

As an American saw it : Switzerland and the world

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as an American saw it

SWITZERLAND AND THE WORLD

FROM many points of view Switzerland is a "must."

If you are fond of travelling you must visit it to see the natural charm; if you are an industrialist, you must see how it has become the workshop of the world without being rich in natural resources; if you are a politician you must study the working of its system, which offers the most perfect democracy in the world today; if you are a student you have plenty of things to learn and see; if you are a patriot you must know how Swiss people have gradually built up their model political institutions; and if you are an internationalist you must see how Switzerland has been able to maintain its neutrality during two devastating World Wars in Europe. Switzerland is, therefore, an emphatic must for both study and pleasure, for it excels the world in so many things of wide and varied nature, offering something interesting and attractive to everybody, student or mere pleasure-seeker.

Intelligence and hard work have enabled the Swiss people to achieve their present position and the respect of the world in spite of numerous shortcomings.

With five million inhabitants, Switzerland has a small area of 15,950 square miles only, out of which 400 square miles cannot be used either for agriculture or for forestry. In less than 12,000 square miles one-third can be used for only pasture, another third is covered with forest. Agriculture of all kinds, food crops and vineyards, account for another third of arable land. Only about three-fifths of the population can be permanently fed on the produce of the soil and two-fifths are permanently dependent on food imports.

Diversity of language, race, religion and culture have failed to checkmate Swiss progress; on the other hand it has resulted in a combination of "all in one" yet highly individualistic national character. The types of houses and settlements, dialects and customs vary from district to district.

"White Coal"

The country is extremely poor in natural resources; there are no minerals worthy of mention, no coal, no sea coast, and so on. However, there is plenty of water—there are over 40 rivers and 45 major lakes, all of which have helped the Swiss to change the face of their country and bring happiness and prosperity to every home in a most remarkable manner. Almost fully exploited, the perpetual ice of the alps is a source of power in Switzerland. More than 6000 power stations, some 300 of them on the largest scale, transform the energy of mountain torrents and rivers into electricity. This "white coal" has become more and more important as a source of most of the wealth of the country. The industrialisation of Switzerland is due to this factor only.

The abundant wealth of natural beauty of Switzerland, to be found nowhere else in so small a country, could be fully developed, exploited and opened to the tourists of the world only with the help of electricity, which plays a very vital role in the life of the people. The Alps form the impressive back-cloth; they reach their greatest altitude in Switzerland with the Dufour Peak of Monte Rosa, which is 15,217 feet high.

One of the peculiarities of the Swiss state is the combination of pure and representative democracy, not to be found in any other country of the world. In certain cantons, every law enacted by a cantonal legislature must be submitted to the people for approval. In others, the referendum may be brought into action. This means that if a sufficient numbers of signatures is collected by the citizens amongst themselves they have the right to demand that a law approved by the legislature be submitted to the vote of the people.

Simplicity

The referendum and initiative features of Swiss democracy, which are typical of the country's absolutely democratic nature, have been retained even in the federal constitution. A bill approved by the Federal Assembly must under the constitution be submitted to the referendum. It becomes operative only if no petition is made against it within 90 days. The citizen has yet another means by which he can exercise the right of taking part directly in the affairs of the country, namely, the initiative. By this instrument, the people, given the support of 50,000 signatures, can demand the Federal Constitution be amended or totally or partially revised. Yet, both in the Confederation and in the Cantons there is great stability. Election to the Federal Council generally means re-election to the members in office as long as no resignation has been announced. The annual election of the President and Vice-President of the Confederation by the Federal Assembly is a mere matter of routine. The President cannot dismiss his colleagues, there can be no cabinet crisis, and no vote of censure is possible.

Simplicity is another equally interesting feature; even the President of Switzerland has no official car, no Government House. He lives like all other citizens.

It is in Switzerland that there are no strikes and that the difference between minimum and maximum salaries is smaller than in any other country. The neutrality of Switzerland is another very interesting feature of Swiss life, which has been built up during so many centuries. In 1815, the Congress of Vienna and the Convention of Paris formally set down in writing that "the neutrality and inviolability of Switzerland and her independence of any foreign influence are in the true interests of European politics." Since then Switzerland has been preserved from war. The League of Nations in 1920 and the UN in 1946 recognised its status and respected it. It is not even a member of the United Nations, as the admission to an organisation relying on armed force in certain emergencies upsets the ideals for which it stands.

It has no standing army and professional soldiers are few. In times of emergency, a General is elected and the army is raised within a day or so; for military training is compulsory and soldiers come in their own conveyances to join duty. During the last World War, Switzerland had 800,000 citizens with the colours, either as soldiers or in auxiliary services.

High Standard of Education

Switzerland has been rendering more and more delicate and useful services in World Wars. During the last war it had some 40 mandates for safeguarding the interests of belligerents in countries occupied by their enemies. Moreover, it has been

housing a great many international organisations, whose headquarters are mostly in Geneva.

The Swiss have a very high standard of education, as is only to be expected in a country whose citizens have such far-reaching civic rights and duties. Switzerland has stamped out illiteracy, and the stress on technical education is high because the chief means of livelihood depend on skilled and qualified labour. Every child must attend school for eight years and there is an average of one teacher to every 31 pupils. Thousands of children have to walk miles to reach schools owing to scattered villages in mountain areas.

The high level of education and political life has also affected the newspapers. There are more newspapers per head of the population in Switzerland than in any other country.

The Swiss people have a wonderful sense of toleration. A German-speaking Swiss will greet his French or Italian-speaking countrymen in French or Italian. It brings greater respect for each other and the country also is able to command respect all over the world for its uniqueness, despite so many diverse factors.

Hardest Currency in the World

Its economy is equally interesting. It imports more than it exports, yet its currency is the hardest in the world. It makes its loss good in two other ways. Situated in the heart of Europe as it is, it makes good money by transporting goods of neighbouring countries through its frontiers and by making money from tourists who come from various parts of the world. Tourism is a very big industry employing over 150,000 persons. Switzerland has numerous hotels, and great efforts have been made to make it more and more attractive. You can reach the highest peak easily by aerial cableway. Its highest railway station in Europe is situated at 11,203 feet above sea level, and you can go there by electric train.

The Swiss have spared no pains, no efforts, no labour to develop their export industry and tourist trade. It is a manufacturing country importing raw materials or semi-manufactured goods from other countries to be given final touches here before being re-exported. Its precision industry is of a very high order and is supplied to the world.

Similarly, great attention is paid to the proper and full development of the tourist industry. Mountain resorts have modern facilities. All beautiful places are made accessible by public transportation, and the cities and resorts have been laid out with parks, fountains and many other attractions to impress and please the tourists who come from all corners of the globe.

If the Swiss had not planned and used their intelligence and put in hard labour their country would not have been occupying its present position in the world.