them the gifted Swiss architect Le Corbusier, he referred to the fact that they were racially mixed or even without a fatherland: “also faced with the danger of belonging to the small people, I hold on with both hands to the soil of my country”. This attitude was part of his intellectual national defence.

It is not surprising that a German Nazi whispered to him after a visit to the Landi: “you have done it better than we could have done with all our Party propaganda”. For the majority of the population of the time, this applause definitely came from the wrong side. Because, for them, the Landi was a “simply comprehensible and idyllic roof” over Switzerland and contributed to the “cultural and political defence against foreign totalitarianism, and the contemplation of traditional values”, as historian Hans Ulrich Jost expressed it in his “History of Switzerland and the Swiss people” (volume 3, page 131). ■