

"Schweizer, das musst du wissen"

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“SCHWEIZER, DAS MUSST DU WISSEN”

In my work as Editor of the “Swiss Observer”, I frequently have to consult books on Switzerland. It is not easy to find the right volume on a given subject, even less so to pick the right page straight away. I know where to look for essays on neutrality, for a report on tourism in the previous year, but I waste hours trying to put in a nutshell, say, a particular article in the Civil Code or explain the tax system.

Now, by accident and good fortune, I have come across a new book when I attended the Assembly of the Swiss Abroad in Solothurn and met one of the main contributors, the first practising Swiss woman lawyer, Dr. iur. and Dr. rer. pol. Edith Ringwald. The book, in German, is called “Schweizer, das musst du wissen!” published by Gebr. Wagner A.G., Basle. It is not a new work; its first edition appeared in 1943 in the middle of the decisive phase of the last war. Since then, many have been the changes in Switzerland, rapid and often almost breathtaking, and this, the eighth edition, has been completely revised, enlarged and brought up to date. Hans Wagner has compiled the book with the assistance of many experts.

As an introduction, the Charter of the EXPO 1964 reminds the reader immediately that Switzerland is aware of her position and the part she has to play in the world, and indeed, Dr. Ringwald puts her straight in the middle of European Integration with her first article. The simple logic with which Switzerland's role is presented and the difference between EFTA and the Common Market explained appeals immediately. It is this clear-cut manner, devoid of any frills, stressing every important aspect of the matter, giving information, yet always making the reader think as well as absorb knowledge, which is the hall-mark of this book. It goes right through its 230 pages.

Generally, books on Switzerland start with geographical or historical data. The “Schweizer, das musst du wissen” begins with Switzerland's relation with the rest of the world. European Integration is followed by the Red Cross (again not so much an article as an enumeration of principles, historic and actual facts and an explanatory chart of Red Cross organisations). Charts and drawings are a useful guide throughout the book.

“Asylgewährung und Flüchtlingshilfe” is the title of the next chapter, a subject not usually included in a book on Switzerland. Carl Hilty's quotation “A ‘small’ state today has to be a moral power, if it is to keep the right to continue”, shows that the authors not only produce information but have a higher purpose of making the reader realise his own responsibility. Technical co-operation is followed by Swiss history, again in the framework of world historical events. Dr. Markus Fürstenberger's chapter gives over twenty pages of chronological detail, showing at a glance which important event happened when.

Hans Wagner himself is responsible for the chapter on geography, population and the economic structure of the country. Again, it is not an essay, but a graphic description of the natural advantages and shortcomings of Switzerland, and what its people have made of them. A wealth of information is contained on page after page, from rivers and mountains to climate, from inhabitants and languages to oil pipe lines and atomic energy, from agriculture and industry to railway tunnels, passroutes and air traffic. Alcohol production, the turnover at the Basle Rhine ports — nothing has been left out, and statistics are as complete as is possible in a work of this kind.

The chapter on the Swiss confederation is the joint effort of Dr. Fürstenberger, Dr. Ringwald and Hans Wagner. It shows in a comprehensive way how the family is the basis on which the political edifice is built — Family — Commune — District — Canton — and finally the Confederation. I have never found anywhere such simple ways of explaining public bodies, the functioning of the Communes, the distribution of powers between the cantonal and federal authorities. The rights and duties of the Swiss citizen are clearly defined. The way a Postulate, Motion or Initiative becomes law is shown, and the difference explained between proportional and simple majority. We learn the aims and objects of the Swiss Political Parties, and how far women's suffrage exists in Switzerland (29 women are members of Cantonal Parliaments — in Geneva one even presides!).

Before we reach the chapter on the Swiss abroad, Dr. Ringwald introduces us to “Bauern- und Berghilfe”, an exceptionally well-conceived article on an unusual subject, but one vital to the country. In the next chapter, we Swiss living outside Switzerland are accorded more space than is usual in a book on Switzerland. What we are, where we are and what we do is given great prominence. Even the proposed Constitutional Article is dealt with and the Solidarity Fund fully described.

Hans Wagner writes on the military organisation — how it is set up, of age limits and grades, women's voluntary service, civil defence and martial law, requisitioning and war-time food production. But it clearly shows that the Swiss soldier is the citizen, not someone apart.

The following fifty-odd pages are devoted to the Law. It is our civil and penal code in miniature, easily comprehensible to the layman. Bold lettering, as in other parts of the book, helps to spot the essential. Dr. Ringwald shows herself as the lawyer in this chapter, but one who is familiar with the difficulty of the ordinary man and woman to deal with legal matters.

Voluntary and compulsory insurance is the subject of the next chapter. It deals with Swiss old-age and invalidity insurance. It covers sickness, accident, third-party and property insurance and gives quite a few hints for the layman.

One chapter is on taxes, direct and indirect, and includes double taxation agreements.

Dr. Fürstenberger and Hans Wagner are responsible for the chapter on art and culture. They tell us of Swiss writers, historians, composers and mathematicians, of Pestalozzi and other educationalists, of painters and architects and of the Swiss film industry. The chapter ends with a chart of the various art epochs in Switzerland. In comparison to the rest of the book, this chapter, perhaps, could have been somewhat more comprehensive.

The book ends, strangely, with the old and the present (temporary) National Anthem. I have yet to mention the excellent photographs which are interspersed between the chapters. To my personal delight, there is a slight bias on Basle and its surroundings, but seeing that the pictures are perfect, nobody could mind. There is an extremely useful list of international organisations, their equivalent terms and abbreviations in French and English.

If any other criticism were to be made, it would be that education is hardly mentioned. Perhaps the publishers might consider its inclusion in a future new edition. I am sure this will not be very long in coming, as this issue will be sold out as fast as its predecessors. For anybody interested in what Switzerland is really like, presented without propagandistic tendency or patriotic smugness,

“Schweizer, das musst du wissen!” is the answer. As a comprehensive book of reference it is invaluable to anyone who has to write or talk on Switzerland. For young “Auslandschweizer” eager to learn about their country, this book is ideal, provided they know German. But their elders, too, will be pleased to get their facts right up to 1965 — very few of us can keep up with developments at home. So here it is — “Schweizer, das musst du wissen!”

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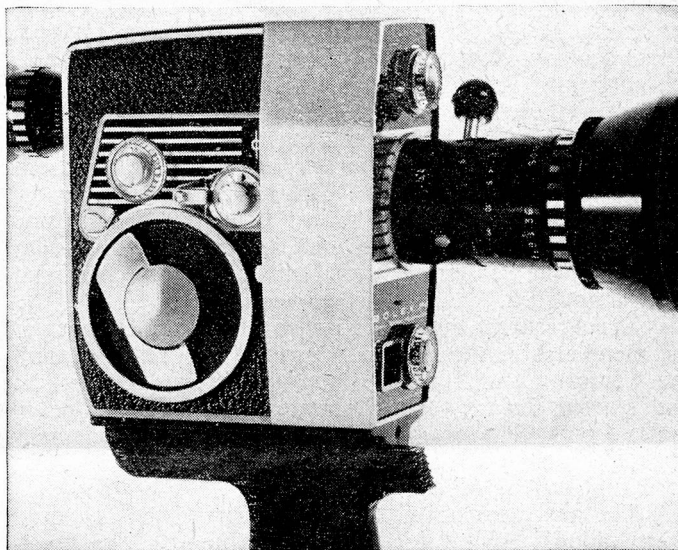


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