

Cultural crossroads

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CULTURAL CROSSROADS.

by OLIVIER REVERDIN.

Switzerland, unlike other countries, does not possess an Academy of Science. At least, not officially. But, her scholars and scientists have, at their disposal an organ, of private character, which takes its place, namely, the Helvetic Society of Natural Science, which was founded in Geneva, in October 1815, on the initiative of a few scientists, of whom Henri-Albert Gosse, was the leading spirit.

Practically all the scientists in this country are grouped together in the various sections, committees and other organs of The Helvetic Society of Natural Science. One of its aims is to make it possible for them to meet and talk about their experiments and the way in which their work is progressing. For this purpose, the Society holds a session each year, which is, in fact, a Congress of Swiss naturalists.

The latest Congress took place recently at Lugano, in the Tessin. Let us glean something from its echos. This will give us the opportunity of penetrating a little into Swiss scientific life.

One of its chief preoccupations to-day is to explore the new fields of activity which are being opened up to science through the development of nuclear physics. In this respect Switzerland is only following the general movement. She is, however, following it in an active fashion, contributing towards the advancement of this new science through the work that is being carried on in the institutes attached to her Universities. This is, moreover, the reason why the European Organisation for Nuclear Research, the creation of which was decided upon definitely last June, in Paris, has chosen the Swiss town of Geneva, for the construction of the big institute in which the scientists of twelve European countries will have at their disposal all the necessary instruments which will allow them to pursue, in common, their research into the structure of the atomic nucleus. This research work is so expensive and requires so many teams of scientists that Europe has been obliged to pool its resources in this manner, so as to be able to carry on with it. As I am alluding to the future nuclear centre in Geneva, I will seize this opportunity to tell you that this very week, the Swiss Parliament has ratified the International Convention which establishes it.

And now let us return to the Congress of the Helvetic Society of Natural Science. One of the items on its Agenda was the study of the services which can be rendered to medicine by radio-active isotopes. A number of communications were made on this subject, and some very interesting discussions took place regarding the results obtained for the treatment of various illnesses, in the Swiss university institutes.

A large portion of the work done at the Lugano Congress, was carried out within the small groups formed by specialists belonging to the same discipline. It is not possible for us to mention them all. We will confine ourselves to saying a few words about what has been done by the paleontologists. They have worked on the terrain itself. Indeed, for some years past, the universities of Zurich and of Basle have been engaged in exploring at Monte San Giorgio, near Lugano, in the Tessin, one of the richest layers of

fossils of prehistoric animals, which exists in the world. During the Triassic period, that is to say at the beginning of the Mesozoic era, the dead bodies of fish, amphibiens and reptiles, some of which were small and others of gigantic proportions, were deposited there by the sea, in excellent condition. Left there in a very rich coze, at the bottom of a calm Gulf, these dead bodies have remained remarkable well-preserved. Some perfect specimens of various species which up to now had only been known from a few rare fragments, have been discovered in this bed. Its systematic exploitation, which is now proceeding, has produced results of the greatest interest. Thus, the Swiss paleontologists have a rich material at their disposal, which allows them to offer a substantial contribution to the study of these species of animals which have now disappeared from the earth.

The research work of Swiss scientists is not limited, however, to the national territory. One of the plenary sessions of the Lugano Congress was devoted to the geology of Mount Everest. Professor Augustin Lombard, who was attached to the Swiss Himalayan Expedition of 1952, which was composed of a group of alpinists, of which the scouting party got within the few hundred metres of the summit of the world, and of a group of scientists, read a paper on the results of his observations, which were of the greatest interest to his colleagues, most of them specialists in the geological study of the Alps.

The Congress of the Helvetic Society of Natural Science has furnished us with an opportunity to direct a brief glance at the activities of scientific life in Switzerland. A number of other questions were studied in Lugano, ranging from that of polyploidy which was discussed by a group of geneticists, to that of the idea of proof in science, discussed by those who are interested in question pertaining to method and philosophy. The discussions took place, as usual, in the three national languages, i.e. in French, German and Italian, a circumstance which could not fail to enrich them, for to these three languages correspond the differences in intellectual formation and a great variety of points of view, of reading and of influences.

Perhaps this little talk has seemed to you to be somewhat desultory, but, if it has succeeded in convincing you, by means of the few examples offered to your notice, that scientific life in Switzerland is really very intense, then it will have achieved its purpose.

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