

# Home affairs

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**HOME AFFAIRS.**

by PIERRE BÉGUIN.

**"The freedom of the city, in Switzerland."**

If there is one Swiss institution which always surprises the foreigners, it is that of our right to the freedom of the city. For, if we should ask a Frenchman, for instance, where he comes from, he will always mention his birthplace, as, for example, Paris, even if he bears an ancient Provençal or Breton name. In Switzerland, on the other hand, one may have been born in Berne and yet fiercely contest the qualification of being a Bernese which is being attributed to you, specifying that, on the contrary, one is in reality a Tessinese or a Genevese.

In point of fact, every Swiss is a burgher of one of our three thousand Communes. He is entered in the Register, from the moment of his birth and all the modifications which occur in his legal status are duly noted there. This is a Commune in which his family has been established for a very long time, and where it has remained for centuries, at a time when populations were very stable and people did not get about much or leave their homes often.

When we are among our fellow-countrymen, we know each other so well that, most of the time, from the mere fact of hearing a name we can tell if the person who bears it is a Vaudois, a Valaisan, a Bernese, or a Lucernese. This is a proof in itself that until quite recently, the Swiss continued to live the life of their ancestors in the same spot where they were born.

But, what with the growth of industrialisation and with the progressive exodus of the country-people towards the cities, things have changed a great deal. Migrations on a very large scale have taken place within the confines of our frontiers. To such an extent, in fact, that — in order to cite one example — the Bernese inhabiting Switzerland represent approximately one and a half times the size of the total population inhabiting the Bernese territory. This "mix-up" — if I may call it so — is such that you find here in Switzerland citizens who possess the freedom of the city in the Canton of Tessin, but can't speak a word of Italian and others who come from a German-speaking Canton, but who would find it very difficult to speak in the language of their Canton of origin. The times are receding more and more from those days when the Helvetic Cantons constituted small entities which lived a closely sealed existence,

within which the autochthonous populations remained permanently on the spot.

This phenomenon is a happy one, from one point of view, in that it has made Switzerland more united. But, it is less pleasing in this sense that it is prejudicial to a serious extent to that Federalism to which we are so greatly attached. We are keen about our local particularities. We claim the right to be different from each other. We think the differences which reside in us constitute subtle variations which make our country, a society which is really and profoundly human.

That is why the question is being studied, in certain circles, as to whether or not it would be a good thing to attach to their Canton of domicile or of birth those Swiss who have preserved their right to the freedom of the city in another Canton, but who no longer have anything to do with it. Of course, naturalisation within the country itself, has always been possible. But it entails long formalities and is relatively expensive. So long as loyalty to an ancient Commune or origine, which one perhaps does not even know, does not cause any material disadvantages, a great many Swiss renounce from applying for the freedom of the city in the Canton where they were born, or where they live, or where they have become completely assimilated.

It is in order to do away with this *de factum* situation — which is paradoxale, if not frankly absurd — that the Canton of Vaud has just put forward a proposal for a facilitated and free naturalisation for certain categories of Swiss citizens. This is an intelligent move.



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