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ON COMMON GROUND.

By THÉO CHOPARD.

The recent census of the population, taken by the Swiss Confederation, shows a further decline in the rural elements and a fresh increase in the urban and industrial population. In spite of the fact that from 1941 to 1950 the number of inhabitants in Switzerland has increased by nearly half a million, one rural locality out of three has registered a decline in the number of its inhabitants. Within the space of one century, the proportion of persons engaged in farming has fallen from 50% to 20% of the whole of the Swiss people. Is it really a fact, as so many would have it, that we are witnessing a flight from the land? Certainly not! Nowhere in Switzerland do we find abandoned farms, deserted villages and hamlets, and uncultivated land, as is the case, for example, in certain regions of France. On the contrary, the tiniest plot of land is carefully cultivated. What is then the reason for this steady decrease in its population from which our countryside is suffering? It is self-evident that the attraction exercised by easier living conditions, higher earnings, and more varied possibilities for recreation, plays a considerable role. But this is not the only reason for this demographic movement. The simple reason is that in the agricultural regions the number of births is too high in relation to the possibilities of work and of living offered by the available land. The superficial area of this land is constantly declining. The progress of industrialisation and the progressive extension of towns and cities, is steadily "eating away" arable land. In other words, there is no longer sufficient land to provide work for all those who are born in the farming class. A great many families leave the country because the number of farms is diminishing. The cost of running a farm has become — for a number of various reasons — so high that agriculture is obliged to rationalize its methods of production. Small farms — which are not paying concerns and cannot provide a living for all the members of the family — tend to become eliminated in a pitiless manner. They are cut up and engulfed by larger farms. Only large farms are profitable. But, even they, are no longer important enough to be able to provide work for all; moreover, they cannot pay the wages which can be obtained in industrial undertakings. That is the reason why we find ourselves facing the following paradox: in spite of a birth-rate among the farming class which is too high for the amount of work available, agriculture lacks man-power and is obliged to have recourse to foreign labour. The migration of the rural population to the towns and the steady growth of the latter, is far from desirable. On the other hand, those rural regions which lie at a distance from the urban centres, are not in a position to provide everyone with sufficient earnings. At this point, I would like to specify that the depopulation in question is particularly marked in the outlying parts of the country. In those villages where certain industries have been established, there has been no decline in the population. Thus, it would appear as if the best way to stabilise, to a certain degree, the relations between the farming population and the semi-urban regions, is to decentralize to a still further extent an industrial production which is already proceeding along that road, and, in this way,

open up new possibilities of employment to the village populations. Taken as a whole, however, this decline in the rural population which is being deplored, is not a social evil. In a small and highly industrialised country like Switzerland — a large portion of whose superficial area is covered by mountains and glaciers — farming can offer possibilities of work to only a limited number of persons, of whom the proportion grows smaller concurrently with the growth of the population. In short: the possibilities of employment offered by agriculture are limited, whereas those offered by industry are not. And that is why the industrial population continues to increase in comparison with the farming population.

OUR NEXT ISSUE.

Our next issue will be published on Friday, April 13th, 1951. We take the opportunity of thanking the following subscribers for their kind and helpful donations over and above their subscription: A. Gartmann, A. O. Bucher, W. Graf, M. E. Lichtensteiger, S. Alberti, Mrs. J. Stanton, Mrs. B. C. Hossack, J. H. Ungricht, P. Bucher, J. Kessler, R. J. Keller, Mrs. A. Rietmann, C. Landau, J. Hausermann, J. Paravicini, E. Widmer, H. Bingguely, M. Gysin, A. Maeder, W. O. Bossard.



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