

The week at home

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THE WEEK AT HOME.

By MAX NEF.

Being, as it is, a highly industrialised country which has enjoyed economic prosperity for many years, Switzerland faces a constant increase in requirements for electric energy. During the Suez crisis, when the normal supplies of raw oil and of oil products were suspended, it became especially clear what an important role is played nowadays by electricity, both in the field of economy and in the life of every individual.

In Switzerland electricity is not generated principally by means of so-called thermal energy — coal or oil — but by means of hydraulic power. As a result, the production of electricity in our country is greatly dependent on natural precipitations which, for their part, are subject to considerable fluctuations during the seasons of the year. It is true that, for a good many years past, artificial lakes have been created, at an enormous expenditure of labour and finances, in the mountain regions, which act as reservoirs for those periods during which the electricity works that have been built on the banks of rivers must reckon with a considerable decline in production, as a result of a penury in their water supply. In spite of this, however, the markedly dry spells which have occurred during the last few years have caused difficulties in the supply of electricity, which could only be overcome by importing up to one-quarter of the amount required. On the other hand, at times, during the summer months, Switzerland is able to export electric energy.

The fact that for many years now our country's supply of electric power has not been able to catch up with the steadily growing demand has resulted in endeavours being made to build, with every means available, new power plants. No fewer than eighteen such plants are now in the process of being set up. Of course, in Switzerland, also, there exists the prospect that one day atomic energy will be available for the generation of electricity. For the present, however, it is impossible to say when that moment will arrive. Moreover, at present, it is not quite clear as to the magnitude of the costs which will have to be taken into consideration for the equipment and the running of atomic power stations — a matter which is naturally of great importance for the profitability of such plants. In any case, even if the calculations prove to be of an optimistic character and after all possible projects have been carried out, the generation of electricity by means of hydraulic power will remain indispensable for Switzerland. This fact has been confirmed once more, quite recently, by statements emanating from official and expert sources.

In this connection, it may be mentioned that a Popular Initiative has just come into being, which is levelled against the plan of erecting a new power station in the Engadine. This Initiative has been launched by circles which are interested in the protection of the natural beauties of the Alps, and which are opposed to this project because it will be

prejudicial to the Swiss National Park. The authorities, for their part, declare that the effects of this plan on the beauty spots will be insignificant.

The constitutional possibility of having recourse to an Initiative against the planned power works in the Engadine, by means of which a Popular Referendum can be called for, resides in the following facts: The river which is to be exploited starts on Italian territory and flows into Switzerland only when it reaches its middle course. In view of the fact that Italy also intends to harness the river in its upper course — by the way, the name of this river is Spöl — it is necessary that an Agreement regarding the limitation of the mutual interests be concluded between the two countries. State Agreements possessing a validity extending over fifteen years, however, are subject in Switzerland to approval by a Referendum; this means that a Popular Referendum must take place, should this be demanded by a minimum of 30,000 citizens possessing voting powers. In the present case, the Initiative has been signed by more than 60,000 citizens, and was handed over to the Authorities on 24th March. It is still too early to be able to estimate what will be the results of the voting, which will take place in the near future.

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