

The lights go down

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THE SWISS SCENE
THE LIGHTS GO DOWN

Zurich's Bahnhofstrasse, one of Europe's most prestigious shopping streets, together with its more modest equivalents in other Swiss towns, wears a dismal appearance now after nightfall. Shop-lighting and illuminated advertising are either completely extinguished or severely dimmed in response to official appeals to help save Switzerland from the power cuts with which it was so familiar in the post-war years, and which it thought to have banished for good a few years ago.

Isolated cuts in train services and train heating since mid-February have given a taste of the more drastic measures scheduled for mid-March at the latest if the weather does not suddenly come to the aid of the hydro-electric undertakings.

Poor Resources

For a nation which otherwise deals imperturbably with severe cold and massive snowfalls each year it may seem incongruous that it should have inadequate electric power resources. The Swiss do not hesitate to criticise — justly or unjustly — dilatoriness and incompetence in Berne. Yet there has been scarcely a murmur of complaint so far, and certainly nothing approaching the barrage of criticism which Britain's Central Electricity Authority has had to bear. Perhaps the economic facts are more familiar to the man in the Bahnhofstrasse than to his counterpart in Regent Street.

Faced with the country's legendary prosperity, it is easy for the foreigner to forget — the Swiss never does — that Switzerland has practically no natural resources. Coal production is non-existent, and despite years of determinedly optimistic exploration, there is as yet no tangible sign of exploitable oil or natural gas. Hence the very heavy investment in hydro-electrics (over Sw.Frs.11,000m.) — not always the most economic form of power in the short run, but secure against wartime and transport difficulties.

So intensely have these resources been exploited that there will be no further scope for increasing hydro-electric capacity after the present programme is completed in the mid-1970's and by 1970 even normal yearly consumption will be greater than hydro-electrical capacity.

This fact explains the growing interest in atomic energy exemplified by the experimental atomic power

station now building at Lucens, and the recent technical co-operation agreement signed with Britain's Atomic Energy Authority.

On the other hand, despite its lack of raw materials, Switzerland has the highest electricity consumption per head of population of any country in Europe. The trouble is, however, that with its electricity capacity based entirely on water resources, maximum water supply in the wet months of spring and autumn never coincides with maximum power demand in the cold winter months. To a certain extent this drawback can be countered by exporting electricity at one season and importing at another, and also by building dams to store potential power. Switzerland does both.

German Help

Though Austria has had to cancel electricity supplies this winter, firms in Germany have continued to supply the whole of Swiss night time power — a few weeks ago the whole country was blacked out shortly after midnight due to a transmission fault near the German border — some 12m. kWh per night. Meanwhile reservoir capacity has been increased in 1962, and the total contents were in fact some 16 per cent. higher on October 1, 1962, than a year earlier. Exceptionally dry conditions from October to January, however, reduced new water supplies to half the normal rate, resulting in a much more rapid draining than usual so that by early December stocks were already no greater than in December, 1961.

From then on the extraordinarily cold winter became the dominant factor. Electricity consumption steadily increased up to 20 per cent. above winter "normal", making a total of 60m. kWh per day. Imports covering one-fifth and production from current water supplies another fifth, the reservoirs had to be tapped to produce some 36m. kWh per day. By this week they were over four-fifths exhausted and a current rates of production sufficient for only four weeks more. This is the present Swiss power crisis. It is not a lack of productive capacity, just a shortage of fuel — in this case water — and only rain and a thaw can supply it.

(By courtesy, "Financial Times", 1st March 1963.)

SEMAINES FRANÇAISES

Geneva, Lausanne and Zurich were "at home" to France throughout February and partly in March as well. During these "Semaines Françaises" not only the most exquisite products of France's world-renowned cuisine and her efficient export industries were on display, but also gems of her cultural and artistic achievements. The programme further included architectural and art exhibitions, French guest performances in the theatres, and gala film shows.

On 30th January the French weeks opened in Zurich in the presence of Town President Dr. Emil Landolt and the French Ambassador in Berne, Monsieur Philippe Baudet. Federal Councillor Schaffner was amongst the guests of honour.

On 16th February the "Semaines Françaises" opened in Geneva and two days later the French Minister of Finance, Monsieur V. Giscard d'Estaing, opened similar weeks in Lausanne.

SWISS MERCANTILE SOCIETY

Wednesday, 10th April, 7.15 p.m.

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