

Recent events in Switzerland

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heated arguments over the works of present-day Swiss writers. And yet I keep being told that Switzerland is a land of farmers and peasants, just because many Swiss were countryfolk a generation or two ago and some still are. Never believe a Swiss when he runs down his country.

“... at common sense she gaily mocks”

Whatever I learnt about the country was startling. My mind boggled when I was first told that Switzerland is not a nation, and that it will cease to exist at all unless the twenty-five constituent Cantons remain sovereign States in their own right. This need for a Federal system I can now fathom, but what I still find strange is that, as a result, each district has its own tax structure, that the more prosperous a city or region is, the lower will be its taxation level and that regions blessed by nature with mountain roads to build and maintain have to pay for them out of their own (accordingly high) taxes unless they can persuade the Federal authorities in Berne to play uncle. And this in an egalitarian country! “O paradox, O paradox, at common sense she gaily mocks.” (There is of course a sensible explanation, but I would still protest if I were Swiss). Or take tolerance; there are one or two churches in which both Protestant and Roman Catholic services are held in turn — and yet some Swiss people refuse to go to certain shops “because of the assistant with her awful accent from so and so.” (This is dying out as people from the various Cantons intermingle more and more.)

Intolerance is a universal phenomenon and Switzerland may well have less of it than most, but somehow one would expect none at all in a country which has so signally succeeded in bringing together people of different creeds, races, languages and cultures, and which cares so lovingly for minorities that the very variants of a language spoken by only one per cent of the population are safeguarded in the Federal Constitution.

I expect too much of the Swiss, I know. I ought not to get angry at odd lapses in this impeccably organised country, but I fail to understand, for instance, why on earth the Federal Railways are so sparing of station nameplates that it is a matter of luck if one can read where the train has stopped; or why the opening and closing times of shops vary so unpredictably (although most of them mercifully do stay open until 6.30 p.m.); or why the place for letter-boxes in many blocks of flats is inside the entrance hall and access to them denied to anyone delivering after the pedantically early hour at which front doors are duly locked (for fear of intruders? — where crime is almost non-existent). But I ought not to carp, because the absence of even such traces of imperfection would be altogether too much of a good thing.

To return to the paradoxes: it is these that give the Swiss way of life its endless fascination: “mais, Monsieur, il n’y a pas une Suisse — il y en a 25”; a democracy that denies women the vote; a citadel of economic liberalism that nationalised its railways by popular vote in 1898; people of the most disconcerting listlessness who can be the staunchest and most stimulating friends one could wish for; conformists who are individualists.

I’m slowly becoming used to it all. Look, I now say to myself, why be surprised at the seagulls that abound on Swiss lakes and rivers, hundreds of miles from the sea. Depend on it — they know why they come.

(“Pro Helvetia” Foundation)

RECENT EVENTS IN SWITZERLAND

The most important event in Switzerland recently was the 24th agricultural exhibition and fair in St. Gall, the **OLMA**. Over 1,000 exhibitors showed their products, and a special day was reserved for this year’s guest of honour, U.S.A. The OLMA was opened by Federal Councillor R. Gnaegi who spoke on federalism and agriculture, especially on the new concept of cattle breeding. Special attractions were a cattle auction and a show of *Sennen*- and St. Bernard dogs. 365,000 visitors were registered, a new record — 3,000 admissions more than last year.

The **Swiss Week** was once again organised from 15th to 29th October, a special annual campaign to publicise Swiss goods and products. The President of the Confederation, Federal Councillor H. Schaffner, addressed the Swiss people over radio and TV.

Other events during October included a meeting in Aarau of the **Swiss Youth Parliaments**. The Federation of **Swiss Cheese Exporters** discussed a more flexible marketing policy at their meeting in Berne. A new exhibition on “Model und Gebäcke im Laufe der Jahrhunderte” was held in Lucerne, whilst the **Cantonal Police Chiefs** discussed the progress of an intercantonal mobile police force at their annual meeting at Altdorf.

Problems of personnel, especially as regards continuity and integration, were discussed at the first Swiss conference of the **Swiss Study Association on Questions of Personnel** in Berne. The **Swiss Federal Gymnastic Society** held its 80th Delegates’ Meeting in Geneva; the new constitution was accepted according to which federal gymnastic festivals will be held every six years (every four hitherto), and the “Schweizerische Turnzeitung” is to be reorganised.

At a meeting in Zug, the **Swiss “Werkbund”** demanded the reform of applied art colleges and the creation of demonstration settlements. To mark **United Nations Day**, an exhibition on UNO stamps and photographs was organised in Geneva. A special concert by the *Orchestre de la Suisse Romande* was given at the Nations’ Palace.

In Berne (University), an exhibition on **German Exile Literature 1933-1945** was held, and in the same place, the **Interverband für Schwimmen** held a silver jubilee meeting and discussed the benefits of swimming and the construction of baths.

At the meeting of the **Union of Swiss Chambers of Commerce Abroad** (Zurich), the Netherland Swiss Chamber of Commerce was accepted; the Union now comprises Paris, Milan, Brussels, Vienna, Buenos Aires, Rio/São Paulo and Amsterdam.

Over 700 people took part in a **Rassemblement Européen** at Caux, which had the theme “A Society in the Service of All Men”.

[A.T.S.]

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