

Berne : the capital of Switzerland

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Berne

The Capital of Switzerland

Compared with capitals like London or Paris—not to mention New York—Berne is a unidimensional city. It does not stand for the world, but only for its own world, a finite and limited quantity that in any case belongs mostly to history. Berne has, to be precise, less of a present than a past, a continuation, a heritage. It is the federal capital of Switzerland but neither its commercial nor its cultural centre. Either one succumbs to its influence and runs the risk of falling into an antiquated and complacent historicism, or one steels oneself upon the resistance that the town opposed to its modern inhabitants. This resistance, however, is in a sense also a criterion — of strength, substance and character.

Old Berne lies in a loop of the Aar, not nestling on gentle banks but high above the roar of sometimes turbulent waters. The river in fact surrounds the city like a natural moat, and the picture from some angles is that of a reptilian fossil clinging to wavewashed cliffs. The unity, the corporeality of this monument of a town is impressive; the streets are like broad furrows that run down towards the river bend. These longitudinal divisions mark the stages of expansion within the belt of the former town walls. There is a very respectable difference in altitude between the upper town and the river: the bridges cross the Aar at the height of aqueducts, and where the buildings reach out on to the steep escarpment the glance drops down into giddy depths to meet the waters below.

The very plan of Berne suggests a closed-in, defensive town. I am speaking here, of course, of the old, mediaeval town, but this is still in reality the town proper; Berne's old core is the centre of the modern federal capital, the centre both of its business life and of its communications. What the industrial nineteenth century added is not of any great significance. And the rest of a city area that now harbours a total population of perhaps a quarter of a million consists of purely residential quarters.

Berne's corporeality is more palpable and more impressive to the pedestrian. When he is in its streets he is not "outside" but safely "inside": in broad stone chambers, which is what they were no doubt intended to be — market and meeting rooms, living spaces which are in fact eminently fit for living in.

The unbroken rows of houses step out on supporting pillars, as if on stilts, into the usually cobbled street. Behind the pillars run the *Lauben*, the arcades that are so characteristic of Berne and are the communication channels of its city life. The corso takes place inside, sheltered from rain and snow. The arcades also form the main shopping area, all the important cafes and bars are situated here. And here the townspeople stroll, bathed in an inimitable blend of smells and fragrances in which the scent of carnations mingles with the aroma of roasted coffee and the perfumes of passing girls. The arcades handle the flow of the

whole city population day after day; they force people into a close contact that has no parallel elsewhere. That is why every inhabitant of the city in the course of time acquires the impression that he knows every face, every fellow-citizen, and even a long absence will never quite destroy this sense of minute familiarity with places and faces which is part of his heritage.

—Paul Nizon.

Big Contract in Iran for a Swiss Firm

R. Henry & Sons & Co. Ltd. of Lausanne (Vaud—Switzerland) recently signed an agreement in Teheran with the “Iranair” National Airline Company. Under the terms of this contract, the Lausanne firm will be responsible for the proofing and thermal insulation of the roofs of “Iranair” hangars and aircraft shelters in Teheran. This is a very big market, which is planned to be expanded within the framework of the needs of the airforce. It is therefore a big new outlet opening up for the Swiss firm, thanks to its new technique for the mechanical projection of duroplastic foam. It is also interesting to note that R. Henry & Sons & Co. Ltd., which together with the Bureau des Architectes Associes S.A. in Lausanne is the driving force behind a group of Swiss and European builders, has obtained through the intermediary of the “Sakhteman” Construction Bank the authorisation of the Iranian government to take part in the building of 50,000 homes in Iran.—(SODT)

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