

# Switzerland's problem : seventeen per cent of its population are foreigners. Part I

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SWITZERLAND'S PROBLEM:

## Seventeen Per Cent of Its Population Are Foreigners

By Kurt Muller

### PART I

This article by a national news editor of the *Neue Zürcher Zeitung* discusses the problems confronting the Swiss people and Government as a result of the enormous increase of the number of foreign workers—mostly Italian—in their country due to the great and rapid expansion of the economy in recent years.

THE preservation of its individuality must pre occupy a small state with a small population more than a nation which by its mere size is less vulnerable to external influences. Nevertheless, a country's determination to prove its cultural and political individuality should not lead to its shutting itself off from the outside world: intellectual and spiritual inbreeding to the exclusion of an exchange with the currents and developments outside the national boundaries must be avoided as much as the dilution of the national character by an excess of foreign elements. The geographical position of Switzerland at the crossroads of important transit routes, its lively cultural contacts with three great European countries through the presence, within its boundaries, of four linguistic communities, and its world-minded economy have, together with the increasing mobility and dynamism of our technological era, definitely reduced the danger of Swiss national self-complacency.

All the more urgently, and with the more justification, the question is being raised at present in Switzerland whether this country is not actually exposed to the opposite danger. The unexpectedly protracted boom has led to a rapid expansion of the Swiss economy, to a large part thanks to a massive invasion of foreign workers. While in 1959 the number of foreign workers in Switzerland was 232,000, the figure has risen rapidly in recent years, reaching 720,000 in the summer of 1964. Together with their families, the foreign community now amounts to a total of approximately 1,030,000, that is to about 17 per cent of a total population of not quite 6 million. This is a percentage far higher than in any other West European country, Liechtenstein excepted.

#### **Economic Stabilization Programme Jeopardized**

This large number of foreigners whose ways and views of life are quite different from the Swiss makes itself felt not only in factories and offices, but everywhere. It has given rise to a lingering malaise among the Swiss people who, in certain situations, complain about not feeling quite at home any more. Last fall some pent-up resentment exploded into several rather xenophobic demonstrations and letters to the editor.

These sudden eruptions had two causes. The first was that the decision of the Federal Council, or national executive, of March 1, 1963, aiming at a stabilization of the number of foreign workers had not been able to prevent a further increase by 30,000. The second, and more important, was the publication of a draft agreement between Switzerland and Italy designed to considerably improve the legal position of the Italian workers in Switzerland. Thus, they were to be allowed to change their occupation after five years already and not, as had previously been provided, after ten years only with the granting of the right of settlement, and they were to be allowed to have their families join them in Switzerland after a period of uninterrupted employment here of only 18 months.

The fear on the part of many Swiss of a further increase of foreign elements was combined with the fear of a further tightening of the already very tight housing situation; in view of the still very great shortage of labour it was also expected that the Italian workers would change from weaker branches of the economy, like the textile industry and agriculture, to more rewarding employment.

In itself, an exchange of population across the borders is certainly not to be rejected; in fact, as long as it remains within certain limits it on the contrary means a mutual enrichment and a contribution to tolerance. It is indeed with pride that the Swiss like to point to the existence of the so-called "fifth Switzerland," that is, the colonies of Swiss living abroad, which at the end of 1962 together had 273 members, of whom 162,178 have Swiss citizenship only, while 111,758 have dual citizenship.

### **The Problem of the Labor Market**

Contact across the borders, however, ceases to be constructive and turns into a danger when the influx of foreign elements takes on such dimensions that the recipient people and its character are in danger of becoming modified by the traditions and attitudes of resident foreigners. Whether a people is threatened to be overwhelmed by foreign elements is not a quantitative question only. It also depends on the extent to which the character of the foreigners in question differs from that of cultural and economic key positions occupied by them, and on the degree of the willingness on their part to become assimilated.

Since 1888, when the number of foreigners in Switzerland began to be recorded in public statistics, there have been two periods in which the number of foreigners increased to such an extent as to pose a danger to the national identity: the years prior to the outbreak of the first world war, and again the sixties of our century. In 1888 the percentage of foreigners in Switzerland was 7.9, in 1900 it was 11.6, in 1910 14.7, and in 1914 15.5

The mobilization of large armies upon the outbreak of the

war reduced the number considerably. The census of 1920 reported the total to be 10.4 per cent, that is, considerably below the prewar figure.

In 1941 the percentage of foreigners was given as 5.2 and in 1950 as 6.1, this reduction in the inter-war period to some extent having been the consequence of the economic depression. In the second half of the 1950's the number of foreigners in Switzerland again began to increase and continued to increase very rapidly until, in 1963, the ominous maximum of 1914 was exceeded.

But while in quantitative respects the situation in the two periods is similar, in other respects it differs greatly. To begin with, the mobility of the population and the tendency to an internationalization of the labour market have greatly increased in the past sixteen years. In addition, the proportion of the gainfully employed among the foreigners is much greater than it was in the period prior to the first World War. According to the factory statistics of 1911, 22.3 per cent of workers and employees in industry at that time were foreigners. According to the factory statistics of September, 1962, the percentage was 34.5, that is more than one-third of the total labour force. On the other hand while in 1910 the percentage of foreigners in services was 19.8, it is today only 13.5.

These figures point up certain structural changes. Prior to the first World War, the foreigners were distributed relatively evenly among the different social classes and occupations, and the number of independent tradesmen was considerable. They frequently had their families with them and acquired the right of settlement. With respect to their social and occupational positions and their level of education, the foreigners hardly differed from the Swiss. Their contacts with the Swiss population, therefore, were quite intensive and mutual influence was strong.

These contacts were facilitated also by the geographic origin of the foreigners before the first World War. In 1910, 39.8 per cent of them were German, 6.8 per cent were Austrian, 11.5 per cent were French, and 36.8 per cent were Italian.

By contrast, in August, 1964, 65.8 per cent were Italian, 11.5 per cent Spanish, 10.9 per cent German, 3.8 per cent Austrian and 3.3 per cent French. Today more than half of the foreigners in Switzerland are of Italian origin.

Also, before the first World War, a large part of the foreigners were concentrated in the cities. Their occupational positions—many of the university and college professors in German-speaking Switzerland, for example, were of German origin—gave them far greater opportunities to exert an influence, which in fact in German-speaking Switzerland was undoubtedly responsible for the uncritical attitude of many Swiss toward the Germany of the Kaiser, and thus indirectly contributed to deepening the differences between the German and the French-speaking parts of the

country. At that time, the capacity of Switzerland to assimilate foreign elements was indeed strained beyond its limits. The situation, however, was immediately changed by the outbreak of the first World War which caused large numbers of the foreigners to leave Switzerland.

Switzerland's capacity to assimilate foreign elements may be presumed to be much greater now after the second World War than it was at the turn of the century. Not only did the period of National Socialism and of Fascism bring about a—temporary—withdrawal to *la Suisse des bastions*, but the necessity of a demarcation against the totalitarian neighbour states also encouraged self-examination, self-awareness and self-assertion.

The social and occupational structure of the new wave of immigrants, moreover, has had relatively little impact at the key positions of public opinion and cultural development; the will to national individuality is largely intact among all classes, with the exception of a circle of intellectual non-conformists who, out of a sort of international snobism or under the fascination of larger entities are no longer willing or able to feel at home in their own small state.

Nevertheless, the present development is not without danger, even though this danger is of a different nature than before the first World War. The influx of foreign workers has had a tremendous influence on the labour market. The Swiss have more and more moved into occupations they prefer, or to higher positions, while the vacancies have been filled by the foreigners. Thus it was found that in the summer of 1963 the share of foreigners in the textile industry amounted to 48 per cent, in the clothing industry to 67 per cent, in building to 60 per cent and in the hotel trade to 50 per cent. Without the foreign workers Swiss industry could not today maintain its present output; indeed, without them the production of many plants and branches of industry would all but collapse. The departure of large numbers of foreign workers would lead to a notable drop of the living standard of a vast majority of Swiss citizens. Despite this fact, however, it must be said that a proportion of 50 per cent of foreign workers in any industry is definitely excessive. Not only does the production of such plants and branches stand on uncertain feet because international crises, or even a basic change in the political conditions of their home country, could affect these workers' presence in Switzerland. The fact that in the larger industrial plants included in our factory statistics more than one-third of the workers and employees already are foreigners makes our country too dependent on foreign influences, even in a period of increased international mobility. It cannot be overlooked, moreover, that after the gradual exhaustion of the labour reserves in surrounding regions, the workers that remain available tend to depress Swiss standards of quality.