

Switzerland in perspective

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SWITZERLAND IN PERSPECTIVE.

An N.S.H. Lecture.

The Open Meeting held by the Nouvelle Société Helvétique at the "Schweizerbund" on May 18 proved one of its most interesting events. The lecturer, Dr. George Soloveytschik, revealed himself a refreshingly original observer and frank recorder of his impressions of our country and its people. He knows them both perhaps better than many amongst ourselves, having spent much of his time since early youth there and having made a special study of them since the end of the last war on frequent visits with a view to the writing of a novel kind of book about us, shortly to be published by the Oxford University Press under the title "Switzerland in Perspective". Of course the lecturer took good care not to give away too much of his book in his talk to the N.S.H. But what he had to say, whether to be found later in the book or not, certainly testified to his may-be all too intimate acquaintance with some of our weaknesses and a robust appreciation of the final outcome of the mixed aspects of what constitutes our national existence.

In the lecturers view the Swiss know much about their past but little of the present, all about the theory of Constitution and Government but near to nothing of their actual working. They accept Schiller's presentation of the spirit animating us to be "ein einzig Volk von Brüdern", while in fact the Swiss refuse stoutly to be cast in the melting pot of mutual assimilation and prefer to remain themselves in every region with all peculiarities of their own. They consider themselves the most democratic people on earth without realising that most important decisions are made by no more than about 15% of the population.

The continuing denial of political rights to the women of Switzerland is often matched by a none too courteous attitude of the men to their womenfolk in private life. The highest divorce rate in Europe, the frequency of marriages to foreigners, the strong tendency towards emigration or temporary stays abroad — do they not reflect a certain malaise in human relations in our country? Both men and women tend to overwork, leaving themselves too exhausted in the evenings for a stimulating relationship at home and good neighbourliness. Women might be

well advised to fight for their human rights before fighting for political rights.

Our real government is no longer so much vertical in its functions as horizontal. The build-up from the commune through the canton to the federal authority has become less important in the lecturer's mind than the "Querverbindungen" from the Bauernverband to the Vorort, Gewerbeverein and trade unions. They all constitute most effective lobbies, delegating M.P.s, selecting future Federal Councillors, preparing the decisions to be nominally sanctioned by the voters. The parliamentary commissions do most of the useful work of parliament, their members being paid for it in contrast to the ordinary M.P.s., holding their meetings in pleasant spas, eating and drinking well, not despising the mellowing effect of the national pastime the "Jass". However noteworthy these and so many other observations of Dr. Soloveytschik may be, he thoroughly approves the final result at least as regards the stability and quality of government and economic development and prosperity.

It goes without saying that some of the lecturer's more audacious statements provoked much contradiction and lively discussion. They clearly achieved the most important aim of stimulating new thought on old problems, even where the audience may have remained unconvinced or appeared unrepentant. We can do with a little shake-up from time to time if administered with evident sympathy and without spite or passing censorious judgments.

Dr. H.W.E.

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