

Roundabout Switzerland

Objektyp: **Group**

Zeitschrift: **The Swiss observer : the journal of the Federation of Swiss Societies in the UK**

Band (Jahr): - **(1955)**

Heft 1257

PDF erstellt am: **26.06.2024**

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ROUNDABOUT SWITZERLAND

by Derek Meakin

AUGUST 1955 will long be remembered in Switzerland. For this month has seen the unprecedented success of what must surely be one of the most ambitious folklore festivals the world has ever known, Vevey's unique Fête des Vignerons.

Some people I met in Vevey thought it has been too much of a success. As on August 7, when the little town was invaded by thousands more visitors than the organisers had visioned in their wildest dreams. Well-thought-out crowd control arrangements got so out of hand that I saw on two different occasions a sight I hope never to see again — policemen losing their temper and using force.

Some Café owners also thought it too much a success — but not for them. They, too, had worked out ambitious plans. They had prepared well for the rush. They stocked their cellars to bursting point. From all over Switzerland they hired extra waitresses for the occasion. And what did many of them find? That visitors rolling into Vevey with tickets in their pockets that had cost up to eighty francs each considered their day had cost them enough already — and brought their own picnic lunches.

Of the show itself there can be only one criticism: that its run was limited to one brief fortnight. Numerous were the requests for tickets that were not available, for performances that would never be held. Thousands of people who, after reading about this historic event in the newspapers, hearing it on the radio and watching it on television, wanted to see it for themselves had to be turned away.

The work that had been put in by the 4,000 artists and the 300 animals for only eleven performances! Why, even Icare, Harald, Iago and Intendant — to name the oxen chosen to haul the enthroned goddess Ceres — had spent more than two years learning their role.

For those visitors who were fortunate enough to take their places in the vast arena, the three-hour spectacle left many happy memories. For me the choicest moment came when the scene was invaded by the colourful band of *armaillis* and the magnificent line of prize-winning cows — and we heard the first haunting notes of the celebrated *Ranz des vaches*. The clear voice of the soloist was echoed by the massed choir. Then spontaneously the refrain was taken up by the entire audience until the very air seemed to

tremble with the thousands of voices and the melodious accompaniment of the cowbells.

This simple tune, this plaintive melody sung so fervently, impressed me more than all the other grandiose scenes that had dazzled my eyes that beautiful sunlit morning.

The few minutes that were devoted to this particular episode were alone enough to silence those critics who had feared that in this 1955 Winegrowers' Festival the original intention of this time-honoured celebration would be overshadowed by a desire to introduce a theatrical element with all the trappings which that implies.

They were concerned that instead of it being the traditional homage to vine and wine it would be turned into just another tourist attraction.

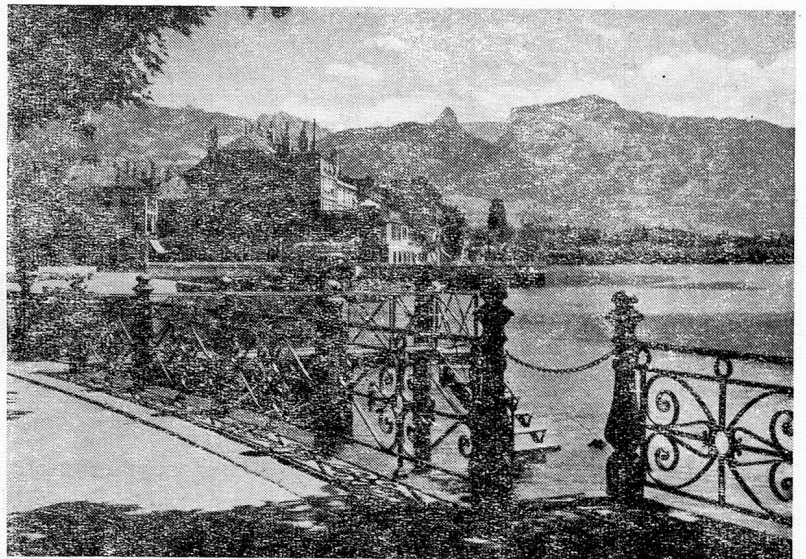
Their fears, of course, proved groundless. There were some spectators who might have gone solely for the sake of sitting in the largest open-air theatre in the world, of rubbing shoulders with Charlie Chaplin and Oona, or watching the Aga Khan being hoisted up to his seat by a muscular band of gold-plated "archers of the sun".

But the vast majority could not fail to be impressed by the obvious sincerity of this festival and the majestic tribute it pays to the glory of the wine harvest and the hard work of the men and women who wrest their living from this bountiful soil.

Now 25 more years will have to roll by before Vevey throbs to another Winegrowers' Festival. But this does not mean this pretty little town is in for another quarter century of hibernation.

Last month I referred to Vevey as the Rip Van Winkletown of Western Switzerland. To-day I am pleased to report that it is now wide awake, so much so that it already has ambitious plans afoot that should go a long way towards making it one of the gayest resorts in the whole country.

These plans are still on the secret list, so I cannot talk about them now. But I can say that they have something very novel to offer. And after seeing all the work that has gone into the current Winegrowers' Festival I have no doubt at all that they will be successful.



The quay-side at Vevey. To the left, the Market place, focal point of the Wine-growers festival.