Swiss spotlight

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SWISS SPOTLIGHT.

By Pierre Béguin.

A Swiss minority menaced in its authenticity.

For a long time past some anxiety has been felt in Switzerland in consequence of the fact that the language and culture of our Italian-speaking minority are threatened. In the Canton of Tessin and in the Italian-speaking valleys of the Canton of Grisons a progressive germanisation is taking place which, if it is not checked, will eventually eliminate Italianism in these regions. This evolution is sufficiently perceptible for an alarm to be sounded by a certain number of personalities, on the occasion of a " Day of Italian-speaking Switzerland ", which was organised recently in Berne and is now to take place every year.

Switzerland is *one* — through the will of all her inhabitants to live in an atmosphere of tolerance and mutual respect. At the same time she is profoundly diverse in that her population is divided into a German-speaking majority and two minorities, the stronger of the latter being the French-speaking one, and the weaker the one that has Italian for its mother-tongue. To complete this picture it is necessary to add the very small minority which speaks Romantsch and which holds out, against wind and tide, in the fastness of the Grisons.

Switzerland realises the value of these diversities, which also exist on the denominational plane. It is Switzerland's characteristic trait that these four populations have succeeded in living in harmony, each preserving its own traditions, customs, language and dialects. Switzerland would no longer be Switzerland were each one of these different linguistic parts of the country to cease to bring to the whole of the country its original contribution, nurtured by a culture which has its source and its force of renewal abroad, but which we strive to assimilate in accordance with our own manner.

Prior to speaking in a more detailed fashion of the problem of Italianism, it is only fair to recall the fact that the majority of German-speaking Swiss, in spite of their numerical strength, have never attempted to assert themselves or to triumph over the Tessinois. They would, in fact, by very unhappy themselves were the whole country to yield to a movement towards uniformity.

On the other hand the fact should be stressed that French-speaking Switzerland has preserved her originality. Although a great many German-speaking Swiss settle in that part of the country, they become assimilated very rapidly, not only when it comes to the second generation, but very often the first generation, also.
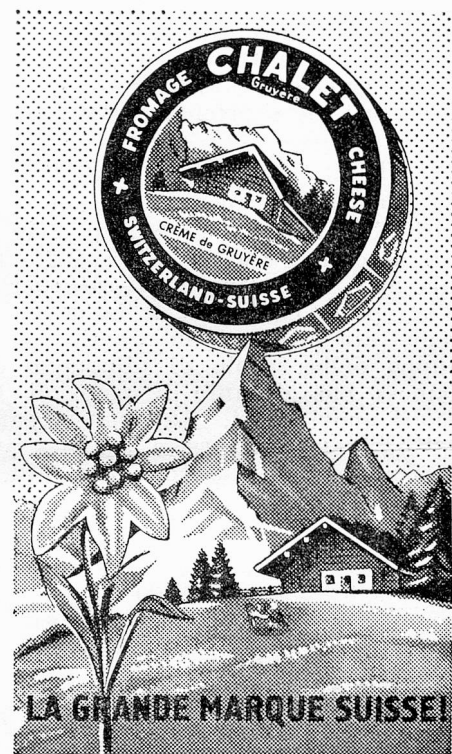
The case is quite different in regard to the Italian-speaking part of the country, which is the weakest numerically and also the poorest in natural and industrial resources. It has only the beauty of its landscape and the mildness of its climate, so that tourism constitutes its chief means of subsistence.

It is an established fact that most of the visitors to the Tessin are either German-speaking Swiss or Germans. Moreover, even those who settle there keep to their own language and way of living. They do not allow themselves to become assimilated. The tourists, for their part, do not make any effort to respect the language, the culture and the traditions of the Tessinese. The latter, on the other hand, very often accept this Germanisation far too easily.

In order to counteract this tendency it is necessary for some concrete measures to be taken. These have been drafted during the course of the first " Day of Italian-speaking Switzerland ". The most interesting of these planned measures, and the one which would undoubtedly prove to be the most efficacious, is the suggestion that the teaching of Italian should be made obligatory in all the secondary schools in the country. In this way, all Swiss going to the Tessin, either to visit or to stay, would find assimilation less difficult. A campaign is to be started with this aim in view.

It is also hoped that it will prove possible to institute measures which would allow the Tessinese themselves to renew the traditional ties with Italy, especially those of a cultural nature. We should gain a lot if we were to have amongst us jurists who had imbibed the fine science of Bologna, historians who had obtained their discipline in Florence, architects who had studied in Rome, and technicians who had acquired their skill in the industrial centres of the Piemonte and Lombardy. For if the Tessinese desire to play their part in our national community and give us that element of Italianism which we require, it is imperative that they go to the source of their culture.