Zeitschrift: The Swiss observer : the journal of the Federation of Swiss Societies in the UK

Herausgeber: Federation of Swiss Societies in the United Kingdom

Band: - (1927)

Heft: 280

Artikel: Swiss types

Autor: [s.n.]

DOI: https://doi.org/10.5169/seals-686422

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The Swiss Observer

Telephone: CLERKENWELL 9595. *Published every Friday at* 23, LEONARD STREET, LONDON, E.C.2. Telegrams: FREPRINCO, LONDON.

VOL. 7—No. 280 LONDON, JANUARY 8, 1927. PRICE 3d.

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HOME NEWS

A deficit of about 14 million francs is anticipated in the Budget estimates of the Confederation for 1927.

* * *

With a view to lightening the heavy loss in the accounts of the Swiss Federal Railways a specially appointed Commission is visiting and inspecting the different railway stations to study the possibility of reducing the staff; in addition it is proposed to re-introduce a longer working-day.

* * *

A somewhat remarkable decision has just been taken by the Conseil d'Etat of the canton Valais; the traffic of motor lorries and private cars, accommodating more than eight passengers, is prohibited on the route between Monthey and Champéry, so as to eliminate their competition with the local railway company which is serving this sector.

* * *

The electors of Zug have declined to sanction the imposition of a ticket and amusement tax proposed by the town fathers.

* * *

The recently enacted dancing restrictions in the canton Ticino have resulted in a regular exodus on Sunday afternoons into the neighbouring extra-cantonal valleys, notably the V. Misocco.

* * *

Influenza is very prevalent in the lower parts of Switzerland, the higher regions and touring resorts, which are literally crowded with visitors for the winter sports, not having been affected at all. Most of the schools and colleges, notably in Basle and Geneva, remain closed and in some towns public meetings are prohibited.

* * *

National Councillor Charles Naine has died at the age of 53, following an attack of pneumonia. He started life as a mechanic, later on studied law taking his degree and finally settled down as a very forcible writer and propagandist in the cause of Socialism; he believed in constitutional methods and was unfalteringly opposed to Bolshevik principles. For 15 years uninterruptedly Naine represented Neuchâtel in the National Council, where his fiery and dauntless speeches carried considerable influence; though the accepted leader of the Socialists in the western part of Switzerland he had little in common with Grimm, the official head of the Swiss Socialist party.

* * *

Skidding on the frozen road was the cause of an accident near the Egghölzli (Berne) when on Sunday afternoon the family of the Bernese confiseur Baer suffered more or less serious injuries. One of the daughters succumbed to fractures on the head, her sister still being on the danger list; the condition of the mother is also stated to be serious, whilst the father escaped with slight abrasions.

SWISS TYPES.

The following article appeared in the Glasgow Herald (Dec. 4th and 11th) and is reprinted by courtesy of the author, whose delightful description of modern Swiss institutions and conditions is characterised by a fascinating gift of seeing but the bright and beautiful side of things. The second part of the articles reviews in an alluring strain a well-known war story by the Vaudois writer Benjamin Vallotton:—

I.

After Captain Bluntschli, the hero of "Arms and the Man," had enumerated the assets to which he had fallen heir—his 200 horses, his 70 carriages, and his tablecloths, blankets and eiderdown quilts by the thousand—his prospective father-in-law, Major Petkoff, asked in an awed whisper—"Are you Emperor of Switzerland?" "My rank," replied Bluntschli, "is the highest known in Switzerland; I am a free citizen!"

This proud boast gives us a key-note to the Swiss character. The Switzer is intensely patriotic—one might almost say chauvinistic, if such a term can be applied to a people whose militarism is purely defensive. And surely no nation in Europe has better justification for its pride than the Swiss. French in the south-west, Teutons in the centre and north, Italians in the south, Rhaeto-Romans in the east, speaking their own languages, preserving their own customs and costumes, have by their efforts welded themselves into a compact confederation of 22 cantons, each a little republic but all federated for defence, foreign policy, communications and Customs regulations. The history of Switzerland deserves more study than it usually gets. It is the history of a gallant people gradually freeing themselves from powers spiritual and powers temporal, the history of the evolution of the three tiny Forest Cantons of Uri, Schwyz and Unterwalden into the Switzerland that we know to-day. Switzerland is the home of political experiments, such as the initiative and the referendum, of efforts for the betterment of mankind, a platform for international causes, and a city of refuge for the victims of lost causes. Democracy may have failed elsewhere to justify itself as a form of government, but in the Swiss Cantons it is an unqualified success, whether representative as in the larger Cantons or absolute as in the tiny Canton of Appenzell, where the Landesgemeinde consists of the whole adult population, who attend the biennial open-air meetings with sword on thigh, and, in the event of doubtful weather, umbrella in hand.

The Swiss are often contemptuously described as "a nation of hotel-keepers," but on the most inclusive estimate only 10 per cent. of them are engaged in the Fremden-Industrie. Though faced with enormous disadvantages, as compared with other nations, in the absence of coal and iron, of seaboard and of navigable rivers, they have by sheer skill and industry raised their little country with its population about half that of London, to a high position among the manufacturing countries of the world. To take one example only, Winterthur, though all its raw materials come from abroad, is one of the world's great engine-works, whose products are known in every civilised land. Efficiency is "writ large" all over Switzerland, over its hotels, its railways (and what country can show greater feats of engineering?) its postal system, its business establishments, and its local government. Apropos of the last, I was, as a pedestrian, overjoyed to find that in the Canton of Glarus all motor traffic is prohibited on Sunday between the hours of one and six p.m., so that the humble paterfamilias may shepherd his flock along the roads in peace! Mr. Lunn finds significance in the ding-dong of the Swiss station bell as the train glides away from the platform. It seems to say "Pass, friend, all's well!"

As for the land questions that agitate other countries, nine out of ten Swiss cultivators are owners, and Communism is forlorn hope. Though Lenin started on his fateful journey in 1917 from Switzerland, he left little of his influence behind him. The proposal of a Capital Levy was rejected by Referendum, and in the election of 1925 only three Communists were returned to the Federal Assembly. Education reaches a very high level, and, apart from the agricultural class, most of the Swiss are bi-, if not tri-lingual.

Though as Voltaire said: "L'histoire de la pomme est bien suspecte," the figure of the sturdy bowman, William Tell, has been adopted as the national symbol. And rightly so, for whether Tell belong to history or to legend (and recent researches point to the former) his dogged independence is the leading note in the Swiss character. More than a hundred years ago Wordsworth, after a holiday in the Alps, wrote of

"The simple dignity no forms debase,
The eye sublime, the surly lion-grace."

It is this quality of independence, this lack of what Henry James called "soft curves" in the Swiss temperament, that may account for the uncomplimentary estimates that one sometimes encounters. Without going back to Voltaire, Madame de Staël or Ruskin, there is the Italian Papini of to-day, who, dividing human history into four epochs, each headed by an apple—the Biblical by the apple of Eve, the Hellenic by that of Paris, the Mediaeval by Tell's and the scientific by that of Newton—goes on to say: "The one whose fate I most regret is the one the Swiss bowman with the cock's feathers transfixed on his son's head. The first was eaten with consequences that have made us what we are; the second was an award to the fairest creature in all mythology; the last, though somewhat injured in its fall, gave us the law of universal gravitation; but the apple of Tell gave us the Swiss nation, and what the Swiss nation has given us I refrain from saying!" That inveterate "grouser," Bret Harte, too, has his grudge against the Swiss people. "How the mountains must despise them," he writes in a letter from Lucerne; "No wonder they take a shy at them every now and then with an avalanche!"

For my own part, whenever I hear a complaint of Swiss discourtesy, I am tempted to put the plaintiff through an examination on his own manners. My experience of the Swiss dates from the 1880's, when in the Ormonts-Dessus I enjoyed the amenities of a Chalet-Pension at three francs fifty a day (tout compris) in the company of a dozen or so of Lausannois, legal or scholastic by profession, all friendly and congenial souls. And can I ever forget Burkhardt Reber, chemist and archaeologist of Geneva, with whom I foregathered in the same year, on a tramp in the Valais, and later in his own city; Reber, always bubbling over with enthusiasm, whether he was exhibiting his famous collection of "Venice Treacle" jars, or exploring the rocks of the Binnthal for marks of Druidical sacrifice, or turning a lesson in English conversation into a joyous symposium with a bottle of that delectable wine, the Malvoisie of Sion! I have only to turn to my diaries to find instances of friendliness in the mountain inns and in the less frequented valleys, where the black-coated water is unknown and one is served by the daughters of the family in their native costume. There was Inden at the foot of the Gemmi, where an aged member of the family gave up her room to accommodate the benighted traveller; and Appenzell, where the host was the Landamann of the Canton and his pretty daughters were the Hebes of the house. Nor can I recall without gratitude an experience of 1922, when I inadvertently strayed across the Austrian frontier into an almost uninhabited region of Switzerland, and late in the evening was forced to ask for shelter in a cheesemaker's hut, three or four hours distant from the nearest village; when I supped and breakfasted on lordly bowls of milk and great hunks of bread, slept on the hay in the company of the Senn and his merry lads, and in the morning paid for my entertainment with 20,000 knonen, to the infinite astonishment and amusement of the Senn who, ignorant of the depreciation of the Austrian currency, thought for the moment that he was dealing with a demented millionaire!

To generalise on the character of a nation is easy but rarely justifiable, and in the case of the Swiss, where the particulars are so varied—French, Teutonic, Italian and Rhaeto-Romanic—it is almost impossible. Everyone will form his own conception according to the region with which he is most familiar, whether it be Vaud or Valais, the Oberland or the Engadine, or the northern regions of the Italian lakes. My own preference is for "la Suisse romande" from the south-west corner of Lac Léman to the Val d'Anniviers in the Valais; the foundations laid by a winter of study in the University of Geneva and the superstructure added by many summer holiday rambles. And the figure which sums up my best impressions of its people is that of David Potterat, ex-Commissary of Police, the genial creation of Benjamin Vallotton in his war novel "Ce qu'en pense Potterat." But Potterat cannot be dismissed in a few lines; he deserves a chapter all to himself.

ANNIVERSARIES OF SWISS EVENTS.

January 11th, 1841.—Attempted rising by the Ultramontanes against the Liberal Government in the canton of Aargau when, in retaliation, eight monasteries were closed. In consequence of the threatening attitude of the clerical cantons four nunneries were later on, in 1843, restored.

January 12th, 1746.—Joh. Heinrich Pestalozzi born in Zurich.

January 14th, 1866.—First attempt to revise the Federal Constitution of 1848; of the nine articles submitted in the referendum on this date only the one granting equal rights to the Jews was accepted. This slight revision was the inevitable result of a very favourable commercial treaty concluded with France in 1864, under which the right of free settlement was guaranteed to all her citizens, including the Jews. A modification of the Constitution was necessary, as under the existing one native-born Jews were debarred from the right of free settlement and it was, of course, inadmissible to treat the latter less favourably than those hailing from abroad.

January 15th, 1814.—Forcible overthrow of the Cantonal Government in Fribourg, when the patricians recovered their ancient authority lost to them in 1798.

II.

In his "Ce qu'en pense Potterat" ("What Potterat thinks about it") M. Benjamin Vallotton has done two things well. He has projected his own feelings for Switzerland and his thoughts about the Great War into the person of David Potterat, ex-commissary of police, and in doing so has created a very vivid and lovable personality; and in the second place he has shown the difficulty of the task laid upon the Swiss Federal Council of steering a neutral state of mixed races and divided sympathies through the perils of a European war.

David Potterat, now verging on the sixties, is a man of comfortable habit of body, eupeptic, expansive, and genial of temperament, and with an engaging twinkle in his eye. After more than thirty years of honourable service as guardian of the peace of Lausanne he now finds his greatest joy in cultivating his garden. The skill with which he had formerly tracked the lawbreaker is now exercised upon caterpillars and other garden pests. "The Alps to the left of me," he says, the Jura to the right, the lake in front, the sun up above, a garden and I in the midst of it, what more can one desire?" He held that man is not destined to live in a six-storey tenement. To achieve happiness he must touch the earth with his two feet, dip his hands into spring water, lean his ladder against his plum-tree, and digest his own vegetables.

Being eminently sociable and finding his wife and little son Carlo a somewhat unresponsive audience, he often foregathers with his cronies at the café, where he inveighs against strikes, the cost of living, Socialism, feminism, and the Sunday circulation of motors. He is no slave to newspaper propaganda but forms his own opinions, reading between the lines and interpreting silences. "When an Emperor visits his clients," he says, "distributing clocks and tie-pins, it is just as when the lion-tamer with his lumps of sugar proposes to make his animals work. Then it is time to be on one's guard!"

When the care of the garden proves too heavy a task for his single-handed labours he takes Belisarius into his household—Belisarius, the "spoiled child of the police," the "lyrical tippler," just culled for vagrancy for the thirty-second time. With all his faults, Belisarius is as gentle as a child, and under Potterat's humane treatment he proves a willing worker and also a reverent listener in the intervals of horticulture. It is to him that Potterat delivers himself of his ideas on religion. "Religion is a ticklish affair nowadays, Belisarius. If you preach hell-fire you frighten the people. If you tell them they are all saved, well and good. But if you mix the two points of view they are bewildered. We must have religion, but the point is how to present it. One for all, all for one—death—resurrection—judgment; yes, but a judgment not too discouraging, something comfortable, in which one can state one's case and plead extenuating circumstances. On the other hand, if you preach perfection, your words fall on deaf ears, for we all know what life is. There are times when you have to humour your clients, to use a little diplomacy. To attract the people you must have a democratic religion. What's your opinion, Belisarius?" But his listener proved to be neutral on the subject of religion, both in regard to doctrine and to the frequentation of assemblies!

Potterat's social activities were not confined to the café. He was the leading spirit with his bugle in a harmonic club that met for practice in his own house, and at which Belisarius assisted with the ocarina. And who more enthusiastic than he in those excursions by steamer to the beauty spots on their lake, ending in an open-air meal, that the Lausannois love to make? It was on such occasions that his expansive patriotism, stimulated by the generous local wine, found expression in an eloquent after-dinner speech. As he said himself, "J'ai le coup pour les toasts."

It was a heavy day for Potterat when Mauser, the speculative builder, invaded his Eden and after a sharp struggle forced him to move into a tenement house. Mme. Potterat, who, like Mrs. Boffin, was something of a "high-flyer" after the fashions of the day, greeted the change with undisguised joy. Little Carlo saw a prospect of a larger circle of playmates. Belisarius had already succumbed to an attack of pneumonia, and Mi-fou, the cat, disappeared during the removal. "He had a heart," said Potterat, by way of epitaph, "rather than live in a barracks he threw himself under a tramcar. *Requiescat in pace!*" Potterat's philosophy, however, soon came to his aid, and the humanity with which he had formerly tended his fruit trees was now exercised upon his humbler and weaker neighbours. He began to realise, too, the futility of his protests against the spirit of the age. The cinema, he now found, was the revelation of an epoch. "Now I can better understand the folly of the world," he said after his first visit to one. "Formerly we used to be living beings, but now we are all puppets of the cinematograph." He even took a mild interest in football, automobiles, and aeroplanes, and was responsive to Carlo's ambition to "loop the loop."

Towards the end of July, 1914, his talks in the café centred on the menace of a European war. He found it a bad sign that the monarchs were already mobilising God. "I tell you," he said to his listeners, "God is Swiss: He is neutral by definition." His indignation at the violation of Belgian neutrality knew no bounds, and he was among the foremost to offer hospitality to Belgian refugees. He and his wife applied for two little orphans, but the bureau sent them an aged couple from Ostend who proved quite impervious to all the Potterat's attempts at consolation, though they were grateful for their unwearied kindness. "Monsieur Potterat, vous êtes un brave homme" was the burden of the poor old refugees' song.

No one was more active than Potterat in attendance at the station on the arrival of a trainload of refugees. The family wardrobe was depleted, and in the pocket of every garment that he took to the train Potterat would put a scrap of paper with the words: "Courage, sympathy, condolence!" "If you read articles in the papers," he said to a refugee, "vinegery articles, just turn the page. The Swiss people—those who take the time by their watches and not by clocks worth 15,000 francs—they are here on the platform with their hearts and their indignation."

After the issue of the report of the Belgian Commission of Enquiry the vials of Potterat's wrath were poured not only upon the authors of the sufferings of Belgium but upon the Swiss Federal Council, which had laid an embargo on the free expression of opinion. Potterat was of La Suisse Romande, whose sympathies were almost entirely with the Allies, but the Federal Council had to act for the whole Confederation, 70 per cent. of which is German by race and largely German in sympathy, and to preserve their country from internal schism they issued a decree that "whoever publicly, whether in speech or in writing, expresses hatred or contempt for the ruler or government of a foreign state is liable to six months' imprisonment and a fine of 5,000 francs." Only the remonstrances of his wife saved Potterat from incurring these dire penalties, and he had to be content with exhaling his wrath and playing the Belgian national airs within his four walls. At last, however, he found a means to give expression to his pent-up feelings. After a visit to the station to administer gifts and consolation to a trainload of blinded soldiers he returned home, and in the silence of the night composed three letters—one to Marshal Joffre, then the hope of the Allied forces, another to the King of the Belgians, and the third to the Swiss Federal Council, took them to the post, and retired to rest in the early hours of the morning with a sense of infinite relief. For the next few days he woke at six every morning with the cry: "Up, the neutrals!" but one morning the usual cry was not heard, and Madame Potterat, hastening to his bed, found he had passed away in his sleep. His funeral was almost a public event. All the societies of which he had been the leading spirit were represented in the procession, and the flowers —from the wreath sent by his old colleagues of the police down to the little bunch from the concierge's little lame boy—testified to the respect and affection in which he had been held. "We shall not see his like again," said his old friend Bigarreau, "It was the war that killed him; he lived through it with all his heart and soul. If ever there was a true citizen it was David Potterat."

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