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# The Swiss Observer

FOUNDED IN 1919 BY PAUL F. BOEHRINGER

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## A CLOWN NAMED GROCK

The Circus is an entertainment that practically almost belongs to the past. The Great Barnum Circus, Bert-ram Mills and many other household names have found a lasting place in the history of entertainment. The only circuses that seem to survive are the national companies. The Knie Circus in Switzerland, for one, appears to survive very well and returns with unfailing regularity on the same square of every major Swiss town each year.

The Music Hall is also a form of entertainment that has vanished. Many people still remember the days when for a penny they could have a night out at one of the innumerable theatres found in every town of some importance. These theatres have all closed down or been converted into cinemas. It was Hollywood and the new sound films that killed the Music Hall.

The man who probably made the most money and earned the greatest success in both media was a Swiss known as *Grock*. He was a "Swiss abroad" and made his career in all the countries of Europe but Switzerland. It was only at the end of his career, after the second world war, that he began to tour Switzerland with his own troupe more extensively. The British public who knew him well during the years which succeeded the first world war were unaware of his national origins. He was just their beloved entertainer. Winston Churchill told him one day: "You are our best comic".

Grock wrote his autobiography, entitled *Sans blague!* in 1947. It is a most lively and entertaining account bearing the style of history's most famous clown. His real name was *Charles Adrien Wettach*. He was born at Moulin de Loveresse, near Reconvilier, in the Bernese Jura, in 1880. His father was a watchmaker and an amateur acrobat.

Grock grew up with the love of the sawdust. He discovered the Circus at an early age and never missed a chance to watch the troupes of jugglers, gypsies and acrobats wandering across the Jura. He joined them for odd jobs

still as a child and performed as a tumbler and violinist. His father sent him to a watchmaker for a regular apprenticeship. But the work bench did not suit Grock at all, and before long he left to seek adventure abroad, like so many Swiss of his day.

He left for Hungary where he was tutor in a noble family for two years. His debuts in the Circus were made at Budapest, and came quite by chance when a job as a partner was offered to him. There followed a long life of wanderings and living off expedients from Hamburg to Bucharest. He worked in small French circuses. He played the piano in cafes and lead chequered and hard beginnings.

It was towards 1903 that he formed an association with a fellow clown called *Brick* who had made his name in a former partnership known as "Brick and Brock". To keep up the suggestion of this "trade mark", but also to maintain his own individuality, Adrien Wettach changed his name to "Grock". Grock was thus created in the arenas of Nimes on 1st October, 1903.

He had a long and successful association with Brick. He toured France, North Africa, South America. He later formed other partnerships and constantly enlarged his repertoire of gags. He was already a world-known entertainer when the war began.

With the famous French clown *Antonnet*, he toured England in 1911-1912 and made his audience at the Palace Theatre in London choke with laughter. When the Sarajevo incident triggered off the first world war he was touring in Russia. He returned after a long and adventurous journey to Switzerland to perform his national service. When he was discharged because of a hand injury he left for Paris.

After some time he came back to England, and Grock appeared before the British public for a second time. He formed a lasting association with the theatre agent Percy Riess and appeared successively with the Oswald Stoll and the Syndicate Tours in every

major music hall of the country. He and his partner Antonnet drew the tears from the crowds massed at the "Empire" and the "Coliseum" in London.

Early after the war he was being paid up to £500 a week. Grock was a good businessman. He started a music shop at 36 Charing Cross Road with a partner and wrote songs. These were immensely successful and thousands of soldiers coming home from the front had them constantly on their lips.

Grock remained in England until 1924. He loved the British but hated the dreariness of British provincial towns and was disheartened by its weather. His departure was hastened by a disagreement with his impresario Oswald Stoll who had refused to improve the terms of his contract, and was paying the three *Marx Brothers* almost twice as much as Grock. This was a time, Grock recalls, when the Marx Brothers never filled a theatre and hardly drew a laugh.

Back on the Continent, Grock was immensely successful at the *Olympia's* regular season in Paris. He performed in every capital in Europe. He married an Italian woman and built himself a villa near San Remo. He has many tales of his encounters with every public figure of that time. He made the Queen of Spain laugh so much that she gave birth prematurely. He made the wiry little Dr. Goebbels laugh to tears. Hitler told him that he had come to enjoy his pranks at least ten times. Charlie Chaplin travelled specially from Algiers to Marseilles to applaud him. Maurice Chevalier was an old-time buddy.

Many of the Grock vintage gags are still remembered today. The best known, but also one of the last ones to be perfected, was his peculiar way of saying "*Sans Blague?*" How was it that he could unleash an explosion of laughter each time that he pronounced this very banal French idiom? This was Grock's secret. Another famous gag was to take out a ridiculously small fiddle from a gigantic double-bass box,

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fool about with it in a vain attempt to draw a sound from its strings on the wrong side. Another one was to sit a little too far from a piano and draw the piano nearer to the stool instead of moving the stool.

These pranks always appeared simple. Yet, without Grock's comic genius it was impossible for anyone to raise the same hilarity. Grock worked on his tricks for long. They took years of perfecting. Many of them just came by accident. The stool and the piano classic first happened when a piano and stool had been inadequately positioned on the stage, and when Grock found it more convenient to displace the piano owing to the presence of a carpet under his stool. Laughter broke out in the theatre and this was the birth of a new gag.

One day the seat of the chair upon which he was performing collapsed and Grock fell to the floor in a shower of laughter. He got back on the chair, somewhat taken aback, jumped and un-

accountably landed in a yoga position atop the chair's back. This was the accidental creation of an acrobatic trick which Grock alone could perform.

At 67, Grock could still do the trick! He was still active and the sawdust, on and off, until his last appearance in Berlin in 1954. He then retired in his villa at Oneglia, Italy, and died on 14th July, 1959. He was an accomplished acrobat, a proficient musician and a comic of genius. He had the equipment of a complete clown, able to thrill both Circus and Music Hall audiences. He was probably the greatest show-business star Switzerland has ever produced.

## COMMENT

### WHAT THE FEDERAL ELECTIONS MEAN

The 38th legislature of the Swiss Confederation is drawing to an end and on 31st October the country's legislative will be re-appointed by the people. What are the tendencies represented at the National Council? Every shade of attitude ranging from conservatism to radicalism has its reflections in the electoral programmes of the parties. There is, predictably, a right, a centre and a left. At the extreme right one finds Schwarzenbach's National Action, the Independent Republicans, the Agrarians and cantonal fringe movements such as the Vigilants in Geneva. More squarely on the right wing are the well established Liberals, imbued with a philosophy of hard work and unimpeded prosperity. The Radicals are somewhat to the right of Centre.

The Christian Democrats no longer consider themselves as conservatives and are to be situated to the left of Centre as a result of their new programme. The Socialists are, naturally, on the Left, followed by the Labour, or Communist Party, which now have representatives from Geneva

and Vaud and which have been extracted from the Ghetto in which they once were. At the extreme left are all the proponents of an overhaul of society. However they refuse to play the electoral game from the outset.

All these parties have their line of action. There are alliances and campaigns with the aim of pulling more political weight. Each party shall, depending on its financial means, advertise in all available media, its advantages as the elections get nearer and the voter will have to inform himself diligently in order to make up his mind on the candidate he will choose. The coming elections are the nearest thing in Switzerland to general elections. With this difference, however, that the Executive will not automatically change. The continued term of office of federal councillors depends indirectly only on the outcome of the elections to the National Council. The composition of the new Federal Assembly will certainly have a bearing on the future choice of federal councillors and it is possible that a new composition of Parliament will lead to changes in the Federal Council. It will be eventually elected (it stays in office for four years) but the practice is to select again those federal councillors wishing to stay in office.

The Federal Council is not elected by the *people* and, in contrast to the practice of other countries, the electorate is not called to a kind of national confidence vote placing a party leader in power.

Whatever the course of action elaborated by each party, there seems to be a political law which says that the variety of options presented at elections tend to be smothered by the hard realities of power. Basically, it is *economics* that tend to narrow the margin of choice and, whatever the policies of the ruling parties, they are soon confronted with an heritage and economic constraints which deprive them of freedom of action. This is more apparent in Great Britain where,

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