

Reminiscences : a trip to Gruyere

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Objektyp: **Article**

Zeitschrift: **Helvetia : magazine of the Swiss Society of New Zealand**

Band (Jahr): **16 (1951)**

Heft [8]

PDF erstellt am: **29.06.2024**

Persistenter Link: <https://doi.org/10.5169/seals-942732>

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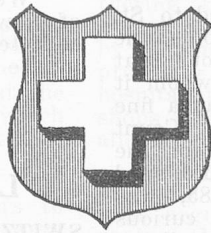
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HELVETIA

MONTHLY
PUBLICATION
OF THE



SWISS BENEVOLENT
SOCIETY IN
NEW ZEALAND (INC.)

GROUP NEW ZEALAND OF THE NEW HELVETIC SOCIETY

16th YEAR.

SEPTEMBER, 1951.

AUCKLAND.

REMINISCENCES

A TRIP TO GRUYERE

By MRS. H. A. GOULD, Napier.

Although I have been in New Zealand over 40 years, a country whose features and attractions are often likened to those of Switzerland, I have always cherished a hope that some day I might be able to visit the land of my birth and the members of my family still residing there. What a thrill it was then in May, 1948, to enter Switzerland with my husband by way of Vallorbe, on the French border. How satisfying and delicious was that first Swiss breakfast of hot rolls and cherry jam; how pleasurable the change from steam to electric locomotive, which is now universal throughout the country. What a welcome when we reached Montreux from my sister's and the hospitality which will always be such a treasured memory.

One of our first excursions during our two months' stay was to the medieval town and castle of Gruyere. A word which simply conveys to many people the thought of a very delicious kind of Swiss cheese. But for us Gruyere conveys a picture of the most interesting valleys and castles; the citadel of Hapsburg Dukes, whose rule and exploits are historic in the great struggle of the Swiss people for freedom and peace. Especially interesting was the journey by the Montreux-Bernese-Oberland Railway, as I well remember the commencement of this project in the days of my girlhood, when the track was being cut through Sonzier, our village. The company which conceived and carried out this great scheme to pierce the mountain barrier to the Oberland, was wise and far seeing; an electric railway which would enable folk to enjoy the magnificent scenery without the discomfort of smoke and smuts. As we took our seats in the train, our attention was drawn to the sound of tinkling bells, and there, from the window, we saw the first cows driven by herdsmen being taken from the lowlands to the mountain pastures, which would leave the peasants free to husband their hay for winter use and give those who tended them the chance to contribute towards the production of the famous cheeses of Switzerland. The leading cow had a larger bell than the others, and seemed to be very proud of her leadership. As we travelled up the mountain slope we had wonderful views of Glion and Caux, both very attractive tourist resorts. Magnificent views of the Lake and the Rhone Valley; glimpses also of the hillsides covered with narcissi, which is another star attraction of Switzerland. Soon after this we reached the picturesque township of Les Avants, at a height of 2000 feet, which was the terminus of the first section of the railway to be conquered. The view, unfolded as we ascended, was an entrancing one. The Dent de Jaman was covered with freshly-fallen snow, likewise the tree-covered steep slopes.

Numerous curves showed how the track doubled back on itself. We had glimpses of rushing mountain streams, pretty waterfalls and a seemingly close-up view of the Rochers de Naye and other snow-clad peaks. My husband was truly thrilled by these delightful views, but I told him that still further surprises were in store before he had been long in Switzerland.

At last we reached Montbovon, the Junction of the Bernese and Oberland routes. Here the scenery changed and the style of buildings also; on the hillsides we saw what looked like large stone residences, two-thirds of the space was used for the cows, and one-third for the farmer's family. Passing within sight of Mt. Villard and its 13 peaks we came at last to Gruyere Station, and upon alighting we found we had a walk of one and a half miles to the Castle. We enjoyed that walk and were surprised to see growing wild, cornflowers and several other varieties of flowers we love to have in our gardens at home.

How near to destruction this gem of ancient Switzerland had been when in 1848, the Federal Government offered it for sale by auction for demolition, and £7000 was offered as its beam and tile value; then a Geneva gentleman undertook to buy it at the same price and preserve it, and has loyally kept his promise, this precious relic being preserved for the people. As we apparently reached the Castle we saw a wide gateway, and above it the strange crest of the outstretched Grue or Crane, with a primitive warrior standing on either side; a well-preserved painting. Entering through this walled archway we came to the centre of a wide medieval town street with quaint shops and houses on either side, and washing troughs in the centre of the street by a picturesque fountain. Further up the street we saw what appeared to be another water trough on the side of the street, but found that it had various sized circular funnel-shaped holes carved out. These were the grain measures of the merchants, who in ancient times sold their wheat and barley in the open market street.

We had a very interesting time at the restaurant, where we enjoyed a cup of tea and some genuine Gruyere cheese, and while doing so had a good view of a woman doing her weekly wash at the fountain, thrashing the clothes on a sloping board by the side of the trough; it seemed to be a soaples process, but the washing became astonishingly white. A short time afterwards a wedding procession came from the Town Hall opposite where the civil ceremony had been held. The happy couple were followed by a number of children singing very sweetly. They entered the restaurant by a side door, and for a considerable period we were entertained by their jollification and music. While we were sitting there, a great barrel-shaped water cart delivered fresh water for the establishment. We then made our way towards the Castle, passing, en route, a wayside shrine: a sculpture of the crucifixion, protected by a penthouse roof.

Entering the Castle gate we saw a notice in French: "Please ring the bell." The caretaker charged us the usual fee of one franc and showed us around. On the left of the entrance was an old chapel dedicated to St. John the Baptist. We were told that Count Louis, the second ruler of the town and Castle, was anxious that this oratory should be worthy of the Saint to whom it was dedicated. It was only 20ft. by 16ft. and had a fine domed room adorned with beautiful paintings. Count Louis collected famous relics and obtained from the Pope special Indulgences for those who worshipped there. This parchment manuscript, dated 1485, was displayed in another room. There is also a curious tradition concerning the chapel bell. In 1573, a fierce storm rent off the roofs of houses and the clapper of the oratory bell was carried right into the forest of Bouleyeres; it was found some months afterwards and the citizens promised to maintain the bell rope, on condition that the bell should always be rung in time of storm, and henceforward the sound of the bell of St. John had the marvellous power of staying the storm as if by magic.

From the esplanade by the chapel we had a marvellous view of the surrounding country. In the distance Bulle, the market town, still famous for its cattle sales, and Broc, the site of Cailler's and Nestle's chocolate factories. The snow-covered Dent de Broc and Chamois hovering as sentinels of the district, and fine pasture land stretching almost to Gublou.

On entering the Castle itself we were shown the guard's room and kitchen, then up the stone stairs, worn hollow by thousands of feet, to the first floor, where we saw the apartments of the lords of the Castle. In the main room was a fine oak chair carved with the arms of Gruyere and Meuthon, and bearing the date 1501; a huge fireplace where an ox could be roasted whole, and the various equipment for doing so was also displayed there, including spits, and turning wheels. From the ceiling were suspended two huge bells, similar in shape to cow bells of Switzerland; attached was the notice, "Ne pas toucher." But the guide sounded them for us, to reveal their musical value and order. We then entered the banqueting hall, with ancient furniture and beautiful tapestries. On the second floor the largest room was decorated with beautiful frescoes painted by the artist brother of the owner, Mr. Bovy. These depicted actual and legendary episodes of Gruyere history. One of them showing the count and 100 followers departing for the Second Crusade. The torture chamber still conveys to the onlooker some of the gruesome punishments meted out to enemies in the Dark Ages, and a great display of armour and medieval weapons.

Another room has been furnished as a French salon of Louis 15th period, with beautiful china and furniture, the walls being hung with valuable paintings by Corot. From the windows of the apartment we looked down upon a wonderful French garden.

On leaving the Castle we made our way down the hill, picking a bunch of beautiful wild flowers by the wayside, returning to Montreux by way of Bulle and St. Legier. At this latter place we crossed a great viaduct, which reminded us of that of Mohaka, near Gisborne, then via Hauteville to Vevy, where, by the lakeside we met a number of girls in Bernese costume singing national songs very sweetly, before returning by coach to their homes.

From Vevy we took the tram, skirting the Lake to Montreux, tired but well pleased with our day's experiences.

We wish to sincerely thank Mrs. Gould for her very interesting article written so vividly that most of us who have had the pleasure of visiting this historic part of our homeland have no difficulty in recapturing its beauty. We hope that Mrs. Gould's admirable contribution to our paper will be an inspiration to many of our other readers.

NEWS OF THE COLONY

We have learned that some compatriots in the region of New Plymouth have made a nice gesture; they have collected £35 for the benefit of their old church at home in the Canton of Schwyz.

LETTER FROM SWITZERLAND

SWITZERLAND AND THE EVOLUTION OF PRICES

Swiss economy is at the moment enjoying a period of real prosperity. The various branches of industry, the metallurgical industry, machinery, precision instruments, watchmaking, textiles and chemical products all have orders on their books for many months to come. Delivery dates in many cases have had to be extended. Unemployment is non-existent, firms are working to full capacity and a call has had to be made on foreign labour to make up for the shortage in the number of workers and employees, which was taking on serious proportions in certain trades.

The causes of this great activity are not unknown. The intensive re-armament programme that has been going on in other countries for a year now and the considerable stockpiling are among the principal causes. But it would be wrong to consider only these factors. The liberalisation of trade that has taken place under the aegis of the European Payments Union, of which Switzerland is a member, has favoured Switzerland's commercial relations with certain European countries. The textile industry in particular has profited by this state of affairs, as has watchmaking, which has been enabled to increase its sale of finished watches. Mention should also be made of the heavy demands of the home market, the wages paid in Switzerland nowadays being such as to grant a high purchasing power. It is only fair, however, to mention that the retail trade is complaining of a certain falling off in business, the continued bad weather of the last few months having put a brake on the sale of clothing, travel articles, etc.

In spite of the favourable situation, industrialists and those at the head of Swiss industry, are showing signs of a distinct anxiety with regard to the future. They point out, and rightly so, that the present state of prosperity is in part an artificial one since it is dominated by political factors, and that a deterioration or an easing of the international situation could produce serious repercussions on foreign markets as regards prices.

Moreover it is this question of prices that is commanding the most attention in economic circles at the present moment. In Switzerland it is particularly serious, for the poor soil of the country and a sub-soil barren of raw materials oblige her to seek beyond her frontiers the products in which she is lacking, and consequently to suffer the fluctuations of prices on international markets.

Up till the first quarter of this year, the cost of living index was only 4.6 points higher than the year before. In no other country had the cost of living risen so little. It should be emphasised here that it is not official measures—such as price controls, but on the contrary the free decisions of private enterprise. In point of fact, the economic groups of the country as a whole agreed that recourse to a system of official price controls was in no way justified, that the law of supply and demand worked as a sufficiently strong regulator and that it was advisable, in the present circumstances, to obey the appeal issued by the Federal Council in January of this year. This appeal pointed out clearly enough that the maintenance of industrial and agricultural exports is a vital necessity to Switzerland, and that a rise in the prices of products for export would have grave consequences for the export industries. It is