

The Swiss Olympia

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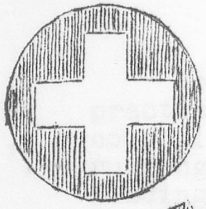
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HELVETIA

Monthly Publication
of the Swiss Benevolent Society
in New Zealand.

AUCKLAND, 1st February, 1936.

No. 5

Swiss residents of New Zealand have been deeply bereaved by the news of the death of His Majesty King George V., and we wish to express to our English and New Zealand friends our sincerest sympathy for the loss of their great Monarch.

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ELECTION RESULTS

The results of the election of our National Council which took place on October 27th last, were, quite contrary to the New Zealand elections, without any drastic changes. The following mandates were returned, showing the principal party strength and the previous seats in parenthesis:

Conservative Democrats	48	(52)
Catholic Conservatives	41	(44)
Farmers & Trades Party	22	(28)
Liberals	6	(6)
Social - Democrats	50	(50)
Communists	2	(2)
Social Political Party & "Young-farmers"	7	(4)
Independent	7	(0)
Various other factions	4	(1)

The Conservatives (Democrats & Catholics combined) are still the strongest party and in spite of extensive propoganda and special efforts, the Socialists made no progress whatever. The Independents (new faction altogether) are the sole party to register an outstanding success, which was chiefly due to their leader, G.Duttweiler. We referred in our previous issue, No.3, to this rather remarkable personality. Mr.Duttweiler had the unprecedented distinction of being elected a "Nationalrat" in three different electorates, namely, Zürich, Bern and St.Gall.

THE SWISS OLYMPIA

In the 14th and 15th centuries, the Swiss Confederacy was surrounded by enemies. Training in the art of war was a necessity of life. The spirit of Olympia, which had lapsed into oblivion for 2000 years, and which in the Middle Ages was only practised by the knights and nobles, came to life again in the whole of Switzerland. Thus, it came to pass that the small democratic communities in town and country revived the cult of physical strength and discipline.

Boys of from eight to sixteen years of age were compelled to practise gymnastic exercises under the control of the district councils; they had to go in for sprinting and long-distance running, putting the weight, shooting with the cross-bow, swimming, fencing, riding, and other trials of skill. The magistrate and other leading men of the community personally supervised the training. At the age of sixteen those found fit for the task were allowed to go to war with the army as baggage-boys. Alien children who had regularly attended the exercises, were given citizenship. Between the ages of sixteen and eighteen, the cadets learned to wield the eighteen-foot spear, the halberd and the sword, and were subjected to the regular discipline of the troops. "Hornussen" (hornets) and other ball-games were introduced to add variety to the drill. Sprinting was endowed with special importance. The foot-soldiers had to practise keeping pace with galloping horses. Practice with the cross-bow and gun made the eye keen, the body agile, and the will strong. Even in those times the Swiss were excellent and enthusiastic marksmen, just as they are today.

At the age of eighteen, when he had been trained in the use of arms, the young man was enrolled in the army, received a helmet and coat of armour, and had a white cross sewn on to his doublet. His boyhood's dream was realised. But his training still continued until he was twenty-four. A master-at-arms taught him how to use the sabre, the Swiss sword and the dagger.

In olden times Switzerland also had her sports festivals, her Olympiads - events organised on a grand scale, which often coincided with the anniversary of a victory or signing of a political treaty of alliance. They opened with a religious ceremony. The populace cheered the procession, which was preceded by heralds in the colours of the Canton. The banners were attended by a guard of honour. This tradition has been preserved down to the present day in the shooting and gymnastic festivals. With a rattle of drums and a blare of pipes and trumpets, the combatants entered the lists, there to swear a solemn oath that they would observe the rules of the contest and abide by the verdict of the umpire. The programme of the Federal "Olympiad" of 1465, for instance, reads as follows: Foot race over 400 paces, endurance race over 10,000 paces. Jumping: three leaps on one foot over three standard measures of length and height. Putting the Stone: over three distances with three stones of from 45 to 67 pounds weight. Wrestling: three rounds with elimination. Riding: race over 1000 paces, obstacle jumps. Cross-bow Shooting: free-arm, butt against shoulder, over distances of from 100 to 300 paces. There were also fencing championships and exhibition bouts between lancers and halberdiers.

Substantial prizes were offered, consisting of richly decorated horses, bullocks and sheep, or golden rings which the soldiers wore in their ears; there were silver or gilt goblets, too, and daggers and doublets, weapons, and suits of armour. The champion marksman received a golden chain, so long that he could put it three times round his neck. Victors became exempt from taxes and tolls. The mountain-dwellers from the heart of Switzerland, their bodies tanned by the Alpine sun, were loudly cheered as they presented themselves before the umpires; the laughing, lively Appenzellers, too, with alproses in their hats, were loudly applauded, as were the tall athletes of the Grisons, the archers from Lausanne, the shepherds of Gruyere, while joyous, unending yodel songs echoed from one group to the other.

These festivals, many of which lasted a full month, ended with songs and merry feasting, in which the participants swore eternal friendship. The return of the victors to their native Cantons was a veritable triumphal procession.

Such peaceful contests, which were repeated nearly every year, strengthened the bonds of Federalism, aroused a sound spirit of rivalry between the districts and Cantons, and promoted agility, daring and endurance.

Thus the old Confederacy was in a position to train an army of 100,000 soldiers about the year 1470, put men in the field who were experienced in the art of war, and face every one of its adversaries with a superior force.