

# The social position of the Swiss woman

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*"Peace is my parting gift to you, my own peace, such as the world cannot give. Set your troubled hearts at rest, and banish your fears. You heard me say 'I am going away, and coming back to you'. If you loved me you*

*would have been glad to hear that I was going to the Father; for the Father is greater than I. I have told you now, beforehand, so that when it happens you may have faith"*

JOHN 14, 27-31.



Engadine  
Sils

By courtesy  
S.N.T.O.

## A HAPPY WHITSUN

### THE SOCIAL POSITION OF THE SWISS WOMAN

By Dr. H. THALMANN-ANTENNEN

The Swiss woman has won questionable fame as the only woman in Europe today not to enjoy the same civic rights as the man. This undeniable fact might well lead foreign observers to misjudge her social position if the reasons of such discrimination are not duly considered in the light of the very special political situation found in Switzerland. If we speak of the woman's social position we do not mean her political rights only. There are other factors to be taken into account such as her status in general as determined by her training, both intellectual and vocational, by the part she plays in economic life, by her position in the family and by the regard paid her as human being. The legal status of the woman, as reflected by her political rights, need not necessarily tally with her social position as such. Legislation often is late in catching up with social facts, and this is particularly true of a direct democracy where the legislative apparatus is slow-gearred and intricate. This, actually, is the case in Switzerland where equal political rights for the woman are concerned.

The origins of the Swiss democracy date back to the assemblies of free and valiant peasants, centuries ago. Throughout its history and despite steady evolution and modification it never gave up the principle of direct appeal to the people. It is built up from below: the base is formed by independent communities where matters are settled in the communal assemblies; next come the Cantons, sovereign states, some of which still abide by the so-called "Landsgemeinde", the assembly of the citizens for elections and votes held in the open. The overall organization which unites the twenty-five autonomous Cantons is the Confederation in which the people have also decisive word to say in the promulgation of laws, their acceptance or rejection being subject to popular vote. This state organization, evolved out of the traditions of a freedom loving people, calls for a policy which must respect the will of the individual citizen. It is this system which until today has prevented the Swiss women from attaining equality of status. While a bill on the introduction of women's suffrage has obtained a strong parliamentary

majority in some Cantons as well as in the Confederation, the ultimate decision lies with the voters and these — the men — have so far not seen fit to pass a majority vote on the question of equal political rights for women.

It must be pointed out that these so-called political rights of the Swiss citizen go much farther than in most other countries. Besides electoral franchise and eligibility in the communities, the Cantons and the Confederation, they include the right to vote on amendments of the constitution and on the passing of bills. In the Cantons, such matters must always be brought before the people (compulsory referendum) whereas in the Confederation the optional referendum applies when 30,000 signatures have been obtained. Furthermore, every Swiss citizen has the right to sign an initiative demanding an amendment of the constitution or drafting of cantonal bills and amendments of same. Due to these far reaching political rights, exercised on communal, cantonal and federal level, the calls upon the Swiss citizen to perform his civic duties are many and often involve very important and difficult questions of legislation.

Lacking equality of status, however, does not mean that the Swiss woman has nothing at all to say in politics. In the course of the last decades women have in fact won equal political rights in three Cantons (Geneva, Vaud and Neuchâtel). In many other Cantons they have access to communal bodies and the judicature. The battle for women's rights has indeed been long drawn out and tedious, due to the unique structure of Swiss legislation. Yet it has not been in vain, for the Swiss woman has matured in the political field and won an ability of discernment which women in other countries where they were given full political rights almost over night must yet acquire. Though not formally recognized, the Swiss woman, through her organizations, takes a very active part in legislative and political decisions. She is called upon to serve as expert on preparatory committees, and there is hardly a law of any importance which would not first be submitted for discussion also to the women's organizations. The Swiss woman has thus indirectly stepped into public life and assumed considerable responsibilities, gaining an influence which should not be underestimated.

Furthermore, the country can only profit from the good and valuable work accomplished by women in their own organizations or as members of mixed bodies. They help to solve social problems, in fact important social institutions which have become indispensable today were originally devised and started by women. Thus the Swiss woman is doing a job of greatest political importance without making much fuss about it. This work so far has not won her full recognition in the form of political rights, but it is bound to come and probably not so far off.

The Swiss woman has been able to do this valuable preparatory work in the political field because of her excellent education and training. Women enjoy exactly the same facilities in school and occupational training as the men. Switzerland actually was the first country to admit women to university studies. Yet, there still are many hindrances obstructing a woman's professional activity. The law bars women from relatively very few professions, judicature, for instance, which in the Confederation and in the majority of the Cantons requires full political rights. Certain difficulties are further encountered by the woman official and teacher when she marries. Labour shortage, however, has done wonders in this respect. Yet one should not cherish the illusion that economic setbacks would not change this situation. Switzerland today counts 756,500

women engaged in a profession or 30.1% of the wage earning population.

The most difficult question for the woman of today still is that of advancement and equal pay. This we find not only in Switzerland, for the whole problem is closely linked with human nature and the woman's specific position and duty as a mother.

To complete the picture of the woman's social status we must consider her position in the family, as provided by the Swiss Civil Code of 1912. This code is based on equality of the sexes. However, the Swiss people, originally peasants, still uphold strong patriarchal traditions resulting in repeated violation of this principle. In financial matters, a married woman is particularly and very largely dependent upon her husband who, by law, manages and enjoys the assets brought into marriage by her. He further, before the law, is the sole owner of property acquired during marriage for which he need not account to his wife. On the other hand, in case of breach of duties on the part of the husband, far reaching legal protection is provided for the wife and in practice the law is applied very strictly. Guardianship of the children is conferred on both parents equally though where differences of opinion arise the ultimate decision lies with the father, the authorities having certain controls in case of abuse. The developments of the last few years tend to do away with these remnants of patriarchal conceptions. A committee is now engaged upon studying the matter and preparing amendments which in family law should give the woman equality of status and thus comply with the needs of our time.

In international comparison the social position of a people or of a certain group within this people should not be viewed in the light of some one difference or discriminatory policy, the picture should always be seen as a whole. The Swiss woman who as yet does not enjoy equality of status has nevertheless been called upon to co-operate in public affairs on a very large scale. She answers all pre-conditions as to training, energy of intention, social and political understanding and thus is able to assume responsibility and guarantee a fruitful co-operation in the interest of the country.

*(Pro Helvetia Foundation.)*

### APPOINTMENT

The following appointments have recently been made in Switzerland:

#### Federal

Wilfried Martel, St. Gall, Departmental Secretary of the Swiss Home Office in succession to Dr. phil. Eduard Vodoz.

Dr. Werner Guldimann, Head of the Swiss Office of Aviation, in succession to Dr. Markus Burkhard.

#### Diplomatic

Ambassador Guy de Keller (Ghana, Liberia and Togo) as Extraordinary and Plenipotentiary Ambassador to Sierra Leone.

Dr. Arturo Marcionelli, Ambassador in Léopoldville, as Ambassador to Turkey.

Minister Albert Weitnauer, Delegate of the Federal Council for Trade Agreements, as Vice-President of GATT.

#### Military

Divisional Commander Harald de Courten as Commander of Mountain Division 9.

Colonel of General Staff Robert Stucki as successor to Colonel de Courten as *Unterstabscchef Front* of the General Staff Division.

Colonel Georg Reichlin as new Chief of Staff of Training with rank of Brigadier.

National Councillor Otto Bienz, Berne, as new *Oberfeld-kommissar* in succession to Hans Scheurer.

Kaspar Haug, Aeschi, as Chief of Personnel with the Federal Military Department.

#### Press

Dr. Hermann Voegeli, teacher at the Zug Cantonal School, as new Editor of "Der Schweizer Alpen Club" in succession to Dr. h.c. Max Oechslin.

Pfr. Gerhard Rytz, Geneva, as new Editor of the religious youth periodical "Kontakt".

#### Various

Prof. D. F. A. Lutz, Zurich, Delegate and Secretary of the *Schweizerisches Institut für Auslandsforschung*, in succession to Dr. A. Hunold.

Dr. U. Braun, as new Central Secretary of the Foundation "Für das Alter".

Walter Foerderer, architect in Basle, as teacher at the Art Academy of Karlsruhe.

Dr. Sc. Techn. Werner Schoch, Basle, Manager of the Agricultural Research Institute Liebefeld-Berne.

National Councillor Josef Leu, Lucerne, President of the Catholic Farmers' Federation.

Ing. Agr. Emil Straub, Zurich, President of the "Paten-schaft für bedrängte Gemeinden" in succession to Dr. Paul Cattani who, with his wife, has worked in the organisation for twenty-five years.

Walter Rentsch, Zurich, President of the "Schweiz. Buerofachverband".

[A.T.S.]

### MAY DAY IN SWITZERLAND

During the last decade of the nineteenth century, May Day demonstrations started. In those days, there was a belligerent industrial proletariat which fought with justification for better conditions. It used to be an opportunity for making demands during the bitter years of recession in the mid-thirties, and the demonstrators in those days came of their free will without being organised or instigated.

In an article in the "Basler Nachrichten" on 7th May, Editor and National Councillor Peter Dürrenmatt deplores as anachronism the fact that one has not been successful in turning May Day into a real "Tag der Arbeit" and that one still tenaciously clings to the fictitious idea that on 1st May one has to demonstrate *pro* social progress and *antidiscrimination* against the industrial worker. Yet, this year again, practically without exception, the demands made concern the whole nation and every social strata, and the subjects chosen are in fact an essential part of Swiss State Policy.

As May Day fell on a Sunday, some of the demonstrations took place already on the previous day. Mostly favoured by excellent weather, the public came out either to march in or to watch the processions. In the Valais, fewer people took part than usual. In Sion, about 100 workers walked in procession to the sound of the Savièse tambourines. At Brigue, for the first time in twenty years, the Free Trade Unions of the Upper Valais organised a meeting. In the *Suisse Romande* processions were held everywhere as usual. In Lausanne, the Communists had their own celebration a day early. At Porrentruy, the youth of the Jury used their second *Fête de la Jeunesse Jurassienne* to demand freedom and self-determination for the Jura.

At Grenchen, workers arranged a torch-light procession, and at Olten, the new Town Hall was inaugurated,

a fine building in the centre of the town. The cost of 10.3 million francs covered administrative offices a "Ratsaal" for the Commune Parliament, exhibition rooms, flats, a post office and a subterranean garage.

The Basle May Day demonstrations had marked international character with deputations from neighbouring Baden and Alsace, a contingent of North-German carpenters in their quaint and distinctive garb, as well as strong groups of the foreign working population. One of the main speakers on the Market Square where 7,000 people had gathered, was a member of the German Bundestag, Dr. A. Moeller. For a change, the workers from the other Half-Canton of Baselland combined with their urban colleagues.

1,300 people walked in procession in Schaffhausen where National Councillor H. Leuenberger, Trade Union Federation Chief, gave the main address. In St. Gall, some 2,000 people listened to Federal Councillor Tschudi who gave a survey of Swiss Home Policy, putting town and country planning first.

In Chur, for the first time, the organisers refrained from marching in procession, but gave an afternoon concert instead. In the evening, Gerhard Hauptmann's "Fuhrmann Henschel" was performed to a full Municipal Theatre. In Lucerne, an historic pageant "Woher-Wohin" by Peter Hunkeler formed the centre of the celebration.

In Zurich, strong foreign participation was registered, and there were speeches in Italian and Spanish. The Berne demonstrations were under the influence of the cantonal elections and some 6-8,000 spectators and demonstrators gathered on the Bundesplatz.

Whilst many speakers stressed in self-congratulatory manner the social progress that the workers had achieved, they also asked for cheaper housing and improved old-age pensions, a stop to the increased rise of the cost of living and the devaluation of the franc. The vote for women was asked for at several meetings. Some of the posters carried by the marchers wanted "Peace in Vietnam", "Self Determination for Cyprus", "Freedom for the Spanish People". Obviously, the workers from Spain and Italy gave the May Day celebrations a different meaning to that of their Swiss colleagues. Most of the demands, however, concerned the whole nation. Some of the problems which could legitimately have been made a real May Day issue were left out: the kind of poverty in the large towns, which, says Mr. Dürrenmatt, is less of a material than of a spiritual-moral kind, the tough conditions in some of the agricultural districts where nothing much has been felt of the economic boom and where the social standard is low, the existing inequalities in education and training between those available to youth in industrial centres and isolated mountain districts.

Mr. Dürrenmatt muses that the efforts to turn the 1st of May into a Day of Peace or of Labour would fail because of the doubtful character these terms had been given by the military demonstrations in the Communist countries and the pre-war efforts by the Nazi propagandists.

Mr. Dürrenmatt maintains that it will be difficult to make May Day into a genuine "Tag der Arbeit" as it would give it more importance than our National Day which we still celebrate as a working day. Thus, this anachronism, the writer concludes, will continue which, is no disaster provided one avoids slandering other Helvetic anachronisms.

(Apart from the above-mentioned article by courtesy of the "Basler Nachrichten", news was received from A.T.S.)