

# Are there too many foreign workers in Switzerland?

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## ARE THERE TOO MANY FOREIGN WORKERS IN SWITZERLAND?

The problem I mentioned in a recent article in the "Swiss Observer", concerning a distinct lowering of standards of service — and in some cases even of trustworthiness, honesty and integrity — in Switzerland leads me to a second problem which is very topical in our home-country. Whether there is any connection between the two is difficult to say, but does not seem impossible to me.

What I have in mind is the number of foreign workers one comes across in Switzerland nowadays. According to official figures recently released by the BIGA (Bundesamt für Industrie, Gewerbe und Arbeit) the figure at the end of August 1963 reached the level of 690 013. This, in a country with 5 560 000 inhabitants seems to me quite a staggering proportion.

Of the 690 013 foreign workers occupied at the end of August in Switzerland 472 052 or 68,4% were Italians, 78 389 or 11,4% were Germans, 63 653 or 9,2% were Spaniards and the remainder were Austrians, French and others. Of the 690 013 foreign employees and workers 480 609 or 69,7% were men and 209 404 or 30,3% were women.

If one goes to Switzerland as a holidaymaker or tourist, as I did recently, one comes across non-Swiss labour very frequently. We stayed, for nearly three weeks, in Sils-Baselgia in the Upper Engadine. The facts in the hotel, in which we stayed, were the following: The Chambermaid who did our room was Austrian. The whole so-called brigade in the dining room, from the Maître d'Hôtel down to the youngest commis-waiter was Italian. They were as polite as they were efficient, but their hurry to get the meals over and the tables cleared was such that it sometimes became embarrassing. The Barman in the "Stüva Marmoré" was a German who constantly tried to charge twice for one and the same drink, and the gardener who was also groundsman for the tennis court was an Italian of very limited intelligence. The one gentlemen's barber in Sils (Maria) was an Italian and the woman who owns the barber shop combined with *bazar* is a German. The Mercedes-Garage in St. Moritz about which I complained in my last article was owned by an Italian. In this connection I might add that the Grisonnais coach-builder who did the work on my car complained bitterly to me about Italians who came to the Grisons and made a habit of grossly overcharging holidaymakers, thus giving the whole region a bad name.

During a further part of our holiday we stayed at a hotel in Küsnacht, near Zürich. One of the two receptionists in this hotel was a German and so was the accountant. All the chambermaids we saw were Italian, as were also the two car park attendants. One of two porters who

also served as night-watchmen, was Austrian. In the restaurant of this hotel one Maître d'Hôtel was Italian and another one German, whereas the waiters were part Italian, part German. The kitchen-staff was, I was told, all-Italian, with the exception of the Chef himself who was — it seems hard to believe — a Swiss.

Perhaps the weirdest experience we had in the little village of Dübendorf. We were invited there to lunch and had some difficulty in finding the right address. Several times we did what one naturally does on such occasions: we asked local people whether they could direct us. It goes without saying that, being in Dübendorf, we asked them in Schwizerdütsch. It took no fewer than 5 attempts to receive a reply in the same tongue. All the others were in Italian: "Non lo sò", "Mi rincresce" or a simple shrugging of shoulders. We had the impression of being in Italy, with perhaps a sprinkling of Swiss thrown in.

It is, of course, a wellknown fact that in several regions, notably in the Ticino, property had been bought up by foreigners, mainly Germans, to such an extent, that the authorities felt compelled to do something about it. The acquisition of land and buildings by foreigners is now subject to a permit and this rule even applies to Swiss citizens who live abroad. In the latter case however these permits are, I understand, nearly always readily given.

The flooding of the Swiss labour market by foreigners has become a problem of such topicality that many Swiss have begun to view it with anxiety. The term "Ueberfremdung der Schweiz" — which cannot be literally translated, but which implies a danger of too many foreign elements — has become a household word in many Swiss newspapers.

No doubt very many, if not most, of these foreign employees and workers in Switzerland do their work conscientiously and fully deserve the wages they get — otherwise the Swiss employers would hardly keep them. But some do not. And some of those who do not may also be responsible for a certain lowering of standards such as I have recently noticed in Switzerland. As a matter of general interest I might add here that I have had reactions from 5 different readers since my last article appeared in the "Swiss Observer": all of them approving and agreeing with what I have said. I am thus not the only one who has observed these developments; I have only been the one who has put his observations into print.

Whether or not a reversal of the present trend is possible without a stop being put to the "Ueberfremdung" of Switzerland I cannot say. But it is a fact that all these problems cause a good deal of anxiety to a good many Swiss at this moment.

*Gottfried Keller.*