

Aspects of Swiss Democracy [continued]

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PROMINENT SWISS EXPLORER VISITS NEW ZEALAND.

All compatriots will be interested to know that Mr. Lucas E. Staehelin, representative of the Ethnological and Natural History Museum of Basle, Councillor of the Geographical Society of New South Wales (where he has been living for the last 12 years) and well-known broadcaster, is now in New Zealand.

He comes at the request of the Bund Schw. Kulturfilm-Gemeinden and he will be the guest of the Tourist Department, who will show him some of the many New Zealand beauty spots. He has been told that Swiss settlers in this country are prosperous and hospitable, and he is also eager to ascertain for himself whether this is correct.

After visiting New Zealand Mr. Staehelin will return to Switzerland where he is to lecture in Berne, Zurich, Basle, Baden, Soleure, Olten, Thoune, Winterthur, St. Gall and Lucerne.

We feel certain that compatriots in New Zealand will want to do all they can to assist Mr. Staehelin so that he may take away a very good impression of New Zealand and the Swiss settlers here.

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ASPECTS OF SWISS DEMOCRACY (CONTD.)

NO. 4. THE CANTON.

In Switzerland there are five cantons where the "Landsgemeinde", i.e. the legislative open-air assembly, - the original and most direct form of democracy - survives, where the enfranchised citizens of the canton meet, debate and vote in a public square. Here follows the description of a "Landsgemeinde" in the canton of Obwalden which took a particularly agitated course.

The mountains peep through the bright clouds, just as they used to do a thousand years ago. The young people are already assembled. The boys have climbed the trees and cling to them like cockchafers; everything is exactly as shown in the mural painting by Welte in the hall of the States council and no doubt as it has happened for centuries. It is as natural for these country-lads, as curious onlookers, to become familiar with their civic duties, as it is for them to get used to their work in field and stable; the best possible tuition indeed.

A choir, mostly priests, inspires the "Landsgemeinde" with its well-sung hymn "Veni creator spiritus".

The items of business to be considered are: The account of public expenditure, election of a member of the canton's executive, requests for naturalization, an object of public initiative prohibiting cumulation of offices and "chair-sticking" and requesting the term of office to be limited to 16 years and to the age of 70. The following quotation from the minutes, pertaining to the treatment of a request for naturalization may afford a striking example of the immediateness of such debates: "The discussion of requests for naturalization is also very lively. Owing to the sudden resignation of Mr. Odermatt, his substitute, Mr. Infanger, was compelled to improvise, since he had not been able to study the matter and to look up the documents 'in the lobby'. But that is here not necessary at all! Being himself an Engelberger, he knows the three petitioners from Engelberg from their earliest childhood, that is better than from documents, and he recommends them resolutely to be admitted as citizens. One in the ring, however objects: 'Dear people of Obwalden' he says, 'we must grow pithy Swiss families. There looms a danger of the steadfast Swiss nationality being infected!' But by claiming the 'thoroughbred' Swiss he strikes the wrong note and makes himself ridiculous. He is told that his was mere personal animosity against the petitioner and that this was not fair. Now a former school-fellow of the German asking for naturalization also addresses the people: 'He was a young rascal as we all were' he says, 'nobody saw a difference. Today I stand for his loyalty.' The citizens of Obwalden consent, though not without considerable opposition."

The author then pilots his readers to the town hall where the great council of the canton of Berne is assembled. "One of our 25 cantonal parliaments! The people's representation of one of our 25 sovereign states! How irrational, one is inclined to think, at a first glance, to govern 25 small territories of the country, by twenty-fivefold effort, 25 poor laws, 25 finance bills, 25 forensic rules, 25 budgets, 25 state accounts to be rendered! But that is the very essence, the very strength, of Switzerland as a nation: Self-government on small ground. Thus almost everybody shares in it. Though not every Bernese is a member of the canton's great council, everyone knows 'his man'. Great-councillors are elected in 31 constituencies, one for every 4000 inhabitants.

Owing to the fact that Berne is a large canton of farmers, most great-councillors wear half-linen clothes, with the turned down Sunday collar. You want to see the weather-tanned faces and the strong fists of these councillors. Has such a representation of the people anything in common with the ill-reputed parliamentarianism of large centralized nations? In the morning any of them may have mowed grass or milked his cows, then gone to the railway station on foot and come to Berne to attend to his official duties. These farmer councillors, of course, bring with them a breath of the rural atmosphere."

The coalition for the purpose of political co-operation, concluded on the 1st August, 1940, under the threat of danger from abroad, by the great political parties "permeated by the necessity of continuing their constructive activity for the sake of the people as a whole," may be registered as a peculiar event. Their intention was to have common effort for the state taking the place of the much-criticized competition of the political parties, often censured for their claims to the largest subsidies promised to chosen groups of the electorate. On this topic Mr. von Greyerz writes: "If nothing else, such political collaboration is at least an interesting attempt, an attempt to overcome the much taunted jarring of the parties. There may be, however, a drawback, owing to the parties' frank mutual criticism and their reciprocal vigilance and supervision being paralysed, when all are in the same boat. Both productive collaboration and free criticism, are the elements of the prosperity of a well-founded state. To combine the two things is a difficult art which cannot be attained by schemes or retained by decree, but only practised by men of good will. On the practice of this art will depend whether political collaboration will stand its test or whether the disadvantages will outweigh the advantages."

NO. 5. THE CONFEDERATION.

1. "The creation of a federal law" (National Council and States Council).

A federal law is first stated in postulates and motions resulting in subsequent drafts; it is discussed, paragraph by paragraph, by both houses and the differences are settled. In the words of Mr. Scheurer, one time federal councillor: "Democracy is a beautiful but also a difficult form of government, demanding a great deal of patience, of understanding and devotion both on the side of the authorities and of the people. Much of what we have to achieve by great effort, can elsewhere be obtained by ordinary voting of the parliament or even by simple ruling. It may be our solace to know that what we have to struggle for so hard will, for this very reason, be worth more; it will send its roots deep into the hearts of the people and into the ground of our country and like a strong tree better resist the storms than a plant with its roots on the surface."

2. "A federal councillor's day".

The day's task of a Swiss federal councillor is characterised by the large amount of detail he has to deal with. There may, however, be some good in this too. A Swiss federal councillor reads the letters from the "man in the street" and is therefore the better acquainted with the people's ways of thinking and their grievances. He occupies himself with many of his department's details because, in order to vindicate his point of view before parliament, he considers it necessary to be familiar with the remotest details. The present federal council is overburdened.

3. "An eventful week at the parliament building", was the title of the weekly review broadcast by Mr. von Greyerz for the week when the war broke out in 1939. It depicts how in time of danger the complicated Swiss democracy turns into a community capable of acting very promptly by conferring far-reaching powers on the federal council and placing a general at the head of the army. The conferring of such powers on the Federal Council for the preservation of the country's security, its independence and its neutrality and for the safeguard of Switzerland's credit as well as for the protection of her economical interests, was unanimously voted by the Federal Assembly.

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SUNDRY NEWS FROM SWITZERLAND.

Viviculture in the canton Zurich is showing a steady decrease due solely to the shortage of labour for replanting and restocking obsolete vineyards. The cultivated area is now about 701 ha. against 848 in 1938, the chief centres still being Andelfingen, Bulach and Meilen.

An unexplained explosion in the cellulose factory Attisholz set the clothing of seven attendants alight, necessitating their removal to hospital. Two of them have since died; they are: Dr. Alex von Schulthess, a scientific chemist, and Alf. Frauchiger, an assistant.

Carl Steiger, a St. Gall painter by profession, died in Zurich at the age of 89. He is better known for his life-long interest in aviation. Some 55 years ago he constructed - and personally experimented with - the first glider at Schaffelstein and has been one of the pioneers of modern aviation.

The "biter bit" best describes the sequel of a casual arrest by the Bernese police who questioned a workman trying to sell a valuable brooch. His explanations appearing unsatisfactory, a search of his lodgings was ordered which led to the discovery of a hoard of rings, brooches and other jewellery; he finally admitted that they were the contents of a parcel that he unlawfully appropriated at the local railway station. Further enquiries showed that the jewellery was contained in a trunk that had been stolen from the car of a Geneva jeweller when passing through Lausanne. The original thieves had arranged to forward the loot to accomplices in Zurich with the help of female associates and one of them had actually been relieved of her precious bundle in the train at Berne.

While on a casual tour of inspection Dr. Paul Guggisberg, the 65-year-old director of the Lötschberg railway, tripped near Wengi and was hurled to his death; he had been for 19 years a member of the Regierungsrat in Berne.

In Baselland practically the whole of the potato fields have been destroyed by the colorado beetle. One local paper reports that after a tract of land had been obliterated of its cultivation the beetles could be seen in thousands crawling across country lanes for new fields of operation.

The body of States Council. Emil Rudin, the director of the Basle co-operative societies, has been recovered from the Birs; he was 60 years old, had been missing for over a fortnight and is believed to have met with an accident while fishing.

Robert LaRoche, senior of the Basle firm of bankers bearing his name, died at the age of 69; for many years he was president of the Swiss Bankers' Association.

In spite of the universal wave of juvenile criminality honesty still does survive. Two youngsters in Basle trying to accumulate some funds for their holidays started a house-to-house collection of waste paper and old journals. Amongst paperasse handed to them by one old lady was a crumbled card-board box; on the return in the evening of the daughter she spoke of her good deed and learnt to her dismay that in the box were hidden the latter's savings in notes to the value of about 6,000 francs. The police were informed and the carton was promptly returned intact though it had already passed into the dump of a wastepaper dealer.