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Life-giving Waters

Biographical notes

The writer and poet Maurice Zermatten was born at St. Martin on 22nd October 1910. On completion of his studies at Fribourg University, he became lecturer in French literature at the «Gymnase» of Sion.

As author of many publications, he was awarded the Gottfried Keller Prize, the Grand Prix Catholique de Littérature and an honorary doctorate of the University of Fribourg.

In the Rhone Valley, the aqueducts have been the preoccupation of the rural population from one century to the next. It is the consequence of the driness of our climate and the poverty of our soil in this rocky country of ours. For fifty generations of our ancestors, water meant life. Without water no harvest. Driness means misery and death. The «bisse», the water duct is the vein which transports the vital element into the body dried out by the sun.

This means that the «bisses» are as old as the Valais civilization. Cranks would have it that it was the Arabs or, as we call them the Saracens who taught us the art of survival. This is an art which man discovers inside himself as soon as he is in danger. I watch children playing near water. With a small piece of wood or a pebble they spontaneously invent veritable aqueducts. The small stream is channelled according to their whims. A small boy is victorious over the inherent tendency of the water to follow the steepest gradient. The fragile barrage breaks all the laws of physics and the water flows where it had no intention of flowing.

It would be condemning the mountain dweller as an imbecile to maintain that he had lived for centuries in the neighbourhood of our great waterfalls and rivers without getting the idea of making use of them in order to fight hunger. Under the heat of

our summers, the harvest burns. The heat of high summer is mortal. Get a few steps away, the water runs uselessly into the Rhone... The remedy exists in the next room, whilst the patient suffers in his bed and dies. And nobody would have the idea to fetch the remedy?...

What I want to say is that the «bisses» are as old as our agriculture, as our paths and routes, our houses. Communal life was only possible, especially in the mountains, thanks to the «bisses». In turn, their use has improved ever more in the course of centuries. In order to construct the long ducts in the varied topographical terrain, it was necessary that the community organized itself and became aware of its collective responsibility and means. It is not in the power of one man alone to lead the water canals along the unconquerable rocks. The example of the old «bisse» of Savîèse is a most enlightening witness of a victory which was only possible by welding together all the forces available in a region which was threatened by famine year after year. The aqueduct or death... And these people of the 13th century achieved what seems to us today a veritable miracle: trimmed the walls of the vertical rocks and constructed the «bisses» with a courage and an intelligence which still today fills us with wonder.

Thus the whole Valais gradually became dotted with an immense system of canalization which is so fragile that it has to be serviced every spring in order to be operational. Ant's work, ancient obstinacy and fabulous enterprise which require the energy of all the men and women, for the women like the men take part in this drudgery. They use the pickaxe and the shovel just like the men.

They want to have water day and night just like the men. Like the men, they «put» the water on the meadows at night with the light of a lantern. They watch its flow, going from one piece of land to another, so that not a single drop gets lost of what is theirs according to the rules.

The «bisse» is not just a duct embedded in the earth and between estates. It is a whole organization based on the needs of everyone and at the same time defending equally the rights of all. The total of dispositions taken in order to govern the utilization of the water for a given area is called «le ratement du bisse». It contains a complete list of all those entitled to water, a register of pieces of land which may be watered, as well as the amount of time allotted for the watering according to the size of the piece of land. As in olden times when people were not concerned with written records, everything figured on the four-sided «bâtons de bisse», all the important data: 1. the house mark, 2. the day of the round, 3. the time available for the watering, 4. the division of the sector into apportioned lots.

These «bâtons de bisse» thus contain an outline of book-keeping valid from the date of beginning of the watering. This date varies from year to year according to the start of spring. Generally it is in May that watering becomes indicated. The «procureur», administrator of the «bisses», decides one fine day to call all those entitled to take part in the cleaning procedure. Because the «bisses» are empty during autumn and winter. From that first day, watering is open and the round begins. He allocates the necessary time for watering to all the proprietors of the sector, between twenty and thirty days. Then follows the second and if necessary the third round. As a matter of course, the watering begins on the lowest



pieces of land, those furthest away from the ducts and most threatened by the drought, and goes up the slope, higher day after day. There are even «bisses» one above the other: the one below, the one in the middle and the one above on the hill. Each one has its proper organization, its special participants and distribution system. They all act independently, although the owners may be the same.

It must be said that these communities are like the Alpine corporations, completely independent of the political organization of the Commune. They don't render account to anyone but themselves and function completely outside any other institution of the Commune or the citizens. It is certain that these economic associations preceded any political organization by the citizens. These, in turn, are even older than the Communes which are only just a century and a half old.

As the historians told us long ago, it was economic corporate bodies like these which were responsible for founding the Confederation. Within a communal organization

from which depend the interest of all concerned, some men learn to direct, to think for the community and to act on its behalf. They learn not only to carry responsibilities but also get to know the rights and the strength of the small corporate group. One day these men will demand rights from their overlords, which means liberty. From an economic body, it becomes a political one. We gradually come to the constitution of citizens' communities which are at the origin of our political history. Because from now on the banner symbolizes the existence of a moral force which in all its aspirations tends towards liberty.

From this we gather that the «bisses» are not just a simple system of canalization necessary to economic existence of a small community. It grows into the centre of communal and collective activity and becomes the starting-point for the cohesion of common interests which each participant has to defend through the intermediaries he has given a mandate too for representation. Thus real democracy is born in which all have the same rights and duties.

The «procureur» is not in his office by divine right, but because he has been chosen by his fellow citizens.

But don't let us forget our «bisses». The water flows, the round begins. Everyone knows the day and the hour, even the half-hour when the water begins to flow for him. I don't know how the peasants knew the time before the existence of the precision watch. Did the notches on the «bâton du bisse» correspond to the sun dial? The fact remains that there were not a few disputes regarding the use of the water. Our legends inform us. Amongst the ghosts which disturbed the nightly rest of our ancestors there were quite a few water thieves. That is to say, people who directed water from the «bisses» onto their plots at a time which was not theirs. Every pannier of hay had its value. The existence of these mountain farmers had always been marked by a hard fight against poverty. An additional hour of watering meant a better harvest. A curious temptation which moral theology had possibly not foreseen! Those who could not resist, had to admit it in the confessional. If not, purgatory would be obliged to redress justice.

One bought and sold water of the «bisses», or rather the hours of watering. The scales, at least those I saw, excluded watering on

Sundays. On those days, the administrator could sell the water without committing a wrong. On the contrary, he could thus earn a little money for the collective household.

The watering at night has given birth to innumerable tales. The man or woman behind the storm-light or the lantern, seen from the distance, could remind one of a lost soul in search of forgiveness. But the waterers themselves often had strange adventures. Indefinable creatures barred their way, or they heard the rosaries of the procession of the lost souls. Or again they saw dark spots in the dark that could only be birds of ill omen. They heard voices or steps which followed them along the water ducts and remained hard on their heels without ever touching them. The ghosts had no right to touch the living nor to address them. But they could answer questions put to them and also put their demands for prayers and mass. With regard to their situation as the dead, they remained dumb – like the dead...

It is the life of the wine-growers and the mountain dwellers which is sketched on the background of the aqueducts of the Valais. Lerchwood channels, stone walls, grooves in the soil, glades in the woods or cuts in the moraine – everywhere the «bisse» passes, and men and women walk along the verge. From century to century, man follows this health-giving water, this expression of life. He hears the gentle song which accompanies him and which promises not to abandon him to destruction. Rain is so rare in these dry lands and the processions of prayer often so unavailing that the sole hope rests on these domesticated and willing waters.

In the meantime, time has changed. Mountain farming in particular has lost significance. Man is no longer dependent on a

handful of hay or rye. Affluence has replaced extreme poverty. We have hardly any peasants left who live only from the products of the soil. If wine-growing has become more important compared to earlier times, mountain farming is in dire danger. Large meadows are no longer mown, and the «bisse» has become superfluous. Many are covered in rubble and pebbles. The wooden ducts are rotting away and disappear. It is with great distress that one registers this slow disappearance, yet nothing is done.

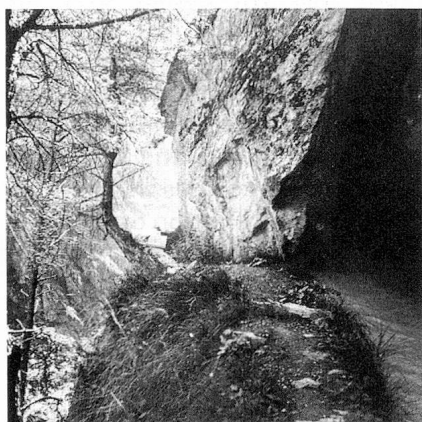
For two or three thousand years, these loyal and irreplaceable servants enabled the Valaisans in the mountains to survive the annual drought, and yet nobody seems to worry about their disappearance.

One has to ask oneself occasionally to what purpose are the organizations for the promotion of development. The walks along the water ducts have an unique charm. What is done to prevent the irremediable destruction?

Occasionally, there is a narrow path, not yet quite disappeared. But it is the presence of the water, the flowing water, the softly singing water which ought to be preserved.

If one is not careful, the Valaisans of tomorrow won't even know any more that these aqueducts existed at all and that they saved our ancestors from famine.

Certainly, the watering channels



for the vineyards remain. The wine-grower, at least in parts, is dependent on these old channels, certainly from the moment of planting the vine-stock. One has repeatedly stated that the vine is of Roman origin. Why should it not be Celtic or Ligurian? Were the soil and the climate not already favourable for its cultivation at times immemorial?

A stroll along a «bisse» in the vineyard means walking in the footsteps of our most ancient ancestors, in the footsteps of those

who settled on our slopes and discovered the splendour of our countryside.

In order to live there, they needed water. They went to find it at the mountain torrent. They opened the first «bisse» a little like the child who plays at the fountain-head. And ever since then, the «bisse» has never betrayed. We ought to remember this.

Maurice Zermatten

(Text and photos: «Revue 13 Etoiles, reflets du Valais», n° 5, Mai 1982)

Results of the federal plebiscite on 2nd December 1984

Surprising conformity

Three subject matters had to be voted on.

The People's Initiative on an effective maternity protection with its proposal of parents' leave of absence of nine months was rejected by a massive majority, i.e. 1 288 181 (84.2%) against 241 400 (15.8%); all the Cantons had a majority against.

The Constitutional Article on radio and television and the Federal Council's counter proposal for aid to the victims of crimes of violence were accepted by a large majority of citizens, i.e. 1 001 693 against 456 102, and 1 240 077 against 272 141 respectively. Both proposals were accepted by all the Cantons. Voting participation was 37%.

The maternity protection Initiative had been proposed by the big women's organizations and supported by the Parties of the Left. It demanded complete cover of all costs arising from pregnancy and birth, the introduction of paid leave of absence for the parents (mother or father) for 9 months. It was this proposal which was op-

posed by most voters. The Initiative also asked for protection against notice during pregnancy. Parliament, Federal Council and all the Parties on the Right had declared unanimously against the Initiative, not least because some of the new introductions would have been unacceptable for employers.

The Constitutional Article on radio and television, which was accepted by 68.8% of the citizens, had practically no opposition from the political Parties. It enables the Confederation to legislate in the field of electronic media, in order to get a more satisfactory basis. A first project of this kind was rejected in 1957 and a second one in 1976.

The proposal for aid to victims of crimes of violence was accepted by 82% of the voting electors. The aid by Confederation and Cantons as proposed for the constitutional change will be realized as moral and legal assistance, as well as considered compensation should the victims get into financial difficulties due to such crimes.

I. F.

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