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Letter from Switzerland

A PEACEFUL SUMMER

We are enjoying quite a fabulous early summer in Switzerland, with cloudless blue skies, which tend to become somewhat pale towards midday when a slight heat-haze rises right across the lake. People go about in their summer clothes and those who have to wear a uniform – police officers, postmen, railway officials – are all in shirt-sleeves. In the shops the strawberries are plentiful, the first home-grown cherries are appearing and at weekends dozens and dozens of sailing boats can be seen on the lake.

The modern diesel-boats and the two old faithful paddle-steamers "Stadt Zürich" and "Stadt Rapperswil" are chug-chugging hither and thither and in the gardens the rhododendrons, lilacs, laburnums and azaleas are in full bloom. Occasionally, when the heat seems to become nearly too much, some clouds appear and a thunderstorm, usually at night, brings some rain.

After four to five fine days the heat gets broken, only to build itself up again: summer has come.

In Berne the two chambers of the federal parliament are in session – the last one before the big summer holidays. The schools are soon breaking up and the general exodus to the mountains or the seaside is already beginning. Greece and Jugoslavia, also Spain and Portugal still seem to be very popular, but quite a few Swiss have also taken to going north for their summer holidays, to Norway, Sweden, Denmark and even Finland.

Politically there is nothing very sensational to report from Switzerland and as far as the economic situation is concerned, the central government in Berne has certainly not, as yet, found an

effective answer to the problem of how to combat the inflation. According to the official index it runs at about 8% per annum, but every banker will tell one that in actual fact it comes near to 10%. There is, it is true, a relatively new office in Berne, the duty of which is to watch prices and to which anybody can appeal if the price of some commodity seems to have risen unduly. The price of petrol went up by a few centimes per litre not long ago and a few days afterwards it had to be reduced again to the level of before. This was an order from the price-watching Commissioner, National Counsellor Professor Leo Schürmann, whom one can only wish success and much grease to his elbow.

Switzerland still has about 800,000 foreign workers and as the so-called "over-foreignization" of the country has become a bit of a problem, Berne has recently tightened the regulations considerably, especially in respect of the "saisonniers." This, in turn, has led the Hotel- and Innkeepers to protest violently against the new regulations because the tourist trade depends very much on waiters and other staff who come into the country to work during a summer or winter season and then leave again.

According to official figures just published, some 800 "black" foreign workers have, since January 1st, been either turned away or put back across the frontiers, because they entered the country and took up work without having permits. In order to stop this influx, employers who employ "black" foreign labour, who have hitherto risked a fine, are now risking prison sentences.

Everybody in Switzerland, or nearly everybody, seems to be motorised. I do not know the actual figure of how many cars and motor bicycles are

registered in the country, but the impression one gets certainly in and around Zurich, is of a place nearly choking with cars. There are also many traffic accidents, and consequently there is a big public discussion in full swing about whether the wearing of seat-belts should be made compulsory or not. Berne, apparently, is considering the matter and opinions pro and contra vary. At the same time a lot of propaganda is being made about switching off the car engine – even during short stops at traffic lights – in order not to increase further the poisoning of the atmosphere through exhaust fumes.

And here, to finish this chatty letter and to show that there are some scoundrels and also some very naive people in Switzerland, a news item: The Berne police is at the moment anxiously looking for a man who has collected several thousand francs with the following trick: he has telephoned some wealthy old ladies and has told them that their telephone line is in bad shape. In order to put it right again they are urgently requested to put a 500 franc banknote into the nearest public telephone booth, where the metallic strip built into the banknote will help to restore, "by its radiation", the necessary "frequency". One may well ask how anybody can be stupid enough to have fallen for this one – but it has happened.

This, incidentally, will be my last letter from Switzerland for a while, as I shall soon be following the general trend by going on holiday – to my favourite spot in the Engadine. To all those amongst the readers of the "Swiss Observer" who may read these lines, I would like to wish the blessings of a truly lovely summer.

Gottfried Keller



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