

Lecture by Dr. E. M. Bircher : delivered at the S.M.S. meeting of Sept. 13th, 1941

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LECTURE BY DR. E. M. BIRCHER.

Delivered at the S.M.S. Meeting of Sept. 13th, 1941.

I wonder how many of us had a chance to listen to the broadcast sent from Switzerland in the early hours of August 1st.

At midnight a representative group of our people had gathered on the little meadow between lake and forests. A beacon was set ablaze, runners lit their torches and carried the flame to all the member states of our confederation. In describing the scene the Landammann of Uri used the picture of a threefold ring of people who were watching this symbolic rite.

The first: the chosen representatives, nay, the very peoples themselves who by the effort of their hearts and hands had built and are still building this land of ours.

The second: the young manhood of the country, our army, who are at the frontiers, not only to defend the soil they stand on, but the very way of our life.

And the third: the Swiss abroad! — What about us who in many thousands have gone abroad and settled in foreign lands, who found new homes, and yet remain as Swiss as ever? Is it enough to pay the taxes? — Hold a passport? — To *profess* allegiance only? What can we do so that we may hold up our heads and be equal to those at home? What is *our* job?

Let us look at our country's history.

Those men who met on the Rütli in the hour of their need — 650 years ago — they were not learned professors or politicians, they were not powerful or clever, nor were they visionaries and dreamers — they were men of the soil who in the wisdom of their hearts knew what was needed to solve the ever present problem of the "*art of living together*" and had the guts to put it to the test. Through their chosen representatives the peoples of the Three Forest Districts agreed to *help each other and respect each other*. They sealed the pact each with their common seal, the outward sign of the right of a corporate body to act in its own name. Two points are of importance:

1. The pact — and I believe it is the first of its kind in European history — is an agreement not between princes or individuals but between three groups of people of unequal status and constitution and different historical background. The pact was concluded between the Free Men of the valley of Uri, the independent communities of the valley of Schwyz and the association of tenants of the Monastery and Abbot of Murbach, the Men of Unterwalden, *and* it treated them all as equal partners.

And 2. The pact of 1291 is not merely a utilitarian measure to overcome outward difficulties, it embodies a resolve which unmistakably is of a moral and idealistic nature. You cannot undertake to help somebody, if necessary without receiving a call for help and without a thought of compensation, unless you respect the other and do grant him the right to live his own life. Nor does the expression "to respect" have any meaning in truth, if we are not ready to stand up for the other and defend him with all our strength when the need should arise.

It is the combination of those two facts, an ethical demand in a pact between corporate bodies as partners, which gave it the necessary appeal and strength to survive the test of centuries. That is the reason why it still captures our imagination and makes it a living force to-day. The League grew. By 1394 it embraced

3 townships and 5 country corporations, 8 sovereign states leagued together for protection. By 1513, after the conclusion of the Burgundian wars, it consisted of 13 members and several associates and began to be a factor in the groupings of the European powers. The pact not only brought comparative security from outside interference to its members, but also prosperity and the chance of cultural development to the human beings living in its territory. Let me remind you of such names as Gessner, Tschudi, von Haller, Lavater, de Saussure, Jean Jacques Rousseau.

The growing wealth and comfort of the 17th and 18th century, however, would seem to have made people forget more and more the ethical side of the original pact and in time religious intolerance, exploitation of subject districts, profiteering from foreign wars and the arrogance of oligarchic government brought our Swiss ideal to the lowest level. They threatened to disrupt the league, and life for the majority of people was intolerable. There were tariffs and barriers between the states and tariffs and barriers between towns and country. There were licences for trade and licences for craft, there were dues for the bridges and tolls for the road. The carpenter from Zurich was not allowed to work in Berne and the dyer from Basle could not ply his trade in Zug. If you were a farmer you could not be a merchant. There were subjects and there were masters, you were a foreigner without rights a few miles from your home.

It needed the French Revolution, the fervent faith in liberty of men like Frederic Laharpe and the fertile brain of a Peter Ochs to put an end to so ridiculous a situation and produce the Constitution of 12th April, 1798. Ruthlessly it cut across all separatistic tendencies and sovereign pride of the members of the League and tried to make one state of them. Like most political innovations that come in the form of an explosion owing to the overlong suppression of the "Rights of Man," it went too far in the attempt to weld the country into a single entity. The Mediation Act of 1803 followed the American example and so pointed the way to a solution of the conflict between the claims for individualism and the demand for united strength by adopting federation. The later formulations, the constitutions of 1848 and 1874 re-affirmed the tenets of the former League and gave them a new and wider interpretation. Again it was the ethical side in man which demanded not only that the relationship of the states to each other and the Federation as a whole be re-defined, but also that the rights and duties of the individual towards the State be established in clear and unmistakable terms. The Federation guaranteed, to borrow the words from the constitution of the U.S.A., "life, liberty and the pursuit of happiness" to the people. In order to do this, each of the 22 sovereign communities renounced and handed to the country as a whole certain parts of their sovereignty and the Confederation freed us from the petty interference and restrictions which the jealousy and vanity of the States had put in our way. To take two examples only, the federal power alone was given the right to war and peace and to conclude agreements with foreign lands; the federal power gave us individuals equality before the law and the freedom to trade and to live wherever we liked within the territory of the 22 states.

If we read through our Constitution we see it as a necessary sequence to the pact of 1291, and an honest

step forward in the fulfilment of the ethical demands of "help each other" and "respect each other."

Most people react cynically to any suggestion that practical life has anything to do with ideals, that laws and constitutions of all things should conform to tenets of ethics and high moral. But we cannot do without ethics in practical life, not even in law.

The Romanist-Materialist school tried to answer the old question of "why are laws obeyed?" by saying that law is the child of power, that law is only obeyed because we fear the consequences if we transgress, that that only can be law which has been decreed as such and has the power of enforcement behind it.

The Greek-Idealist school used to say that law is the child of ethics, that laws are obeyed because in our innermost self we feel them as "just," that that only can be law which as "divine law" or "law of reason" or "law of nature" is the emanation of some higher principle.

The modern answer is not quite so simple. It says: law is obeyed because it is a function of political society! We cannot have law without a political society nor a political society without law. It is of the essence of any society that the rights and duties of its members be defined both to one another and to society as a whole, for law gives us that stability and continuity without which coherent communal life is not possible. But inasmuch as no community can exist or come into existence without there being a certain minimum common view amongst its members as to what the contents of their laws should be, it is to the individual that we must look in the end. We do not deny that man, the individual, is a plaything of the opposing forces of material sense and moral sense. And likewise is man, the social animal, and with it all his political actions, including the law he makes, a field where those two forces meet and try to strike a balance between the lust for power and the need for ethical behaviour.

This cynicism may have a twofold reason:

Firstly, we underestimate the time lag that of necessity must separate ethics from legislation. If in our private lives it often takes years before we translate an intuitive demand of ethics into practical living, time must be counted in decades if not in centuries, before a sufficient number of individual hearts have felt the need and make the demand effective. Impatience leads to disillusion and disillusion leads to cynicism. But let us not forget that the moral sense in man is a living force and once you got the first 100,000 to respond, the second and third are much easier to convince.

A second reason lies in the fact that cynicism is a weapon of defence. The demand for the translation of any ethical notion into the laws of a community is a challenge to the status quo. It rouses vested interests, be they capital or labour, class or creed or race. They are afraid to lose some of the power and the hold they gained over a particular system of society and are unwilling to make sacrifices. Cynicism is employed to discredit new ideas — but never yet has it been of any use against the moral sense of man. We need but a little courage to disregard it.

Look at this world to-day! Obviously the trouble goes deeper than political or economic differences between two factions. It is an ill that has affected the whole of western civilisation, if not mankind; it respects neither class nor country nor race nor creed,

and has affected all of us in varying degrees. The observance of the moral code lags unduly behind our material achievements. A discrepancy between power and ethics — it is the age old struggle between ends and means, which is the trouble with the world to-day. We have become so drunk with our achievements and the power that knowledge gives that we have quite forgotten that power and knowledge can never be an end in themselves, but always will and must remain a means.

Knowledge has eliminated distances and shrunk this earth to a small and tiny place.

Knowledge has given us control over most of the resources of this globe and man's fellow creatures.

Knowledge has given us the power to harness the latent forces on and off this earth and make them subservient to our will.

Knowledge has opened up new fields of work and joy and is expanding at an undreamed of, increasing rate.

And yet, what have we done with all that knowledge and power that have been placed in our hands by the ceaseless efforts and incredible genius of the human brain? As H. G. Wells has put it

"Superman has given us flight
but the Ape in us got hold of it."

To-day all the knowledge, all the material-wealth and success of nations and individuals are as nothing. The snug belief at the beginning of this century that all was well with this best of all possible worlds has been smashed. The preponderance of power over ethics brought us the world war, the 20 years crisis, the present war. Instead of heeding the moral precept of: "help each other" and "respect each other," we have distrust and greed and jealousy, we have built bigger and better barriers between peoples and rendered increasingly impossible the normal happy contact of man to man across the globe. In fact, we have done nearly everything we could think of to rob mankind of the chance to develop to the full those faculties for creative work and the pursuit of happiness which are our birthright. What madness, what absurdity is this.

And how ridiculously similar are the present times to those days in our own history, the days before the birth of the Helvetik. With that difference that then the Tessin and the Jura or Lake Constance and Lake Geneva were several days journey apart, whilst to-day in a few hours we travel from one capital to another; over night we cross the Atlantic and within a few seconds we talk and listen to people in the farthest corner of this earth. The world is still peopled by the same kind of human beings as 150 years ago. They dream their dreams, they want happiness and the chance to develop. Most of our pursuits are international in character and take no notice of all these artificial obstacles and barriers. Men of every race and creed have given to the common pool and mankind as a whole has gained by it.

Look at *science*, no nation can claim exclusive rights. How ludicrous would be the notion that only the Greeks should profit by Archimedes, the Italians by Galilei, the Germans by Kopernikus, the French by Pasteur, the British by Stephenson and the Americans by Edison. The work of these men and thousands like them is international wealth and belongs to all of us.

Consider the arts — music, sculpture, painting, literature, with names like Shakespeare, Goethe,

Rembrandt, Rodin, Verdi, Schubert, Chopin, they are not owned by anyone nation, they are the property and the glory of all men.

Take technical achievements, radio, cinema, lighting, heating, building, production methods — take anything you like, they are not the work of any one nation and any one State, they are as much the result of international co-operation as of the efforts of individual persons. May I remind you of the illustration Mr. Streit has given in his book: "Anyone can make himself a megaphone and extend his voice a little. But to make a telephone that will extend his voice to anywhere, one needs generations of scientists and inventors of many nations. One needs to comb the world to get all the little things required to make a telephone. And if a man could find them all in his backyard and invent the whole thing himself — to use it he would need another man and to make the most of it, he would need all mankind." Similar pictures could be drawn on subjects such as finance, commerce and the press.

This entrenched and barricaded nationalism makes no longer sense in terms of either culture, economics or communications. Partly it is the result of loose feeling and vague emotions. I was caught in this trap myself the other day. I was reading through a recent number of "The Listener," when I came across the report of a speech made by the First Lord of the Admiralty entitled: "Each for all and all for each." I must confess my first reaction was: How dare he pinch our national slogan, and then I realised, of course, that such manifestations of the moral sense must not and cannot be the property of one group only, but are part of the common heritage of mankind as a whole.

Chiefly, however, modern nationalism is the result of the materialistic approach to any problem of this age; where an expression like "sovereign rights" has lost its creative connotation and become a politely legal phrase for anarchy between the States, where the political relationship between groups and races is on the level of a lawless wilderness and where we cling desperately to outworn institutions — for fear that we might lose — something. What can we lose by establishing some sort of law and order between peoples? What in terms of human values did we lose in Switzerland by subordinating our States to the common desire to create a new world for us? We had but gain from it!

And so it is with the world to-day. In Europe, Asia, Africa, in the Americas there is a growing body of public opinion which is fed up with all the waste of labour and material, with the futility of economic nationalism. It recognises the fact that the interdependence of the world to-day must inevitably lead in time to some form of world community. World Order is in the air to-day. What form or forms it will take in the end no man can say nor will it help to be dogmatic on some rigid scheme. It's not for us to shape the fruit that's carried in the womb of time. But we must take care and not let the fear and apprehension of possible economic consequences frighten us away from making the attempt. Whatever difficulties may arise, the human mind will find a way to cope with them; the chief thing is *to do it*, and leave the worry about problems to be solved till later. The world needs the conviction that a new order compatible with national pride and honour can be built.

But most of all it needs the *courage* to take the decisive step.

And so it seems that the time has come when we Swiss abroad should conceive it as our duty to support that conviction and to strengthen that courage. We, who had the temerity to attempt it; We, who have gained that greater strength and greater freedom; We, who like no other nation are of different race and creed and tongue and yet speak the same language at heart; We can help the world to reach that common goal if we but told every man, woman and child we meet:

It has been done
it is done now
it can be done again.

SWISS MERCANTILE SOCIETY.

The meetings of the Society were held regularly during the summer months and, generally speaking, were well attended.

At the August meeting, the members, on the proposition of the Council, unanimously decided to elect Mr. Alfred Gubser an Honorary Member of the S.M.S. Mr. Gubser, on the occasion of the recent Delegates' Meeting of the S.K.V. at Berne, relinquished his office of President of the Central Committee. For nine years he guided the destinies of the association and, it will be remembered, it was he who headed the delegation from Switzerland when the S.M.S. celebrated its 50th anniversary in 1938. The honour bestowed on Mr. Gubser was in recognition of his outstanding services rendered to the S.K.V. as a whole, as well as to the London Section, and it was decided that he be informed of the election in a suitably worded telegram.

Mr. W. Meier, Vice-President, gave some interesting data regarding an English Centre in Switzerland, formed under the auspices of the S.K.V. in conjunction with the Bundesamt für Industrie, Gewerbe und Arbeit. The course, formed on the lines of the S.M.S. College in London, is being held at Frohburg (Solothurn). The Centre was opened on August 4th and we understand that the first course of 4 months' duration is being attended by 30 students. It is a full-time course, with all the students in residence, and the Head of the Institute is Mr. R. Haas-Hämig.

The Society's activities during the coming winter were then discussed at length. In view of the black-out and the attendant difficulties in travelling, it was decided to revert to the practice adopted during the last two winters, i.e., to hold the meetings on the second Saturday of the month. The programme will include lectures, film shows, a social function, etc., which will, however, be decided on from month to month according to altering circumstances. There will also be opportunities for recreations such as philately, table-tennis, darts, cards, etc.

At the meeting on September 13th, Dr. E. M. Bircher addressed the members. As the lecture is published in extenso in this issue, suffice it to say that all present spent a most interesting and instructive afternoon at Swiss House. A very animated discussion followed Dr. Bircher's address and the hope was expressed that he would come along on some future occasion to give another of his interesting talks.

The next Monthly Meeting will be held at Swiss House on Saturday, October 11th, at 2.30 p.m. *WB.*