

The sanctuary of the Madonna del Sasso in Locarno

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Objektyp: **Article**

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

Band (Jahr): - **(1962)**

Heft 1403

PDF erstellt am: **27.06.2024**

Persistenter Link: <https://doi.org/10.5169/seals-687954>

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THE SANCTUARY OF THE MADONNA DEL SASSO IN LOCARNO

Proud and beautiful, the pilgrimage church of Madonna del Sasso stands high on a rocky mountain overlooking Locarno, the sunny resort in Switzerland's Ticino, near the Italian frontier. It contains the Ticino's greatest treasure — a picture of the Madonna, revered by everybody. Once in a while, when the good citizens of the Ticino are in distress, they carry the Madonna through every city, town, village and hamlet of their canton, hoping for relief. This has been the custom ever since the simple monk, Bartolomeo da Ivrea, built his small chapel in honour of the Virgin, back in 1480. He was a pious man, the good brother. To the strenuous, ascetic exercises of his Franciscan Order he voluntarily added a weekly fastday. Saturday, 15th August 1480, was such a day. Having spent the day in prayer and taken no food, the brother retired to his cell. But sleep would not come. Therefore, he went out again — to the loggia of the monastery, to gaze at the stars. Suddenly, there was an apparition — the Virgin Mary with the Child in her arms. Fra Bartolomeo looked transfixed at the apparition until morning. When he later told his Abbot about it, he received permission to build a small chapel on the rock where the Virgin had appeared. Soon this tiny chapel became far too small to hold the many who came to worship. Pope Leo X permitted the building of a bigger church in 1514. It took over a century to complete it and it was consecrated in a solemn ceremony on 1st May 1616. A picture of the Madonna was placed over the altar and the church was called Madonna del Sasso, Virgin of the Rock.

People visit the sanctuary by the thousand. Particularly on the first Sunday in September they flock there, often whole villages. There is the serious aspect of the visit, but there is considerable gaiety, and thus the pilgrims enjoy the lighter comforts of this world while pursuing the solemn interest of the next. Perched on a rocky spur between two deep ravines, five hundred feet above the lake, the sanctuary is seen from and sees afar. Fantastic snow-capped mountains of the Alps surround the great Lago Maggiore, part of which is Swiss and part Italian. Its water is blue, reminiscent of the Mediterranean. The climate here is spring-like all year. The Madonna herself watches over the people of the Ticino and the Ticinese know it. They must be good people! As one Englishman asked: What good deeds have they done that God gave them such a country?

SWISS RED CROSS MARKS 20th ANNIVERSARY

It was wartime 1942 when the first children arrived. Sad, wan waifs with labels tied to their coats. Each had known bombing, hunger and the other adult horrors then let loose over Europe. The project the Swiss Red Cross was inaugurating, taking into account the size of their country, was awe-inspiring. The Society planned to bring 10,000 children at a time from war-torn countries, or 40,000 children a year to Switzerland for three-month holidays. Homes and preventoriums were to be taken over, as well, and canteens set up in countries where children went hungry. This year, the Swiss Red Cross, *Secours aux enfants*, is celebrating its 20th anniversary.

The Swiss *blitz* operation went to work with enthusiasm. Convoys were organized, departure and meeting stations set up to shepherd the youngsters to safety. Red Cross nurses and officials bullied and bearded govern-

ments at war, persuading them to let the children go. And when they were not successful, they simply moved in themselves, setting up baby-food canteens throughout Greece, and travelling up to Finland, down to Italy, as far as Croatia and Serbia with food, money, and help.

The Swiss people were backing this Red Cross attack with all the cash they could spare and by opening their homes. And Swiss children were helping too. In the schools a weekly *sou* collection raised over 1,300,000 francs in its first year and 2,000,000 francs the second year from this pocket money source.

In Geneva alone, the school children's *sous* paid for the convoy and three-month stay of 100 children from Arles. Later, the same source of funds paid for the upkeep of two Budapest homes and for the care of 74 children in Swiss mountain resorts.

When peace convoys could again cross devastated Europe to the neutral refuge of Switzerland, the child invasion really began. Undernourished, often mutilated youngsters arrived in droves from everywhere: small Germans as welcome as the English; Austrian children as carefully nursed back to health as Italians.

By the end of 1949, about 162,000 children had enjoyed Swiss holidays which they gratefully remember as adults today. But the Swiss Red Cross task was not yet over. Soon it was returning young refugees to their homelands from Trieste, Berlin, Hungary.

And today they are celebrating the 20th anniversary of their Pied Piper action. But the *Secours aux enfants* project is not obsolete. Hungarian youngsters are still being cared for; Algerian refugee children are still being brought over to escape from starvation; and Swiss children too, still need held. The drama is less obvious today, but it is continuing with fervour. *W.Tr.*

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