

# Aspects of Swiss Democracy : features of the Swiss character

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by the International Red Cross in Geneva, Switzerland, disclosed last week.

The report, released by Church World Service, Protestant inter-denominational relief agency of 37 E. 36th St., estimated that in 1947 Europe will need 34 billion tons of cereals, a need which can be only partially satisfied by expected American and Canadian surpluses of 21 billion tons.

The Red Cross report showed the worst famine threat in Europe is in Hungary, where the current daily ration per person is only 800 to 900 calories. In Budapest the average is 600 calories.

Germans and Austrians, a little more than one year after their defeat, are getting 1000 calories a day per person on the average. In the American zone the figure is 1300 calories.

The calorie average in Albania, Finland, Italy, Poland, Greece and Yugoslavia is 1300-1500; in France, Bulgaria and Romania, 1500-2000.

#### FASCINATING WONDER OF NATURE.

Once more that natural wonder, the Märgjelsee, at the foot of the Aletsch Glacier, has disappeared. This phenomenon occurs now and then in the course of several years. A satisfactory explanation has never been given, but it is assumed that at a certain level the pressure of the water is great enough to force itself a way at the lake's bottom, and the water then disappears into the ground underneath. The lake is then fed again by the waters of the Aletsch Glacier and thus "resuscitated", until the process repeats itself.

#### INCREASE OF RADIO SETS IN SWITZERLAND.

The number of radio sets licensed in Switzerland as of December 31, 1945, approximated 850,000, states the Swiss press. At the end of December 1944 there were 819,502 licensed radio sets. On the basis of the 1945 figure, Switzerland would have one radio for every 5 persons, or 80 sets for every 100 families.

#### ASPECTS OF SWISS DEMOCRACY.

##### FEATURES OF THE SWISS CHARACTER.

From time immemorial the Swiss has been used, within the people's economical sphere, to deciding himself upon his fate, be it in the pasture-land corporation, in the parish, canton, or in the confederation. He is not merely one of the state's subjects or even a dependent, but a citizen and as such a part of the sovereign Swiss people. As a rule emperors and kings are understood to be sovereigns; in Switzerland it is the people in its entirety.

The prerogative freely to give, either by show of hands, at the "Landsgemeinde", or at the ballot-box of the ward or parish, the casting vote to his authorities and openly to express his opinion anywhere and at any time, is closely connected with the Swiss character, be it that out of an inborn desire for freedom such privileges were gained and defended through centuries, be it that these rights shaped his character such as it is, self-confident and self-reliant in judgment - the very opposite to gregariousness - that of an independent lover of liberty.

It was during the war, when a Swiss asked a foreigner about his country's opinion of the situation. "That is a truly Swiss question," was the reply, "at home we don't talk about the situation, we look on to what our government does, but with you every citizen is a minister of foreign affairs."

The Swiss' sense of liberty and independence, however, does not only appear in his words. His ways of living are also significant. Just look at the magnificent villages and towns! Is not every Bernese farm a

little kingdom! May be the ancestor of its present owner was one of those squires who, in the Middle Ages, were, on their own land, as independent as princes. Whereas abroad we notice villages where the small dwellings of the former bondsmen stand all in a row, humbly packed together, evincing the submissive spirit of old.

To be sure, not every Swiss is the proprietor of such a royal farmyard. But even a peasant loaded with debt, or a factory-worker living from hand to mouth with his family, has at home his gun, complete with ammunition, entrusted to him by the confederation which takes for granted that he will not use it against the public authority, being himself the supreme authority.

Submissiveness in every shape and form is foreign to the Swiss. It could be gathered, from photographs, that on occasion of a royal visitor being shown over some Swiss mill, the operatives did not stand to attention, but faced the royal guest frank and open-eyed, critical though not discourteous.

On the other hand the country's highest statesman is a citizen among citizens. We are used to seeing our federal councillors sitting in a row with the other tram passengers or looking for their hats and coats, after a concert, like any one of the crowd. Mr. Häberlin, one time federal councillor, could, whenever he left for his holiday, be seen walking to the station carrying a small suitcase. Such Helvetic simplicity related abroad causes people to open their eyes wide. More still are we all equals at our beautiful bathing place on the banks of the river Aare where thousands enjoy their lunch time in sunshine and water. A certain state councillor is a regular visitor there and in a corner we may discover some federal councillor just a man amongst men.

One is well aware (as I said at the beginning), that every Swiss is at liberty to criticize freely and he is not afraid to do so. On the other hand we are, owing to long democratic training, in the habit of listening to our fellow-citizens and respecting their views. How would it otherwise be possible for a country of such variety - four languages, about 70 dialects and two confessions - to hold together? The German-speaking Swiss consider it a matter of course to assist the Italian-speaking part of our population in order to enable them to retain their peculiarities. It is quite in order that in many a watering-place the rather obtrusive inscriptions in German were either abolished or their number reduced, in spite of some race-theorists pretending that we thereby lost our Teutonism. Within the Swiss confederation, it cannot and must not, be the business of one part of the population, to drive another into a corner. On the contrary, our coalescence in the confederacy rests on mutual respect and consideration of things of a different stamp. Every one, therefore, who approves of the existence of the other, contributes to the fulfilment of our federal task. There is the secret of what an Italian journalist styled "the Helvetic miracle".

The 4th article of the confederation statute stipulates: "Before the law all Swiss are equal. In Switzerland there are neither subjects nor privileges of place, of birth, of persons or families." Owing to such equality before the law, there is no reason for any one to respect his fellowmen less than himself. And therefore every one enjoys the same right to vote and to elect as any one else. Such was the case already when elsewhere, e.g. in Prussia, the so-called three class suffrage prevailed, according to which a few wealthy people were entitled to as much voting power as the numerous middle class, so that these two prosperous classes were always able to outvote the working class, which could not be represented.

In Switzerland minorities are acknowledged. In the National council they are, owing to the proportional electoral system, represented according to their strength. In the States council all the cantons, large or small, are, each represented by two delegates, with equal status. Consequently a small canton like that of Uri with 27,000 inhabitants is at an advantage as compared with a large canton, e.g. Berne the population of which numbers 726,000 heads.

Out of every hundred 72 Swiss are German-speaking, 20 French, 6 Italian and between one and two Romansh. If the Federal council with its seven members had to be composed in proportion to these figures, the French, Italian and Romansh tongues would, as a whole, have to be represented by nearly 2 members (exactly 1.9). But as a rule the minority, speaking one or the other of these Romanic languages, are represented by two councillors, at times their

contingent extended to three and even four (Messrs. Ador, Decoppet, Calonder and Motta). Since 1944 the political minority too, i.e. the Labour party, has its own representative in the federal executive.

How neatly the sentiment of respect for the other is developed becomes evident in the linguistic sphere. Every letter addressed to the federal administration in French is answered in French, those written in German receive a reply in this idiom. Travelling by train, say, from Zurich to Geneva, up to the limit line of the two languages - somewhere between Berne and Fribourg, - tickets are called for in German and in French, "Alle Billette gefälligt" first and then "Tous les billets s'il vous plait" afterwards; a regulation that is generally accepted as a matter of course.

Not every country has been equally fortunate in settling its language problems. Whereas the Czechs were suppressed while part of the Austro-Hungarian monarchy, they in turn prescribed the use of German after Czecho-Slovakia had become a country of her own. At a bathing establishment in Prague, the Czecho-Slovakian capital with a German-speaking minority, a notice could be seen which made German-speaking an offence. Also, a German-speaking judge in the Sudets had to write to a German-speaking colleague in Czech, this being the official language.

Time and again a spirit of mutual understanding and tolerance manifests itself among the political parties despite the vehemence of their discussions. Though in important political debates, as is only natural, opinions may clash, quiet committee work behind closed doors will always bring these politicians together again. They may be seen, afterwards, socialists, liberals and conservatives all together, enjoying a drink at the "Bear" (a pub in the neighbourhood of the parliament building). This helps them, on meeting again underneath the federal cupola in Berne, to recognize in their opponents not merely an agent of an irritating adverse ideology, but the man and citizen who also has a respectable point of view; then they are less apt to talk past one another. "Let's talk it out" has become the democratic formula.

Sometimes it is a patriotic society, e.g. the "New Helvetic Society" or, more recently, the "Gotthard Federation", that unites the antagonists on occasions of political dissent, and prepares the ground for a free discussion of pros and cons, so that in the end the citizen may shape his own ideas.

"Our whole nature" a psychiatrist, trying to get to the bottom of the Swiss character, recently wrote, "is pervaded by a strain of mutual understanding and, at the same time, by an equally natural ability to retain our peculiarity". All these traits, based upon our character, our tradition or our constitution and statute, which manifest themselves in everyday life, make the Swiss pith, that unites us in spite of all variety. To paraphrase this in a few words would be difficult. Yet it is a reality, as inconspicuous and yet as true as the enlivening glorious feeling of liberty that moves the soul of every one on our mountains, and as real as the fresh air sweeping over them, a gift from heaven.

#### PROPOSED "ROLL OF HONOUR".

Further to our publication in the August issue, we again appeal to all those compatriots whose sons, or themselves, served overseas to forward names and the respective units. The Secretary received only a small proportion of these names, but we know there are quite a considerable number of others who should submit their names. The following have communicated with us so far: J.D. Beusher, Sergeant Air-gunner; A. Respinger, 34th Anti Tank Reg. & British Intelligence; E.A. Schicker; Aleis Schicker; Edwin P. Ungemuth, Sub-Lieut., H.M.N.Z.S. "Kiwi" & "Scarba"; Walter J. Ungemuth, Signalmán, 2nd Div., N.Z.E.F. 6th Inf. Brigade; Werner G. Ungemuth, Signalmán, 2nd Div., N.Z.E.F. 20th Arm. Regt.

We wish to point out that those parents or relations, whose sons paid the supreme sacrifice, are asked in particular to forward the respective names.

#### NEW MEMBER.

We have pleasure to announce the enrolment of Mr. Emil Schicker, 22 Vogel Street, Hawera.

#### ADVERTISEMENTS.

Mr. L. Leuthard, New Plymouth; Visit his "Hygienic Dining Rooms".

Mr. L. Zurcher, 212 Pattison Road, Hastings; 1945 Apple Cider, 5/- per gallon, in two gallon lots, plus freight; samples free of charge, in ordering state dry or sweet. Jars to lend. "Mōschē Mtēndē aim ghā."

CORRESPONDENCE: Please address to the Secretary, Mr. E. Merz, P.O. Box 85, AUCKLAND.