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CONTRASTS, PARADOXES — EVEN CONTRADICTIONS

by Peter Arengo-Jones

Press Attache at British Embassy in Berne

SWITZERLAND is a land full of contrasts, paradoxes—even contradictions. When I first came to live here nine years ago what struck me to begin with were naturally the differences between England and Switzerland. Everything seemed to be on a different scale: distances were less (now that I have become used to this I find that distances in England are enormous), plates were more heaped up with more expensive food, there was much less wind, people and life moved more slowly. The modern misery of overcrowding was unknown. You could even walk to work and back, and breathe pure air all the time.

Soon elements of contrast within the country itself began to strike me. I would say how beautifully clear I found the air, how the feel of it reminded me of a Van Dyck picture—only to be answered by groans and lamentations: this clarity, I was told, is a sure sign of the dread “Foehn”, the abrupt and direful changes in pressure occasioned by the battle between warm air from South of the Alps and colder streams to the North. “You wait”, people said darkly, “You’ll feel it too”. I was regaled with horrific lists of the symptoms of “Foehn” sufferers, the headaches, sleeplessness, the inability to concentrate, the querulousness, the heartaches that assail one when the body’s initial resistance has been worn away by efforts to adapt to the pressure changes. It is an ill wind. But I like Van Dyck . . . and whatever the Swiss think, their country is a god-given haven of health.

Rather given to complaining

Another time I would say how lucky Switzerland was to have such refreshingly clear streams, rivers and lakes. More head-shaking, more anguished groans. I learnt that many of these lakes and rivers were desperately polluted. Then, I marvelled at the neatness and good order I found everywhere, and said so. This seemed to offend the Swiss, who disparaged it as a mean trait in their character.

So it went on, until it dawned on me that the Swiss are rather given to complaining and to denigrating life in their country. I tried to join in and make a mild joke at the expense of the Swiss Army—and was treated to icy stares. Criticism of the Swiss militia army is tabu—especially coming from foreigners. I still find this strange, since the Swiss army is one of the best organized fighting forces in the world and far more powerful than most people would believe of such a very small country.

Discrepancy between size and achievements

Which brings me to another contrast: the discrepancy between the size and nature of the country and its achievements. It is astonishing that a country which is no bigger than three of the smallest States of the North American Union and which is bereft of all natural resources except waterpower should have become one of the world's leading industrial and financial powers. The explanation is of course that the Swiss are resourceful, efficient and very hardworking. So they are. And yet, would you believe in their industriousness when you see them promenading with slow deliberation in the streets?—Come to think of it, who would believe in their slow deliberation from the, shall we say, forceful way they drive?—It sometimes seems to me as though more often than not, when I want to reach a Swiss in his office he is away on his annual military service or on holiday (school holidays are more frequent and taken in shorter spells than in Britain). And when on earth does he find time to study the voluminous literature sent to inform him of the issues involved whenever the entire electorate is called upon to pronounce on some public matter?

Land of farmers and peasants?

The more I learnt, the more puzzled I became. One quarter of the country is totally barren, a waste of rocks and ice. The mountain farmers eke out an almost impossibly precarious existence, largely subsidized by the taxpayers. Yet try suggesting that they might be resettled elsewhere or be found other employment and you bring down on your head the united wrath of every (allegedly materialistic and tight-fisted) Swiss for daring to suggest the destruction of a national heritage. When this first happened to me, I thought I had a clue to the essence of Switzerland: the roots of the Swiss are in their mountains. I said to myself. This was confirmed by several Swiss, who told me that Switzerland was a land of farmers and peasants. It was crushingly contradicted by the evidence of Swiss history. I attended the 500th anniversary celebrations of Basle University, founded thirty-two years before the landfall of Columbus in America. I learnt that Basle was one of the birthplaces of the art and craft of printing, that the ancient and noble city of Berne was founded in the twelfth century and its pure Gothic Cathedral built in the fifteenth by the citizens themselves; I went to Geneva and saw the monument to the sixteenth century reformers who made this city republic the Rome of Protestantism and the intellectual centre it has been ever since; I admired the genius of the nineteenth and twentieth century engineers whose bridges swing their way boldly and gracefully over deep chasms, and whose tunnel-building achievements are unsurpassed anywhere in the world; I talked to Swiss Nobel prize winners and listened to the music of Swiss composers; today I hear heated arguments over the works of present-day Swiss

writers. And yet I keep being told that Switzerland is a land of farmers and peasants, just because many Swiss were countryfolk a generation or two ago and some still are. Never believe a Swiss when he runs down his country.

“ . . . at common sense she gaily mocks”

Whatever I learnt about the country was startling. My mind boggled when I was first told that Switzerland is not a nation, and that it will cease to exist at all unless the twenty-five constituent Cantons remain sovereign States in their own right. This need for a Federal system I can now fathom, but what I still find strange is that, as a result, each district has its own tax structure, that the more prosperous a city or region is, the lower will be its taxation level and that regions blessed by nature with mountain roads to build and maintain have to pay for them out of their own (accordingly high) taxes unless they can persuade the Federal authorities in Berne to play uncle. And this in an egalitarian country! “O paradox, O paradox, at common sense she gaily mocks.” (There is of course a sensible explanation, but I would still protest if I were Swiss). Or take tolerance; there are one or two churches in which both Protestant and Roman Catholic services are held in turn—and yet some Swiss people refuse to go to certain shops “because of the assistant with her awful accent from so and so”. (This is dying out as people from the various Cantons intermingle more and more.)

Intolerance is a universal phenomenon and Switzerland may well have less of it than most, but somehow one would expect none at all in a country which has so signally succeeded in bringing together people of different creeds, races, languages and cultures, and which cares so lovingly for minorities that the very variants of a language spoken by only one per cent of the population are safeguarded in the Federal Constitution.

I expect too much of the Swiss, I know. I ought not to get angry at odd lapses in this impeccably organized country, but I fail to understand, for instance, why on earth the Federal Railways are so sparing of station nameplates that it is a matter of luck if one can read where the train has stopped; or why the opening and closing times of shops vary so unpredictably (although most of them mercifully do stay open until 6.30 p.m.); or why the place for letterboxes in many blocks of flats is inside the entrance hall and access to them denied to anyone delivering after the pedantically early hour at which front doors are duly locked (for fear of intruders?—where crime is almost nonexistent). But I ought not to harp, because the absence of even such traces of imperfection would be altogether too much of a good thing.

To return to the paradoxes: it is these that give the Swiss way of life its endless fascination: “mais, Monsieur, il n’y a pas une Suisse—il y en a 25”; a democracy that denies women the vote;

a citadel of economic liberalism that nationalized its railways by popular vote in 1898; people of the most disconcerting listlessness who can be the staunchest and most stimulating friends one could wish for; conformists who are individualists.

I'm slowly becoming used to it all. Look, I now say to myself, why be surprised at the seagulls that abound on Swiss lakes and rivers, hundreds of miles from the sea. Depend on it—they know why they come.

(“Pro Helvetia” Foundation)



It Happened in Eastern Switzerland

LAKE OF CONSTANCE REGION

AT A recent meeting of the North-Western Federation for Rhine-Bodenese Navigation, it was stated that too many new road and alpine tunnel projects were being realized at the expense of Rhine navigation. Germany and Austria, both interested parties, were present, and in the Federation's Annual Report, it was stated that new records had been reached in the Basle Rhine Ports, and that plans for an international Bodenese Schutzkommission were being worked out. The question of navigation on the Upper Rhine is still under observation.

More and more boats have been registered on the Lake of Constance (Thurgau area); in one year, there has been an increase from 1685 to 1922 units. The old steamer “Rhein”, for sixty years operating on the Lake, has become redundant, the last of the SBB Fleet. The “Schiffahrtsgesellschaft Untersee und Rhein” has celebrated its centenary. Fishing in the Lake of Constance reached a record of 375,000 kg. in 1962. Since then there was a rapid decline by a full third, and only in 1965, the catches began to improve again, both in quantity and quality. The number of professional fisherman is also going down gradually.

Fifteen Communes agreed to a cleansing operation of the shore, but the floods in early summer have prevented full realization of the plans. The main effort concerns cutting out of lake grass.

Dr Arnold Berchtold (Stein am Rhein) was elected new President of the “Verkehrsverein Untersee und Rhein” in succession to Dr W. Ruedi (Kreuzlingen).

The Thurgau Hairdressers' Federation celebrated its 75th anniversary on a boat on the lake.

The Bodensee-Toggenburg-Bahn is a private undertaking, but the authorities concerned, especially the Canton of St Gall, would welcome it if the Confederation were to take it over.