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On the 200th birthday of Jeremias Gotthelf

A world citizen but not at ease

In 1997 Jeremias Gotthelf – one of the greats of Swiss literature – would have been 200 years old. We try to bring him back by quoting.

He was a stimulating man of genius with a multi-sided education, a practical and sharp eye and a deep knowledge of people. At the same time he was easily provoked, given to outbursts, but deep and soft – a nature full of love." It would be hardly possible

*Fritz von Gunten**

to sum up Gotthelf better than this description by his daughter, Henriette.

Understanding Gotthelf also means understanding his age. Political and social struggle was incredibly intense in his day. It was a time of wild turmoil. New ideas about freedom in political, economic and moral relationships were tossed around amongst the people. "The reason why with the best possible will I cannot keep away from so-called politics," he says in the foreword to 'The Spirit of the Times and of Berne', "is that today's politics are everywhere, and precisely the typical characteristic of radicalism is that it penetrates the whole way of life of all classes, ruins the sanctity of the family, destroys all Christian elements. Wherever one puts one's foot in the house, one treads on this serpent, this plague of Europe."

The 1997 anniversary year should be used as an occasion to become acquainted – perhaps again – with Gotthelf as a precise and sensitive observer of his times, although also ill at ease. He was effective as a theologian, an educator, a reformer, a politician, an admonisher and a visionary. In his works, which he wrote in the amazingly short period of

18 years, he built up a wide world of his own.

"The world, and not ambition or industry, made me into a writer. It pressed upon me long enough to press the books out of my head, so that I could throw them back at its head." And books he really wrote. There are 13 big romances and over 50 short stories. In addition, his many letters are infallible witnesses to his time. Alongside sharpness of tongue, there is never a lack of depth of thought and humour.

An observer of country and people

Gotthelf took the time to study people and to deepen his knowledge of them. He was almost 40 years old when he started to write. Only then could he reach into the fulness of life. Hardly any other part of the country has been described with such precision as his Emmental. This was thanks to Gott-

helf's alertness of eye, his gift of listening and describing everything in a masterly way. In his works, he has left us about 150 descriptions of various types of people. Do we not recognise ourselves here and there amongst them?

In general he said: "The Emmentaler is like his land. His circle of acquaintances is not wide, but he sees what is near to him with skill and acuity. He does not quickly comprehend that which is new, but once understood, he holds on to it with a wonderful persistence of energy. He does not speak much, he does not make much clamour, but once he puts his hand to something, he does not let go until everything is in order. And if he bursts out, one must be careful of life and limb."

Gotthelf also once compared the Emmental and its inhabitants with a precious stone, but one that is "uncut". Again and again, he holds up a mirror to the people of the valley and admonishes them: "The Emmentalers are a people of their own, egoists because they live mostly isolated, and for the same reason they are also closed up and somewhat proud. Everyone thinks he is a little master in his castle."

Gotthelf was an uncomfortable critic of government, politicians, lawyers, educators and quacks. But his voice was also one of warning for example when in 'Uli the Farmboy' he has the farmer say to Uli: "A good name is lost in an instant, but a bad name will not become a good one in many years."

Which Gotthelf are we celebrating?

His name has a good sound to it, and this will remain true long after 1997. One small article can show only a fragment of the life and work of Gotthelf. Too many questions remain unanswered. And this is a good thing. The anniversary year should be at the same time an incitement, an incentive and a stimulus to make each one of us come to terms with Gotthelf's creations in his own particular way. It should enable us to find our own personal answers. The question is contained in Gotthelf's own estimation of himself: "But it is happening to me more and more that people do not know who I really am, and they think of me as other than I am."

Information about the anniversary year and individual events may be obtained from: Pro Emmental, Schlossstrasse 3, CH-3550 Langnau i.E.; tel: 41 34 402 42 52, fax: 41 34 402 56 67



(Photo: zvg)

*Fritz von Gunten is chairman of the Coordination Organising Committee of '200 Years Jeremias Gotthelf'.