

Swiss viewpoint on home affairs

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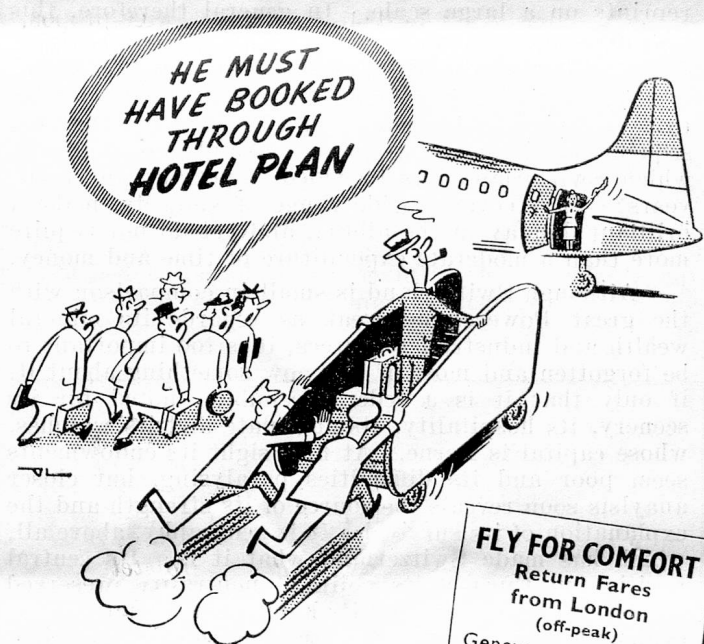
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SWISS VIEWPOINT ON HOME AFFAIRS. Discussions regarding the Swiss National Park.

By Dr. HERMANN BÖSCHENSTEIN.

As soon as the fine, hot weather announced the arrival of the Summer holiday season, five out of our seven Federal Councillors the highest authority in the land, proceeded to that region in Switzerland which, ever since 1914, has been turned into a National Park. The Government wished to know, from a personal visit to this locality, whether the much discussed scheme for the exploitation of the little river Spöl by the large power plant which is being planned, would really be as harmful as stated to the National Park. This river is a boundary stream, and as such the final decision regarding the granting of a concession for the new electricity works rests with the Federal Council. The National Park came into being at a time when technical science and land settlement were proving to be more and more of a menace to the undisturbed course of development of both plant and animal life. Thus, in 1914, Parliament passed a resolution, with an overwhelming majority, approving the conclusion of an Agreement covering a period of 99 years, with the mountain Commune of Zernez in the Grisons, in respect of a circumscribed Reservation, within which all plants and animals would be safeguarded absolutely from all human influence. All pasturage, hunting, fishing and wood-cutting would be strictly prohibited. In return, the Commune would receive adequate compensation each year. The care of this Reservation would be entrusted to a special National Park Commission, in which the Swiss Association for the Protection of Natural Beauties and the Swiss Natural Science Society would be represented. This highly esteemed leading Society for the study of Natural Science was made responsible for the scientific observation of the flora and fauna in the Reservation. Both the aforementioned associations are foremost, to-day, in the fight which is going on to preserve the National Park territory from any encroachment, through the setting up of a big power plant. One may well wonder how it ever came to pass that the necessity for such a struggle should arise — a struggle which can only be settled finally by means of a decision on the part of the Government itself, and which may prove to have serious consequences. This is what occurred. In 1943, a consortium drew up a plan for the erection of four power plants in the Lower Engadine. The Federal Authorities immediately declared that it would be difficult to envisage the possibility of a power plant of this kind being built in close proximity to the National Park, whilst the National Park Commission stated that the building of such a power plant would be tantamount to a drying up of the Spöl river, thus influencing the laws of Nature. Moreover, the fact that the building of such a plant would require perhaps as many as a thousand workers, strangers to the region, which would necessitate the putting up of huts, the construction of roads and even possibly cable and track railways would be very harmful to the Reservation, not to speak of the temptation to these workers, during their free time, to hunt the wild game, the deer and the black-cock, in this, perhaps the richest game territory in Europe. The Federal Authorities charged a Committee of Experts with the task of studying the legal admissibility of the question of granting a concession for the erection of this power plant, as well as that of what

effect such an electricity works would have on the National Park. From the legal standpoint it has already been confirmed that the clause in the Agreement which gave to the Commune of Zernez the right to dam the waters of the Spöl, cannot be invoked in regard to the construction of a large power plant. And it is on this clause alone that the relevant Communes have set their hopes; only a large power plant can provide them with the desired water rates and revenue which would appear to be so desirable for these mountain Communes which are so poor in national resources. The Federal Council will now have to take a decision with regard to the difficult fundamental question as to whether the construction and exploitation of the Spöl power plant would affect the National Park in such a way that the whole idea of the Reservation would have to be given up. But this will not happen; the decision taken in 1914 and the Agreement covering a period of 99 years are still legal and the National Park has grown very dear to the Swiss people. Over and over again, we find in the lively discussions for and against the Spöl Power Plant, the opinion breaks through that even in this materialistic age everything must not be sacrificed to money and that the wonderful wild beauty of the Alpine world must be protected against the organising and spoliating hand of Man. The natural scientists are fighting hard for the maintenance of the National Park, which would of course be affected in a very prejudicial manner by the drying up of one of its most important water-arteries, as well as of four other springs which flow into the Spöl.



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