

Letter from Switzerland

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duty, Mr. Jean Grin, who undertook to settle this affair while avoiding bloodshed at all costs. Mr. Grin conducted negotiations with calm and patience. He approached the bank several times with his hands held in the air to talk to the bandits. He began to establish contact by bringing food to the occupants of the bank and didn't hesitate on their demand to prove he was unarmed by pulling down his trousers.

But showing his calves to television viewers around Europe was recompensed by the bloodless outcome of the siege. As protracted negotiations between the gunman wore on, Mrs. Landolt, who had just resumed work after recovering from shock she had suffered when another branch of the same bank in which she was working was raided a few months ago, felt unwell. A doctor was brought in but the bandits refused to let him in.

The bargaining was conducted mainly by telephone and the two men were most talkative with reporters, claiming that they meant no harm to anyone. One of them said that he was an honest man with a mother and a grandmother. But their hostages, who were eventually unlocked from the toilets, answered some of the calls weeping and almost hysterical.

The gunmen discussed their demands calmly with newsmen. Television viewers heard a recorded conversation with one raider and in a direct transmission watched them preparing to flee in a getaway car which had been brought to the bank on their demand. The raiders had asked for a BMW 2500 to be parked in front of the bank, its doors open and engine warmed. Each of these demands were met. The car stood in front of the bank for over an hour while the bandits dithered inside, fearing apparently that they would be the victims of a Munich-type shoot-out.

Sightseers, sipping beer and coffee, watched the drama unfold from tables at nearby cafes. Others hung out of flat windows trying to see what was happening. The whole area had been sealed off and tram No. 12 had been made to halt several stops before its Carouge terminal.

Bizarre incidents lightened the sombre tension.

At one point, a young man with long blond hair walked across the deserted square to the bank with his hands raised and was allowed in.

Police warned the gunmen he was coming but said he had nothing to do with them. The bandits locked him up in the bank lavatory where he was found unharmed after they made their getaway.

Then a 28-year-old Swiss, apparently drunk, stripped to his underpants and blue socks, arrived at the bank door and offered himself as a substitute hostage. But the gangsters spurned his suggestion, seemingly made as the result of a wager, and the long-haired man retraced his steps and got dressed again.

A report of another shooting incident involving a hostage in the French town of Annemasse only three miles away across the border caused a flurry among the police and the crowd. That incident, which had arisen from a disturbance in a bar, had nothing to do with the Geneva crime. A hostage was killed and the bandit managed to get away.

The police accepted a deal proposed by the bandits which would

allow them to escape unhindered and unfollowed in the BMW. Agreeing to a hide-and-seek formula, the police promised that they would not chase the men for fifteen minutes and the two raiders pledged to release their hostages.

As darkness settled, they bundled the terrified women into the getaway car, pistols at the ready and sped off into the night while armed police stood by without interfering as they promised.

The gangsters also honoured their share of the bargain, releasing the women unharmed less than half an hour later in the city centre, only about two kilometres away. They abandoned the getaway car leaving their pistols, ammunition and a bag of stolen money in the back. The police with tracker dogs traced them to a nearby building site and arrested them without a struggle less than two hours after their flight from the bank. They were found with the rest of their loot tied round their belts and taken to hospital for a medical check before being locked up in St. Antoine jail. Their wounded accomplice was found two hours later in a flat not far from the bank and two other men were arrested during the night in connection with the raid.

LETTER FROM SWITZERLAND

The system of direct democracy, as it is operated in Switzerland, may have its advantages if it is compared with the system of parliamentary democracy of the United Kingdom. But it undoubtedly also has its disadvantages. In Great Britain the voters usually go to the polls once every four to five years to elect a new parliament, in addition of course to being called upon to vote locally in Borough Council elections. But all the important material decisions are left to the men and women – in Westminster and Whitehall or in the Town Halls – in whom the power of decision-making is vested.

In Switzerland the people of voting age do not only elect those who represent them in the authorities, but they are also called upon to take part in decision-making – whether qualified for

this task or not. Thus in Switzerland one may be asked to vote for or against new bridges or underground railways (as not so long ago in Zurich), highly technical projects in other words, and on one and the same day the voters may be called upon to decide on federal, cantonal and local matters.

On June 30th next the people of voting age in the Canton of Zurich are asked to vote on no fewer than seven different problems. Some of these are certainly of considerable importance, such as for example, a socialist initiative about introducing a wealth-tax. Another one is – again the result of an initiative – about introducing a new law to combat juvenile crime. Yet another one concerns environment protection and “the maintenance of dwelling space in urban



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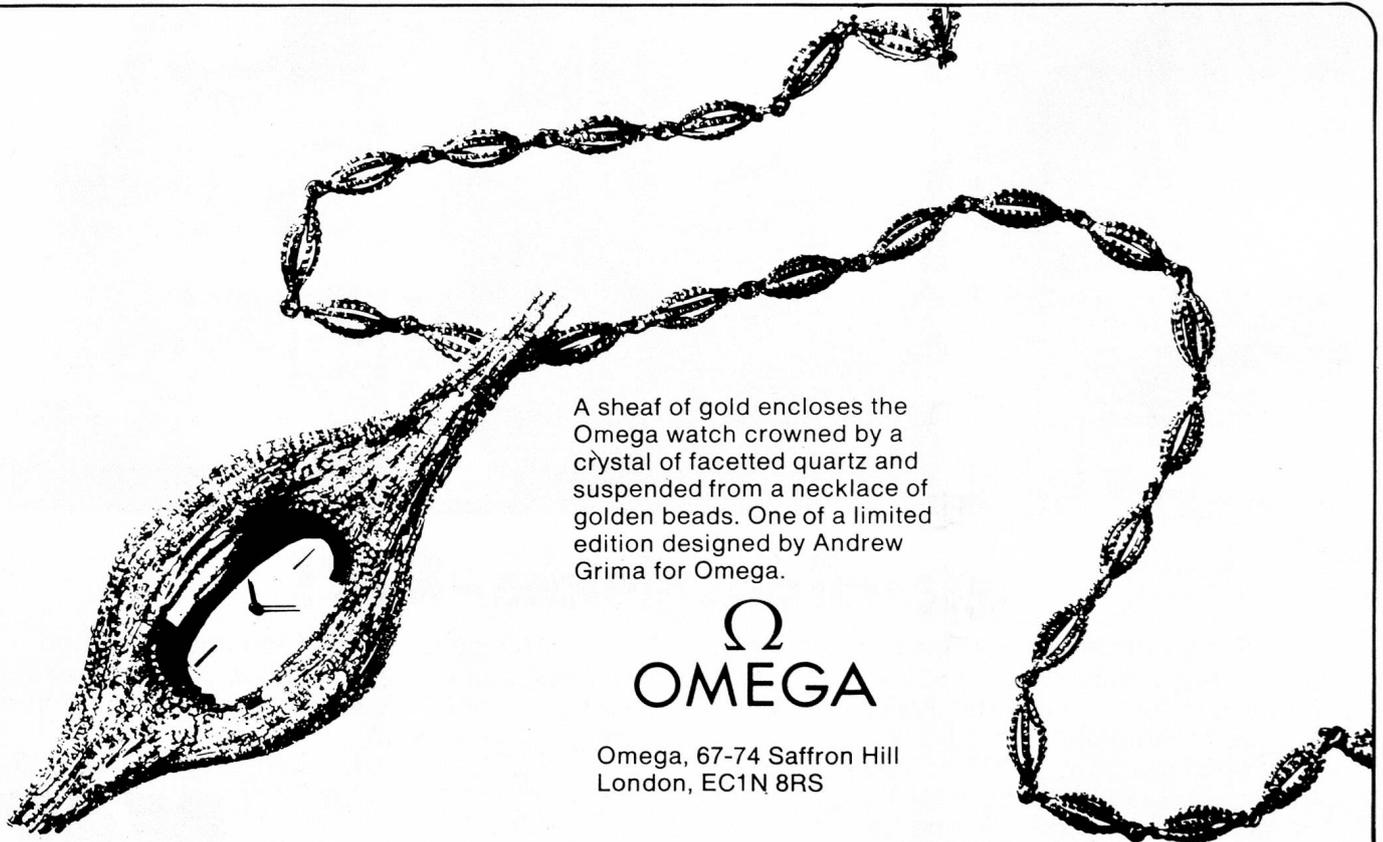
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regions". So far so good. But then the voter is also asked to approve or reject a credit of 21.5 million francs for the expansion of the heating system of the university and the cantonal hospital. How should he — or she — have the technical knowledge to know whether these millions would be well spent — even if the cantonal parliament recommends such expenditure?

It is an undeniable fact that the constant flow — not to say flood — of voting proposals leads to apathy on the part of the voters and to sometimes shamefully small participation on their part. Thus it can happen that certain proposals are accepted or voted down by only 18 to 20% of those entitled to vote. This is quite understandable, since the average voter has neither the time nor the inclination, nor indeed the knowledge to thoroughly study both the flood of explanatory pamphlets he finds in his letterbox or to properly gauge the consequences of the decision he is supposed to make.

Having to go to the polls too often and being asked to decide on things about which even the experts have differing opinions is putting an enormous strain on democracy. It leads to what I am tempted to call voters fatigue and, if not to a malaise within the population, then at least to indifference and unconcern and the result finally becomes a kind of lottery.

If the British voter has — perhaps — too little say in important matters which help to shape the future, the Swiss voter

has too much. This is a conclusion I have come to during the 18 months during which I have been able to observe the Swiss political scene at close quarters. A

healthy compromise solution between the two systems would seem to be desirable.

Gottfried Keller

technical items

NEW TOOLS FOR THE HANDYMAN

A Swiss inventor at Orselina (Ticino) presented two very useful new tools for the handyman at the last International Salon of Inventions in Geneva. The first consists of a universal wrench fitting any shape or size of nut and bolt. In the handyman's tool kit, it will take the place therefore of a whole series of standard spanners; it also offers the advantage of being round and articulated, enabling bolts located even in the most inaccessible places to be reached. The other tool is a ratchet-spanner which can also be used as a screwdriver, box-spanner, etc., by merely inserting the desired accessory into the tool's driving rod. A simple push with the thumb is sufficient to lock the system, making it possible to screw in either direction. All operations are quickly and easily done for the leverage exerted by the dovetail handle increases the force. For screwdrivers, milling

machines, drills and other mechanical tools, a special clutch system has been provided, making it possible to fit the accessory or remove it simply by pressing.

SWISS NOVELTY IN ELECTRONICS

About 1950, cold cathode tubes attained their technical maturity. For many years, they were considered as advanced electronic components; but the appearance of semi-conductors gradually ousted them from their position of supremacy. Recently, however, there has been a veritable rebirth of cold cathode tubes. Their great stability, insensitivity to overloading and peak voltages, wide range of temperatures, reliability and long life make them ideal for many uses in simple automatic controls and regulating circuits. It is above all miniature welding diodes for printed circuits that triggered the present demand for these components. A specialized Swiss factory at Mannedorf (Zurich) presented a number of high-power switching diodes



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