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# HELVETIA

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SWITZERLAND TODAY.  
By: E. Merz, Auckland.  
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For business reasons, I had to visit St.Gall a number of times, and usually had a short stop in Zurich on the way through. When leaving the great station of this sizeable commercial city, you are immediately realising its amazing vitality. Just stand for ten or twenty minutes, during lunchtime or between five and six o'clock at the big railway square, watching the people and traffic, and you are conscious that here is a real city, full of life and wealth and initiative. The packet trams, mostly three coaches each, painted blue and white and decorated with the beautiful city coat-of-arms, roll past in an endless stream in every direction, and needless to say the motor traffic is equally as heavy. The streets and buildings are spotlessly clean. Every Tuesday and Friday morning, the whole length of the tree-shaded Bahnhofstr. is filled with market stands, and it is most interesting to watch the thousands of housewives busily hunting for their vegetables, right in the centre of the main thoroughfare. Could you imagine this to happen in Queen Street, Auckland, or Willis Street, Wellington? By one o'clock, the Bahnhofstr. is again cleared and without a speck of dirt anywhere.

St. Gall - hardly necessary to tell any of my countrymen - is the centre of Swiss embroideries. It had a special attraction for me, as on and off I did business with that city since 1924. Cotton fibre was introduced to Switzerland in the 14th century. Swiss industries always had to fight keen competition and only through constant improvement, both technically and in quality, have they been able to succeed. Embroideries are greatly subject to fashion changes, and this industry is never stable. Perhaps some of the ladies reading my descriptions might be interested in the following chronicle I found at the office of a large manufacturer in St.Gall:

In the year 1750, there came to Lyon, (the centre of silk manufacture in France), two Turkish women who, on a drum embroidered flowers on silk fabrics of various colours with an embroidering needle, as well as working with gold and silver threads. Merchants of St.Gall, who were established in Lyon and traded with linen and muslins, saw the work of the Turks and had the idea that the same kind of embroidering would be done on smooth muslins. They taught a woman this embroidery, and then sent her to St.Gall to teach others. Muslin was thus embroidered by a firm; they were bleached and finished, sent back to Lyon where they found a ready market. In the 18th century, many thousands of women were employed to embroider, and later machines, first manipulated by hand and later mechanically, were introduced and constantly improved.

And while on the subject of textiles, I may as well add a little more for the benefit of my lady readers. The silk weaving dates back to the 15th century, with Zurich as centre. Originally, the silk tissues were woven on hand-loom, as is still the case today in one branch; the Seidenbeutelstuch-silk for making pouches. These hand looms spread all over the country; as late as 1900, more than 30,000 were still in use. If observant, one can still see the little windows of the weaving cellars in many large farmhouses in the Appenzell. Many

of the old Otschweizer families changed over to embroidery-machines when that trade became more profitable.

And by the way, to finish up these few "feminine" subjects, do you know that the widely used "Ovaltine" famous in every country of the globe as a health-drink, is a product of "Wander Ltd." Berne?

In St.Gall, we were shown a number of very interesting factories, small and large. The finest equipped plant we saw at Lichtensteig in the well-known Toggenburg Valley, is owned by Messrs. Stoffel Ltd., St.Gall. Turbines provide their own electric power from the river flowing close by. There, apart from attractive organdy, muslin, etc., was the main production of the famous "Stoffel-tuchli," the Breastpocket Handkerchief. Many millions are fabricated during the year and the U.S.A. is now the chief customer of these gaily decorated fabrics.

Every part of the production of the materials is finished in the modern plant; the most impressive sight is the big machine room with 350 deafening automatic looms working incessantly. The drive home through the picturesque Toggenburg, down to the Rhine Valley via Trogen-Gais was no less interesting.

One fine day in July, we decided to make an excursion to the Santis. Once again we travelled through the Toggenburg; this time by rail through Herisau to Nesslau and thence the Postauto brought us to Schwagalp at the foot of the Santis. Hundreds of cars and buses were parked around the square of the new Hotel, and everybody ascended to the great mountain by the new cable railway. The construction of this cable-coach is one of the keenest ventures of Swiss engineering. The gradient is 50% and the height of the summit nearly 8,500 feet. The suspended coach accommodates 30 passengers and for technical reasons, is not rigidly fixed, but has a slight swing when moving. Obviously a fairly large compartment like that could not possibly be fixed rigid, otherwise the strain on the cables in a strong wind would be enormous. At certain sections, the height above ground is from 4-500 feet; the great concrete and steel supports are wide apart, several are 250 feet high. When we reached the top, a magnificent panorama was spread out in every direction; the rugged Austrian and Tirolese Alps in the East, the entire range of the Swiss Alps south, the lower Tableland of St.Gall etc., in the West, and north across the Rhine, we could see Germany. The weather was perfect and everybody appeared very enthusiastic with the truly splendid sight.

Back in Lucerne, a relation of mine took us by car along the lake to Brunnen, and thence through the celebrated Axenstrasse. This fine road runs directly along the lovely lake, through several galleries cut out of vertical cliffs with openings overlooking water and mountains. A short stop was made at Tell's Chapel, where we admired the wonderful historical paintings; and of course, we purchased the inevitable postcards and souvenirs. Hence, we passed through Flüelen-Altorf, where William Tell's fine monument stands in the principal Square.

From there, the ascent towards the Gotthard begins. The road runs over and under and parallel with the Gotthard Railway, as well as the river Reuss. At Wassen, we tried to unravel the puzzle of the famous three spiral tunnels of the Railway. First the track appears below the village, then the line reserves its direction by a sharp curve, disappearing into the mountains, repasses the village on the level and finally turning again through tunnels and appearing the third time, now high above Wassen. From this village we left the southern direction and turned West to the new Susten-Pass Road. This modern highway was built during the war; its whole length is of asphalt and the width enables three cars to pass each other quite easily. It proved immensely popular to motorists in post-war years and the accumulation of cars at week-ends, on top of the pass, (with the inevitable Hotels) is often so large, that traffic police are put on duty. Although the time was midsummer, we found deep snow on top of the pass, but the road was cleared and as smooth as any city street. The way home took us through Meiringen over the Brunig, past the lovely Lungern and Sarnen lakes.

Industrial prosperity is still extraordinarily high in Switzerland; there are no registered unemployed anywhere and the 48-hour week is maintained by most

manufacturing and trading sections, excepting the embroidery industry. The post-war years have again shown a great comeback of foreign tourists; the total visitors from across the borders reached 1 $\frac{3}{4}$  million in 1947. However, these visitors are not the "rich" of pre-war days, and some of the real luxury hotels are completely closed, or used for other purposes, or else converted to more modest tastes. It is fine to see thousands of middle-class people and labourers, who come to admire our country, so blessed with natural beauty. These visitors also include many thousands of children from all over Europe, not only taken care of and supported by the Swiss Red Cross, but it has become a regular habit for ill and undernourished foreign children to be invited to live with Swiss families. Several of my relations had Austrian boys or girls from 3 to 6 months at a time. Collections among the Swiss population to feed starving children in war-torn countries were successfully started; during two months in 1947 the "Schweizerspende" obtained over 20 million francs. In 1946 a whole village was built in Trogen, Appenzell, where war orphans are to receive their whole education. This scheme is to be supported by appeals, periodically launched among Swiss school children.

During our travels, we often came in contact with American, British, Dutch and other visitors. Frequently the Swiss neutrality during the war was discussed. To most of these people a neutral attitude towards Germany was unthinkable; either one had to be for or against Hitler. Usually my argument was to point out that Switzerland had such a strong and well-trained army at the critical time, that Hitler probably preferred to leave us alone; he got all he wanted in Western Europe in any case. Today, in spite of atomic energy, the neutrality to the Swiss is still a vital condition and the Nazi-ism in Germany has undoubtedly heightened these independent feelings.

In concluding today's chapter, I thought to give a few items of the cost of living in Switzerland. Back in New Zealand for some months now, I have come to the conclusion that the all-round cost of living index would be much the same as here. You may pay 2 $\frac{1}{2}$  times the price for Swiss butter, or double the price for meat; but then such items are only a small percentage of weekly expenses. Most vegetables bread, etc., are about the same price, depending on season, glut or scarcity. Clothing, shoes, etc., are higher in price, but of course, superior in quality, particularly in workmanship. My family and myself bought quite a supply of shoes, some perhaps twice the price of the best you can obtain here; but I can absolutely guarantee this footwear will last us more than twice as long, and what is most important, they are built for comfort and fit. A man's suit to measure may cost Fr.300-400; ready made 150-250 Frs. All of you know today's price for suits in New Zealand. Rents of apartments vary so much, according to town, position or modernity, that we can hardly compare with local conditions in this country. For instance, a four-roomed flat may be from 350 francs a month in Zurich; the same may be only 200 in Geneva.

Hotels we found generally most reasonable, considering the cleanliness, comfort, service and wonderful food obtained. For instance, we stayed at the Jura in Interlaken, rated third-class at Fr.15.- per day, including all meals, hot and cold running water in rooms and excellent food. Second-class hotels are mostly Fr.20.- per day, or 25/- N.Z. These hotels are all far superior to say the St. George in Wellington where the official tariff is now 38/- per day. In Lugano at the Beau-Rivage; in Geneva at the De la Paix, we paid 20 francs and could not wish for anything better. In restaurants, such as for instance, the second-class Bahnhof-Buffet Lucerne or Berne, you obtain a fine meal at Fr.4.50 or 5/9d N.Z. Railway fares are considerably higher per mile than N.Z. However, I am sure that none of you would mind paying for the comfort and cleanliness in the Swiss trains - all apart from the wonderful scenery one can see. And then also, the many different "season tickets," for ten days up to six months, offer total reductions of up to 50%.....

(To be continued)