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# «Hie Bärn, hie Eidgenossenschaft»

*(This ist Berne, this is the Confederation)*

## The author

Dr. Karl F. Waelchli was born at Liebefeld near Berne in 1934. He went to school there and in Berne. After studying in Berne and Vienna, he worked as teacher of history and Latin at the Berne *Gymnasium*. Since 1977 he has been engaged by the Berne State Archives. Apart from papers for the teaching of political science, his publications include Niklaus Emanuel Tschanner, 1727–1794, a Bernese magistrate and economic patriot (1964), and Adrian von Bubenbergr (Berne Heimatbuch Nr. 122, 1979).

In 1953, the 600th anniversary of Berne's joining the Confederation was celebrated. A memorial pageant under the above name recalled to memory the rich and varied history of Berne. There is no doubt that the alliance of Berne with the Primitive Cantons of Uri, Schwyz and Unterwalden was an important landmark not only in Berne's history, but the development of Primitive Switzerland towards the Sovereign State which we know today as the Swiss Confederation, would be unthinkable without Berne's participation. If, today, someone grumbles about «those in Berne», he generally means the federal authorities concentrated in the federal capital. Besides that, there is «the other Berne», the Swiss Confederate State of Berne of which Carl Hilty from St. Gall, lecturer in constitutional law at Berne University, wrote exactly one hundred years ago: «Berne is the only Canton in the Confederation today, which carries a mark of genuine statesmanship, which in case of need could lead an independent existence, and in which wider issues of State are actually carried out and can be examined with regard to their value.»

## Land and People

With its 410 Communes divided into 27 administrative districts, the



Berne: Marktgasse with the Marksmen's Fountain and the famous Clock Tower

Canton of Berne is indeed something like a Switzerland in miniature. Berne has a share in the three

types of Swiss landscape: the Jura, the Midlands and the Alps. Whilst French is spoken in the Bernese Jura and Bienne is a positively exemplary bilingual town, it is «Bärndütsch» which is prevalent in the rest of the Canton. But anyone who believes that «Bärndütsch» is a uniform language is greatly mistaken. It is one of the attractions of the Bernese language that there are significant differences from valley to valley, from region to region. The Bernese is proud of his local idiom and cultivates it deliberately. The state educational publishers have recently issued a schoolbook with samples of Bernese. But it needs an expert to judge easily whether a person speaks the dialect of Ins, of Trub, of Schwarzenburg or



Typical Bernese farmhouse

Oberhasli. This linguistic diversity is reflected in the rules of the Berne Cantonal Parliament which admits French, German and Bernese (with appropriate simultaneous translation) as official business language!

### A look at History

The Keeper of the Bernese State Archives, Fritz Häusler, has succeeded in presenting a summary of the most important historic events in Berne's history, where others generally need volumes:

«The town of Berne owes its origins to the Duke Berchtold V of Zähringen, the last scion of the Swabian family famed for founding towns. On the death of Duke Berchtold in 1218, the Emperor reclaimed the Zähringen town which had been built on imperial territory. The resolute City of Berne, until that time the natural centre of a wide circle of towns and castles of the House of Zähringen, henceforth became the nucleus of a new power-structure along the River Aar.

The roles that the City and Government of Berne assumed in the course of its almost eight hundred years' history may be indicated in a few words as follows: 13th century – free

imperial city with privileges granted by Emperor Frederick II of Hohenstaufen; in the 13th and 14th centuries – capital of the Burgundian Federation already spreading across the French-speaking regions; from 1323 to 1353 – member of the Confederation and protector of its western frontier; after the conquest of Vaud in 1536 – the largest City State north of the Alps; at the time of the Wars of Religion, together with Zurich, – mainstay of the Swiss Reformed Church and proud patrician City Republic which experienced its cultural Golden Age in the 18th century; at the time of the French invasion in 1798 – the Canton most severely punished of all those in the Old Confederation by the Revolutionary Government in Paris; then becoming a People's State in 1831 – determined pioneer of the revision of the Confederation in 1848, and finally – an agrarian Canton having to adapt to the technical and industrial age.

In the 14th century, the City of Berne, often having to exert to the utmost its financial resources rather than its military forces, set up a territorial state extending from the Lake of Geneva almost to the mouth of the River Aar. The priority of foreign over domestic

policy, due to its territorial expansion, was unique for Swiss conditions. It prevented the rise of guild rule at the end of the 13th century, such as arose elsewhere at that time, and it kept in power the nobles and the members of the new aristocracy who sat on the Council which, in the 17th century, was restricted to the small circle of Bernese patrician families, up to the fall of the old City of Berne. The gradual establishment of the Canton of Berne was founded on imperial privileges and on mediaeval rights of rule and jurisdiction inherited from the nobility. Making discreet use of its powers, Berne allowed the rural districts to preserve their autonomy. It was the Reformation in 1528 that gave the State greater effectiveness by opening up new fields of activity such as poor relief, schools and moral discipline. It created an organization comprising the entire population in the Bernese Reformed National Church.

When the old City and Republic of Berne fell in 1798, the Canton was forced to submit to the loss of much of its territory. When, in 1815, the Congress of Vienna assigned to the Canton of Berne the larger part of the former Prince-Bishopric of Basle (Jura)

Spiez Castle, seat of the Bubenberg dynasty from 1338–1516



Arcades in the mediaeval townlet of Erlach





View from the Schilthorn: Eiger, Moench and Jungfrau

in compensation for Vaud and Unteraargau, it again became a bilingual Canton, but, and that was quite new, the two denominations obtained parity. Naturally, in the course of this transformation, the people of the Jura were not asked for their opinion. Only recently were they given an opportunity of voting whether they wished to continue to belong to the Canton of Berne. As a result of several plebiscites, the French-speaking and Catholic northern Jura has now become a new Canton, the southern border of which runs along a historical line of demarcation largely determined by the mediaeval alliances of Berne and Bienne and the southern Jura.

Of the five constitutions (1803, 1815, 1831, 1846 and 1893) that the Cantonal State, newly revived in 1803, has given itself until today, the one of 1831 marks the transition from a patrician state to a «People's State» with equality before the law and direct participation by the people. What was originally a representative democracy has gradually come closer to a direct democracy by the extension of people's rights; women, too, were given the wide powers of franchise in 1971.

It was not easy for the rural Canton which was almost entirely agricultural, to adjust to the technical and industrial age, and when the modern network of communications began to be set up in 1815, Berne suffered from the disadvantage of the axis of its territory running from north to south, that is right through the Jura and the Alpine parts of the Canton where the mountainous nature of the land complicated the building of roads and railways. Since private capital did not flow in sufficient quantities, the State itself was obliged to undertake the construction of a railway. In 1913, the Canton of Berne even took the initiative and financed a second Swiss Alpine transversal, the Loetschberg Tunnel. At the beginning of this century, the Canton also proceeded with the production of energy, but with a difference: instead of a state undertaking, they chose the form of a mixed economy enterprise. At that time of beginning economic and technical change, another new course had to be faced, the elevation of Berne to federal capital in 1848 and the incorporation of the sovereign Canton into the Swiss Confederation.» (Bernerland, Berne 1978).

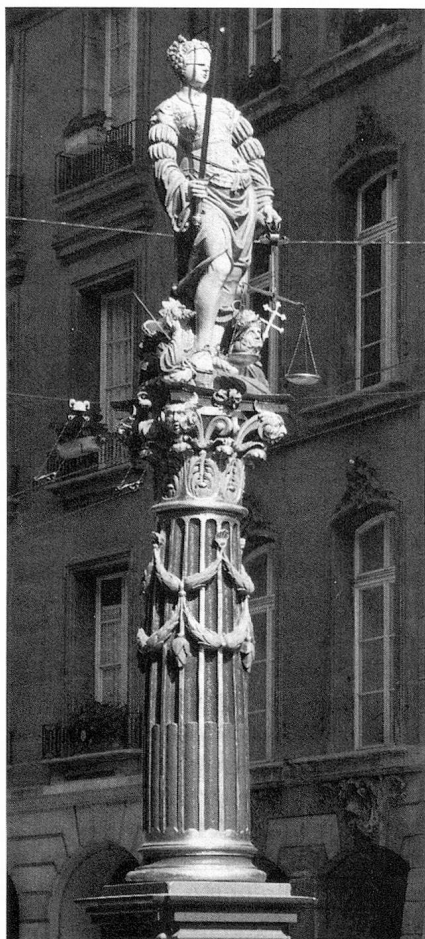
## The Canton of Berne today

With a *per capita* income of a little over Fr. 18000.— as compared to the Swiss average of approximately Fr. 20000.—, the Canton of Berne belongs to the economically less favoured Cantons of Switzerland. The process of restructuring in the watch industry has caused considerable problems in the Bernese Jura. The high rate of exchange of the Swiss Franc also causes worries to the tourist industry, for the Canton of Berne (after the Grisons) has available the second-largest number of hotel beds. The future of the Bernese economy need, however, not be judged too pessimistically. Thanks to its central position and the newly constructed network of national motorways, the Canton of Berne is easily accessible. The projected improvement of the Loetschberg line by making it double-track will also contribute towards enhancing the Canton's attraction for business undertakings. Local planning in the Communes, now largely completed, and ecological development concepts for the various regions will create a well-balanced structure which is in keeping with the needs of the economy

The rack-railway to the Brienzer Rothorn, operational since 1892







The Justice Fountain in Bern. At the feet of Justitia the four heads symbolizing power: the Pope, the Emperor, the Sultan and ... the Mayor of Bern

and the desirable conservation of the beautiful Land of Bern.

The Bernese – contrary to widely-held belief – are well aware that man does not live of bread alone. It is positively astonishing how villages everywhere spend often very large sums of money to save buildings worth preserving and to use them for new praiseworthy purposes. Thus everywhere in the Canton, small cultural centres have sprung up where traditional Bernese customs compete in a friendly manner with new forms of cultural pursuits: cellar theatres, art weeks, evenings devoted to poetry and prose, classical concerts vying with the hot rhythms of youth bands – none of these are the privilege of the capital. In France it may be correct to say

«Paris, c'est la France», but such a statement certainly does not apply to the Canton of Bern. It is true that the City of Bern, in the course of history, has created the State of Bern. But right from the beginning, political leadership did not consist of guild companions only; the surrounding nobility, we think of the Bubenbergs as an example, identified itself with the town. Yet the knights remained rooted in the countryside. And what held good for the knights was important later on for the patrician families who remained in close and active contact with the peasantry, whilst living on their country estates, the well-known «Campagnen». A sensitive observer such as the German poetess Ricarda Huch expressed this Bernese individuality as follows: «Bern is the city of knights and peasants, a combination of what is noble and rural – so truly characteristic of that town.» On closer observation, one might even go further and call it a fundamental trait of the Bernese character and

thus also of the historical role of Bern – Bern has been an abode of equilibrium, a place of understanding through the ages. Such a task is quite often not in the least spectacular, indeed it may evoke hostility from extreme hot-heads and demagogues, but it is a most rewarding and laudible pursuit. The Fribourg writer Gonzague de Reynold formulated Bern's mission in 1913: «Bern is the centre of Switzerland, the iron knot which binds together two blocks: that of granite and that of molasses. It is in Bern where national unity is felt. Everything in Bern which is picturesque tells one of the old Germany, but the façades of the patrician mansions evoke the old France, and the celebrated arcades come from Italy. All this, however, does not imply concession nor neutrality. That is why, when I have doubts about our past, about our future, about our strength of assimilation, about our common spirit – I go to Bern.»

*F. Waelchli*

The village of Ligerz with a view of the Isle of St. Peter where Jean-Jacques Rousseau lived in 1765 (Photo SNTÖ)

