

# Comment - the "Romands" and the French

Autor(en): **P.M.B.**

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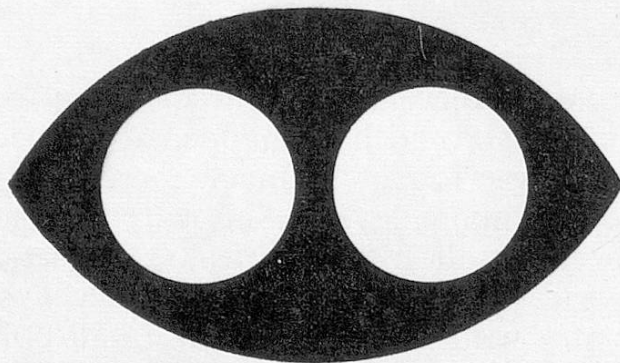
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COMMENT —

## THE "ROMANDS" AND THE FRENCH

The French-speaking Swiss and the French share common ancestors. They both spring from the Burgunders, the Celts, the Gauls and have both been shaped by the same civilising influence of Rome. History has endowed both nations with the same language and both people can pride themselves of one trait commonly shared: they are Latins.

But further than that they differ in almost every aspect. The relations between the French and the French-speaking Swiss have always been tinged with a touch of mutual irony. The French traditionally tease the Swiss for their historically subservient and inglorious role of vergers and mercenaries. For reasons which escape the understanding, the French, a strongly bourgeois people, consider the Swiss as small-minded and middle-class shopkeepers. A new word has become increasingly in use in their spoken language. It is "s'ensuisser" and is supposed to have the same meaning as "s'embourgeoiser" with, however, a marked contemptuous connotation. I do not think that the **Academie Française** has passed this expression for regular and acceptable usage. Let us hope that it will never do so — this might create a diplomatic incident. But the fact that this deprecatory idiom has gained ground shows what the image the Swiss have in the minds of the French. The French are also known to be amused by the



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singing accent and the colourful expressions of the Swiss vernacular. And, lastly, they consider their small neighbours as mental oxes with slothy reactions. This, of course, is injurious to Genevese or Valais Swiss, whose sharp sense of repartie and witticism should not be confused with the same of less Latin Swiss. The French tend to put under one Swiss label and one national characteristic people as different as the Appenzeller, the Graubundener and the Genevese.

The French-speaking Swiss naturally react against their powerful neighbours for their untrue vision of the Swiss character. The French, they say, speak before they have any ideas to express. The essential is to speak. They have love of fine words and dainty vocabulary which **Romands**, who ponder more before they say something, consider as blue stocking perversion. "We have ideas which reach our speech with difficulty", wrote a Swiss journalist. "The essential thing is our conscience. The French have fugitive opinions. We search for unalterable convictions. At the limit, this yields our sparkless honesty and the superficial elegance of the French".

The French-speaking Swiss may readily concede that the French have more taste and a more developed sense of etiquette. But the same journalist commented: "In France, there are no truths, there are fashions. The opposite would apply with us, our truths belong to our communes, our families". The Swiss may envy the gaiety of the French, their exciting and brilliant style of life. They are perhaps aware of pondering over life too much, of perhaps making it too plain. But their strongest criticism is aimed at the French tendency to place their culture above that of other countries and their own. The French have Paris, a prestigious capital that drains the intellectual and artistic sap of the nation. The Genevese have Geneva, the Lausannese have Lausanne and each are proud of their local cultural achievements which do not attempt to vie with those of an overriding capital.

Many French-Swiss intellectuals are concerned by the French cultural invasion. The Swiss, after all, prefer to watch the French TV channel and listen to "Europe No. 1". Pop music and fashion came from beyond the Jura and most of the new literature for sale in a Geneva bookshop are French editions. But this is the natural fate of a small country living in the cultural orbit of powerful neighbours. The influence of Germany is just as strong in Zurich or Basle.

The French and the French-Swiss then share a common ancestry, a common Latinity, the same language and little more. But even the French language differs on either side of the border. The written style of a Swiss newspaper can be easily distinguished from the prose of a Paris daily. The same obtains for German-Swiss dailies, whose German have a flavour absent from "Die Welt" and the home-style of "Der Spiegel". The accents of Geneva, Vaud, the Jura, the Valais and Fribourg are all pro-



foundly different, and the French, who tend to make fun of the Swiss accent should rather admire the diversity in the vernacular of such a small territory and perhaps realise that the blather of the Marseilles bistrot-keeper sounds phonetically uglier than the worse twang of a winegrower from Vaud!

The German-Swiss have a language of their own and this helps to confirm their identity with respect to Germany. The French-Swiss use the language of their great neighbour but this has not prevented them from retaining a staunch cultural identity of their own. This shows that language is not the strongest bond, and that a particular differing political heritage has as much influence in shaping the minds of people with an intellectual life stemming from the same root.

(P.M.B. — "The Swiss Observer")

## News of the Colony

### Hamilton Swiss Club

Our Christmas evening on 13th December was enjoyed by a large crowd of parents and children. The Club's choir opened the evening with the lovely song "Leise Rieselt der Schnee", followed by three more Christmas songs. In between we were thrilled to hear Christmas poems in real "Schwyzerdütsch" by the children M. Rust, N. Rust, O. Waldvogel, H. Rust and B. Schäfer. We can be proud that some of our Swiss-Kiwi children still speak fluently "Schwyzerdütsch".

The boys' and girls' hearts must have beaten faster when Father Christmas appeared at the door. After he had given stern and friendly advice here and there, each child collected a gift and a Fanta. Following an excellent supper everyone left with their happy but tired children. —R.E.W.

### Wellington Swiss Club

#### TWO ACES

The "Evening Post, Wellington (10/12/70) reports: "Two holes in one were scored at the New Judgeford Golf Club. M. Styles aced the 195yd par-3 16th with a 2-wood, and, only six days later, **last Saturday, H. Ittensohn hit an unerring pitching wedge at the 89yd 13th. It was the first ace for both**".

A very nice achievement in golfing by Mr Heinz Ittensohn, a past President of the Wellington Swiss Club. —P.E.