

Swiss Spotlight : "Switzerland, the Common Market and the Free Trade Area"

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SWISS SPOTLIGHT.

By PIERRE BÉGUIN.

“Switzerland, the Common Market and the Free Trade Area”.

The breaking-off, in Paris, of the recent negotiations for the establishment of a European Free Trade Area, excited considerable interest in Swiss public opinion. In spite of the fact that the relevant problems are extremely technical, everyone there knows that the economic prosperity of our country depends to a large extent on international trade, because Switzerland is too poor in natural resources to be able to feed her population and because she lives chiefly from her exports. Thus, fear is felt in regard to the constitution of economic entities which might have a tendency towards autarchy. In economic matters, Switzerland very definitely possesses a vocation towards free-trade, and this conditions her entire commercial policy.

It was impossible for Switzerland to adhere to the Common Market of the “Six”. For one thing, this economic association coincides with a military alliance, and our neutrality forbids us to favour, even indirectly, a group of this kind. For another thing, the Common Market is something much more than an economic association. By the will of its authors, it constitutes the rough plan for a political organisation, in fact, to put it more precisely, for the political integration of Europe. This is demonstrated by the fact that this organisation includes the setting up of a supra-national Authority. Now, even if Switzerland might possibly envisage the giving up, at a long date, of some of her sovereignty in favour of a very large — or even universal — political organisation, she could not do this within the framework of a group which one can only qualify as being restricted or limited. And, finally, Switzerland must not forget that even if she maintains very close economic relations with the six European countries which are now on the eve of becoming a group, her trade balance with them is definitely on the deficit side. It is, therefore, necessary for her to re-establish the equilibrium of this balance by promoting advantageous trade relations with other countries, especially with those overseas, in America and Asia. With this end in view she must have her hands free when negotiating, and she cannot rely in such matters on partners who are much more powerful than herself, and who would, quite naturally, take more trouble in regard to their own interests than in regard to those of a very modest associate.

What Switzerland wants also to avoid, is finding herself facing a powerful bloc, composed of the Six countries grouped together within the Common Market. She has no wish to go back to the system of bilateralism — the system of trade agreements concluded between two countries or between two Customs systems. For a great number of years past she has pleaded the cause of multi-lateralism — general agreements concluded between as many countries as possible, who get together for the purpose of doing away with Customs barriers, of reducing Customs tariffs, of abolishing quotas and of operating, in an equal manner, among themselves, various payment compensations.

A scheme of this kind has already been set up. It is called the Organisation for European Economic Co-operation (OEEC). It has rendered good services;

it has contributed towards facilitating and intensifying trade between seventeen European States. Through it originated the European Payments Union, within which are operated, smoothly and in the interests of all concerned, those compensations which are necessary between favourable and unfavourable trade balances. This Organisation deserves to be preserved, developed and served with perseverance.

In common with many other European countries, for instance the Scandinavian countries, Switzerland desires to *participate* in the progress which the Common Market will make it possible to realise in the domain of the development of foreign trade and in the harmonisation of national economies, but at the same time she wants to keep her hands free in order to be able to arrange in accordance with her own interests her trade relations with overseas countries and those in other continents. Thus was born the idea of a Free Trade Area which would be established on the Margin of the ‘Six’ Common Market, but which would group together — in addition to the Common Market itself — another eleven European States. The two Organisations should be complementary, the one being more strict and possessing a very pronounced character of integration, the other being, in point of fact, merely the instrument for the maintenance and development of the Organisation for European Economic Co-operation. There is nothing that should hinder six countries which, together, constitute a real Customs Union, from maintaining trade relations, on a preferential basis, with eleven other countries.

There is nothing revolutionary about this idea. It is the expression of good sense, and Switzerland has defended it right from the beginning, submitting it, quite independently, without binding herself with anyone. She will persevere in this direction while at the same time striving, at this moment fraught with the difficulties of arduous negotiations, to be a conciliator and a creator of harmony.

“HERAN, DU EHRENWERTE SCHAR VOM ALTEN SCHWEIZERSTAMM.”

Hail noble Swiss, ye gallant breed,
Ye ancient, honoured host,
Our hearts beat high with awe and pride,
Up-surg-ing like the stormy tide
Against a rock-bound coast.

United stand we here to praise
God's spirit and His love,
For He who fathoms all our hearts
Will guide us, when the day departs,
To His bright stars above.

Whilst yet the fields are blessed with green
And while the mountains last,
Our liberty shall not decay,
Warmed by its sunny tender ray
Your sons will hold it fast.

So let us guard this gift anew,
A precious, treasured hoard,
Then gather, as the fresh young seed
Of ancient stock, with Winkelried
Around the festive board.

(Translated by J.J.F.S.)