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The Life of the Swiss Countrywoman

By Mariann Meier

TO DESCRIBE the Swiss countrywoman correctly, a series of separate pictures would have to be painted, for the farmwoman in one part of the country leads a vastly different life from that in another. The wife of the mountain farmer in the Grisons, whose small holding consists of a few goats, grass patches and vegetable plots on difficult slopes, and whose home is snowed up for much of a long winter, leads a different life from the one whose husband is engaged in viniculture in the milder climate of western Switzerland. The fruit growing population of the Valais has a different existence from that enjoyed by the dairy farming communities of the fertile Emmental in the Midlands or the Appenzell. Nevertheless, there are some aspects which are much the same all over the country.

About 80% of all Swiss agricultural undertakings can be classified as "small farm holdings". Half of them have less than twelve acres; only one-quarter comprise over twenty-four acres, and a mere one per hundred deserves the description of large-scale farming, i.e. over seventy-five acres of arable land.

Approximately one-third of cultivable land is in the mountain regions of the Grisons, Appenzell, the Bernese Oberland and the Valais, usually in very small plots.

Swiss agriculture can therefore be described as mainly "family farming." The economic state of the individual farm depends not only on the owner's efficiency or the number in the family, but it is largely due to the wife and mother whether the farm is a thriving concern or a struggling unit eventually doomed to failure. She not only looks after the house, but she tends the vegetable and flower gardens, including the colourful window boxes, an attraction of so many villages. Generally, she is also responsible for poultry and rabbits, and often she minds the pigs as well, and possibly takes an interest in beekeeping on top of it. She thus plays a considerable part in the self-supporting effort of the homestead, marketing and consequently in the food position of the whole country.

The rural woman in Switzerland is reputed to be a hard worker, and this claim is well sustained. Even at normal times, she is "at it" for a long day. When it comes to haymaking and harvest time, potato and fruit picking, heavy demands are made on her time and her physical strength. In spite of improved labour saving and technical devices, the burden has increased, mainly due to migration and lack of paid help. The farmwoman is a workmate of her husband; she cooks large meals for a big family, often com-

prising two or even three generations and, where help is kept, including farm labourers who eat with the family. The children come home from school at midday, and though large families mean more helping hands, it also involves much extra work for the mother by way of cooking, baking and washing. Most important, she is a mother and homemaker and knows how valuable it is to sing with her children and to read to them and tell stories.

Alas, such activities often go short, for real leisure is a scarce commodity for Swiss countrywomen. This was discovered when an investigation was made at the suggestion of a working group of the European Organisation of Agriculture on leisure and its use (published in 1963). She may have some free time in the evening, but that is often taken up with mending and sewing, drying fruit and vegetables. Many women have spare time on Sundays only, and, as often as not, that may be a bare hour.

Church going is still very important, in fact over half of the Swiss farmwomen who answered the questionnaire go to church with their families. Four-fifths like to go for walks on Sundays, if only to inspect the grounds. There are the odd excursions by car or coach to a place of special interest or an exhibition. Holidays are very rare, and only a small percentage of rural women in Switzerland have a chance of a regular rest away from home. The Countrywomen's organisations arrange holidays every year, and increasing numbers are able to enjoy these. The CWA also provide home helps, and a darning and mending service. There is a "Voluntary Land Service" which sends young boys and girls to help harassed farmers for a few weeks at a time.

From the above-mentioned survey it was learnt that newspapers are read in every Swiss farm house, and a good two-thirds of rural women subscribe to a weekly, a Church or agricultural paper. A radio is kept in most families, but television is a very rare thing in the Swiss farm house. It must be said here that Tv. in Switzerland generally is not yet as widespread as in many other countries. In many rural homes one or more musical instruments are played, mainly piano, a wind or brass instrument and the accordion. Children favour the recorder more and more.

The Swiss countrywoman shows a great interest in radio plays, and the number of those reading good books is surprisingly high. But here, too, lack of time prevents her from indulging in reading as in other hobbies such as needlework and embroidery, as well as from taking a more lively interest in public life and welfare work.

But even so, she manages somehow to take part in local activities. With the exception of Eastern Switzerland, the large majority of family farming establishments are in rural Communes of below 2000 inhabitants. This means that the life of the farmwoman is

conditioned by a close-knit village community. Countrywomen sit on education, Church and welfare committees; they sing in the local choirs and support the "National Costume Movement." They visit rural theatre performances and local concerts whenever there is a chance—and time permits. Cinema visits are very rare, though due to Switzerland's density of population, the countrywoman, generally, is not very far from a small or even larger town.

Another very important fact is that Swiss villages are hardly ever purely agricultural. Switzerland, highly industrialised, has her industries spread out all over the country. Farming very small holdings is combined with some form of industrial work, often carried out at home. Tourism, too, has its influence, and some women do part-time work in hotels during the busy tourist seasons.

Some of the activities of the Swiss countrywomen's organisation have already been mentioned. The "Schweizerischer Landfrauenverband" was founded in 1932 and has about 36,000 members in seventeen largely autonomous cantonal bodies. Their corporate aim and greatest achievement in recent years is the vocational training of the farmwoman. This starts with classes and courses for young girls, partly in agricultural domestic training colleges. Stiff exams provide the future farmer's wife with a status of a woman who has attained a position and is not "only" a farmwoman. Many farmers' wives later pass the "master test" which in turn entitles them to train young girls. The CWA also instruct farmwomen in improved housekeeping methods and arrange classes for gardening, poultry and rabbit keeping, weaving, etc. It is in no small measure due to this thorough training and the general efficiency of many Swiss countrywomen that, in spite of migration, production has gone up by about 30% in ten years. Every year, some 5000 acres of the best arable land are lost to building houses and flats, schools, road construction, sports grounds and airfields. More and more machinery is used—every fifth farm has a milking machine. The farms without cattle become ever more numerous, though there are still about 850,000 head of cattle in the country, and annually about 14,000 tons of cheese are exported.

The farmers also club together to purchase expensive machinery such as combine harvesters, silos, tractors, manure pumps, etc. The women, too, share in the communal use of washing machines and deep-freeze stores.

On the whole, Swiss farming is as individualistic as many other things in Switzerland. Unlike the Danes who began co-operative farming as early as 1750, Swiss agriculture has so far not moved appreciably in that direction. If European integration comes to pass, the Swiss farmers will have to reconsider their position. This

will, no doubt, also affect the rural woman. Whatever the outward changes, however, her main task will remain that of wife, mother and homemaker. She may become less of an active farmworker and be relieved of some of the manual work. It is hoped that she will put the much needed increased leisure to good use. On the whole, she is not dissatisfied with her hard lot, but more time for spiritual recreation, for cultivating reading and the arts is desirable and will enhance her position in the centre of the rural family. With smaller economic worries, she may be able to face the challenge ahead of her successfully. She will have to choose what is good in rural tradition and discard much that has been wrongly accepted as rustic conventionality. If she can adapt herself to the altered conditions, she will create a new life which will benefit herself, her family and ultimately the whole nation.

—The Swiss Observer

News of the Colony

AUCKLAND SWISS CLUB

The Auckland Swiss Club held its Annual Picnic on February 12th, 1967. The weather couldn't have been better.

Most people started arriving from 11 o'clock on to be in time for the Bratwurst which were being barbecued for lunch. Of course, coffee cakes, ice cream and cold drinks were available.

We were honoured by the visit of the President and ex-President of the Hamilton Swiss Club, Messrs W. Risi and A. Biland.

The sports activities kept just about everybody busy until late afternoon. Special cups were awarded to the winners of each competition: Picnic Schutzenmeister, Mr H. Enzler; Steinstossen, Mr W. Piatti; Kegeln, Mr J. Spillman; winner of the Ham raffle, Mr H. Fitzi.

One member who couldn't make it all the way from Taupo sent his regards in the form of some 30 hares which were later grilled for tea.

APPRECIATION

I am deeply appreciative of the recent appointment as Honorable Consular Agent for Switzerland. The many genuine and warm congratulations my wife and I received at the recent Auckland reception, so kindly and thoughtfully arranged by our Charge D'Affaires Dr Jean-Pierre Weber and Madame Weber, were greatly appreciated by myself and Mrs Merz.