

Basle

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Objektyp: **Article**

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

Band (Jahr): - **(1963)**

Heft 1438

PDF erstellt am: **12.07.2024**

Persistenter Link: <https://doi.org/10.5169/seals-694817>

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BASLE

by MONK GIBBON

Basle is the Cinderella of Swiss cities so far as the tourist is concerned. He regards it merely as a large railway station where one changes trains, generally at the unbewitching hour of midnight, on one's way back to England. Even for arrivals, Basle at 6 a.m. in the morning is simply a delicious petit déjeuner in the station buffet and the possibility of missing one's train connection for the sake of cherry jam. This is a gross injustice. So far from being a mere railway junction Basle proves on closer acquaintance to be one of the most attractive cities in the country. Indeed, for varied interest I am not sure that it does not take the palm.

The site of Basle, it has been said, seems a predestined one, at a bend of the Rhine, on both sides of that river and at the junction of some of the most important lines of European traffic. We come on the first mention of Basle in A.D. 374 as Basilea, having been founded by the Roman armies probably when they fell back on the Rhine. It was near the site of the old Colonia Augusta Rauracorum which L. Munatius Plancus established in 27 B.C., once known as Kaiser-Augst, now generally referred to simply as Augst. In the middle ages Basle was a free town of the Holy Roman Empire and it has been a member of the Swiss Confederation since 1501.

Basle is an excellent illustration of how in most cities in Switzerland man has managed to fuse the modern with the ancient and historical, so that though the two overlap continually they do not seem to interfere in the least with one another. One finds the same kind of thing in England, at Stratford, at Winchester perhaps, but seldom to anything like the same degree. Basle is an up-to-date city humming with activity, furnished with a multitude of shops which would not be put to shame if you transferred them to the Rue de Rivoli. But one can hardly walk twenty yards through its streets without encountering the fifteenth and sixteenth centuries or the Gothic past, in some shape or form. Swiss conservatism, the Swiss sense of continuity, even Swiss thrift have all contributed to this happy result. One does not take down an old building if it can still be put to a new use. On the other hand, it was the storm of indignation from English visitors which saved the old wooden bridge at Lucerne when nineteenth-century Swiss philistines were about to take it down. Besides, the citizens of Basle take pride in their past; in their Town Hall with its painted front, in its clock canopy by Master Wilhelm, which has been there since 1511; its small belfry by Diepold von Arx of the same date, and its three wrought-iron gates and arcades which are exactly a hundred years younger. It is a Town Hall in front of which modern and ancient modes of life mingle even today, for the flagged space which abuts on the thoroughfare is a flower and vegetable market from 6 a.m. until 1 p.m., at which hour the stalls and their produce suddenly vanish and it becomes a car park for the afternoon. History waits for you at every corner, waits for you even in a restaurant like the Schützenhaus, where you can enjoy excellent food in extremely comfortable and picturesque surroundings — surroundings that suggest that it would not be in the least surprising to discover Franz Schubert seated with his friends at the next table, busily occupied in composing a new song on the back of the menu card. Despite its air of comfort and its up-to-date efficiency the Schützenhaus takes you straight back to its origin in 1561

as the Society house of the "Feuerschützen" or fire-shooters. The richly decorated Renaissance portal and its inscription have been there since it was founded; and the lovely windows in the great "festive room" on the first floor were placed there in the sixteenth and the seventeenth centuries.

But even leaving aside buildings like the Town Hall or the Schützenhaus one could wander about the streets of Basle for days encountering at almost every step some delightful and striking reminder of the past. One sees fifteenth-century homes with quaint, unpredictable variations from symmetry, the outcome of successive adaptations and additions down the years; one sees neat, poplar-slim little houses, the width of only a single window and a door, sandwiched in between more portentous mansions either side; one sees a huge projecting wooden gable hooding the pathway at one point, from the centre of which a pulley and rope once operated to bring up the fuel for the stoves in winter to the top floor from the street below. Everywhere the imagination, if it choose, can leap the centuries and transfer itself to the past. Everywhere, if it prefers the metallic present, the present is there, in the next, or even in the same street. Exactly opposite the fine modern Kunstmuseum, and smothered almost under its own tangled masses of old-man's-beard and other creeper, its window boxes ablaze with red geraniums, stands a vast habitation at right angles to the road, under a span of roof so immense as to be breath-taking. I used to gaze at it in delightful fascination, so huge, so maternal, so tribal, so casual and at the same time so established was the aspect of its slightly dilapidated façade. Just round the corner, only a few yards away, were lovely wrought-iron window grilles of a still earlier date, perfect examples of the craftsman's art, but examples which might have been lost, together with the building which they decorate, had not some industrial association occupied the premises when they ceased to be feasible as family residences.

I stayed in Basle at "The Three Kings". No one finding himself today in those extremely luxurious precincts would suspect, unless he were already acquainted with its history, that he was residing in the oldest hotel in all Switzerland. A document going back to the year 1026 tells how the German Emperor Conrad II, his son Henry III, and Rudolph III, King of Burgundy, met at an inn known as "The Flower Inn" (Gasthof zur Blume) in that year. Thenceforward it was known as the Inn of the Three Kings, though the street has kept its name and still is known as the Blumenrain to this day. In 1356 the building was destroyed by the earthquake, but in 1400 it was rebuilt as the oldest and most noble inn of Basle. In 1760 Voltaire became its guest for a time and occupied a room which is still called the Salon Voltaire. Napoleon and Dickens are two other famous men who figure in its annals. During the French Revolution the host, a fanatical republican, removed the crowns from the figures of the three kings over the porch, blackened their faces and renamed his inn "The Three Moors". The figures date back to the year 1680. When monarchy had become once more fashionable the crowns were restored but the faces have remained black ever since, and are now known as the three wise men from the east, Kaspar, Melchior and Balthazar.

Monarchy must have forgiven "The Three Kings" its trimming to the republican gale, for its Golden Visitors' Book is simply full of the names of European royalties of the last and present centuries. More interesting perhaps than any of these famous names is a quite recent addition to the hotel's association items, which now hangs framed in the foyer. Given to the hotel by Lord Amulree in 1948 by permission of H.M. George VI, the original being in the Royal Library at Windsor, it is a photostat of a letter from the Young Pretender to his banker, Mr. John Waters, in Paris, dated 29th September 1754. It reads:

"Mr. John Waters of Paris. I am just arrived. my adress is at oberge des trois Rois a Bale en Suisse a Mr Thompson jentillhome Anglois, or a Mr De Grandvall. here is a letter which please to forward by your first post. My health is very good so remain yr Sincere Friend. Make many compliments from me to M Le Grand and let him know how to write to me but [illegible] I would wish [illegible] that neither you nor him should write (unless something pressing) until you receive my next letter which will be as soon as William (yr servant I kept sick) arrives. To mr E at R. yr 29th Sept 1754."

So wrote Bonnie Prince Charlie, or the *soi-disant* Mr. Thompson, from Basle at the "Drei Koenige" nearly two hundred years ago. What would be interesting to know is how this confidential document found its way into the Royal Library at Windsor? Was it stolen by some spy before it ever reached its destination? Was Mr. Waters himself in Hanoverian pay and perhaps even doling out a judicious but not too ample allowance from the Crown to keep Mr. Thompson quiet in his retirement? Or did his private papers come into the market in France after his death?

From the high window of my room at the back of the "Drei Koenige" I looked directly down upon the waters of the river Rhine. The Rhine at Basle is a lordly and impressive sight. The river must be nearly a quarter of a mile wide and its deep, dark, swiftly-moving waters are pleasant to gaze on. When there has been a heavy rain shower the many cobbled conduits which empty themselves into it and which may have been dry for weeks, burst into sudden activity and gush furiously forth, carrying sticks and paper and rubbish until the olive-green waters are stained brown for two or three yards out by the torrential spate. Even then the Rhine remains lordly and noble, conscious of its benevolence, and sufficiently big to ignore these trivial slurs on its dignity. In the morning I would gaze fascinated at the huge slow eddies in the centre of the current; while at night, across what seemed a remarkable distance, came the clear notes of a piano, playing sometimes a waltz, sometimes a marching tune, for what I concluded later was an evening class in eurhythmics, a deduction based on certain dimly-glimpsed marching figures with arms extended straight in front of them.

How fast the Rhine flows, despite the smooth appearance of its surface, can be judged from the fact that Basle possesses what is probably a unique type of ferry for foot passengers. From a wire cable, stretched high above the river, another smaller cable hangs down to which the boat is attached. There is no mechanism of any sort. The force of the current, together with the use of the rudder, is sufficient to carry the boat across in either direction. I watched one evening from the far side of the river near the almshouses one of these small ferry boats, crossing toward me. The ferryman was seated at his tiller and a passenger or two stood in the stern of the boat. It had

a canopied wooden shelter in the centre and boxes, with flowers growing in them, on its roof. This delightfully intimate touch made it seem more like somebody's home than a public conveyance. If the barque in which Charon takes us across the Styx is at all similar we should find it reassuring.

Nearby I saw something of equal local interest. It was the projecting arm of a "Fischergalgen", or fish gallows. This is a metal contraption rather like the framework of a colossal umbrella, covered with a fine wire mesh, which can be swung out over the river and lowered into the water. When it has been left down for some time it is raised and swung sideways to be lowered on to a wooden balcony built on the water's edge in front of the funny little grey shack which is the fisherman's headquarters. Maybe the "Fischergalgen" is not quite so deadly as it sounds, for when I watched its operations there seemed to be a dearth of victims for the gallows.

Fishing is popular all over Switzerland. Wherever you go you will see patient, solitary fishermen standing on bridges, on small jetties or mere soap boxes thrust into the water beside river or lake, fishing assiduously with rod, line, float and bait. They seldom appear to catch anything, but like all true fishermen that does not seem to invalidate their hopes. Once I must admit that in the very heart of Zurich, on the traffic-crowded bridge where the river leaves the lake, I saw quite a decent-sized fish landed on the pathway by a twelve-year-old boy.

The Rhine at Basle at one time contained excellent salmon, and Rhine salmon were a feature of the culinary art both of monastic and other times. But now salmon are a thing of the past. The dam of the Kemser Werke, the great French electricity works constructed across the Rhine, by rights conceded to the French in the Treaty of Versailles, checked the course of the salmon upstream, and though a special ladder was built for them the conservative salmon refused to use it. However, if Rhine salmon can no longer appear on the menu there are plenty of other delicious things to be eaten in Basle.

Basle is proud of its long history, proud of its name, "the Golden Gate to Switzerland", a title which must seem incomprehensible to those who have never set foot outside the railway station. Some of the earliest printing in Europe was done there. It boasts the oldest university in Switzerland, founded in the year 1460. The Bishop's See was transferred there from Augst as early as the beginning of the seventh century. The Cathedral, on the "Pfalz" above the Rhine, with its famous cloisters and with its adjoining quiet square, surrounded on two sides by staid and decorous family dwellings, is almost millennial. In 1006 the civil power of the bishop was established in Basle by decree of the Emperor Henry II, and in 1225 the first bridge across the Rhine was built under Bishop Henry of Thun. The city had had its vicissitudes as well as its moments of glory. About 1340 the Black Death was raging there and on 18th October, 1356, an important part of the city was destroyed by the great earthquake. But though it looks back on a long, cultured and eventful past, Basle today is a city of immense industrial importance, handling through its harbours and waterways nearly two-thirds of the total trade of Switzerland. That so much of its trade is conveyed by water has probably helped to preserve it from that defacement which so often accompanies a development fostered by rail or road transport. The Rhine maidens have saved it much, and the city no doubt is duly grateful to them.

From "SWISS ENCHANTMENT"
(Published by Evans Brothers Ltd.)