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Letters from Switzerland

by Gottfried Keller

The 3,800,000 people who are entitled to vote in Switzerland, or whichever number of voters who actually vote on any given occasion, are officially called "The Sovereign".

Just how sovereign they can be, some 34 per cent of the total electorate showed on 13th June by rejecting two proposed federal laws which had both been most carefully prepared and worked out by the Federal Council and approved, after long and searching debate by both chambers of the Federal Parliament.

A few years ago "The Sovereign" had approved a special amendment to the Constitution which actually charged the Federal Council to prepare and work out a law for the protection of what remains of as yet unspoiled territory and living space, which has become known as "Raumplanungsgesetz". It may be said that such a law comes about 30 years too late, because during the long building-boom years before the present recession the country had been sinned against in a dreadful free-for-all of speculative building. If the "Sovereign" has now rejected the law which has been passed by both the Government and the Parliament, this means that the two latter authorities will have to start again, hoping for better luck next time.

The reasons for the rejection, by a relatively small majority incidentally, may be manifold, but according to the "father" of this law, Schürmann, formerly National Councillor and now Director-General of the Swiss National Bank, the "Sovereign" has shown a lack of confidence both in the leadership of the State and of the main political parties.

Some commentators go further and speak of a certain "malaise". Be that as it may: if on an important occasion like this only 34 per cent of those entitled to vote bother to do so and if such a small minority can kill proposals which have been sanctioned by Government and Parliament, one may well ask whether this is not direct "democracy à outrance".

The second proposal which was rejected was one for an interest free loan of 200 million francs over fifty years to IDA (International Development Agency). It goes without saying that Federal Councillor Graber, the Foreign Minister, who fathered this project was a disappointed man when the result of the vote became known.

The fears in the Federal Political Department are that the image of Switzerland abroad will suffer, although it must be said that the country has for years given generous development aid — without first submitting such proposals to the people.

Nevertheless, the question arises how much direct democracy is compatible with the conduct of foreign policy. Some say indeed that foreign policy is too important to be left to the whims of the voters. There may be some justification for saying that. At any rate, it is perhaps not surprising that after the vote of 13th June one prominent commentator has publicly asked the question: Is Switzerland still governable or not?

IS THIS A 'FAREWELL TO ARMS?'

According to article No. 18 of the Federal Constitution every (male) Swiss is compelled to do military service. The Federal Council, acting on a 1972 — "Peoples Initiative", which was approved by the Federal Parliament in 1973, and having taken into consideration proposals put forward by a specially appointed group of experts, has now decided that a further clause should be added to article 18 of the Constitution.

The purpose of the new clause is the introduction of a *civilian national service* for those "who cannot, for religious or ethical reasons reconcile the carrying of arms with their consciences". This novelty constituting a change in the written Constitution, will in due course have to be voted on by the electorate of the whole country. More details will be published shortly (and may have been published by the time this letter appears in print), but it is already known that *political* reasons will not be considered sufficient to opt out of military service.

Conscientious objectors, whether genuine or not, are at present treated rather harshly by the Swiss Military Courts. A young soldier was recently sentenced to nine months' imprisonment by a Military Court for refusing to do his patriotic duty and his case has not only received much publicity, but also underlines the topicality of the whole problem. It is possible that civilian groups of experts may in future replace the military courts for the purpose of examining the motives of would-be conscientious objectors. At any rate, slowly as the official Swiss machinery sometimes grinds, a civilian national service for genuine conscientious objectors against carrying arms is on the way.

FORTHCOMING EVENTS

Wednesday, 28th July, 7.30 pm — CONCERT at Swiss Church, 79 Endell Street WC2, by LUZERNER SINGER, a mixed choir of some 60 young people. The Concert is under the patronage of the Nouvelle Société Helvétique. The programme includes music by Monteverdi and Bach, some Negro spirituals, works by Distler, Debussy and Poulenc, and folksongs from many countries, including Switzerland. No tickets required — a collection will be taken.

SWISS NATIONAL DAY CELEBRATIONS — at Eglise Suisse, 79 Endell Street, London WC2. Doors open at 17.30 for 18.00. Programme includes an address by the Swiss Ambassador, prayer and music. All Swiss and their friends welcome.

27th to 29th August, ASSEMBLY OF THE SWISS ABROAD at Morat. All Swiss warmly welcome to this gathering. Please apply to Secretariat of the Swiss Abroad, Alpenstrasse 26, 3000 Berne.

SWITZERLAND IN BRITAIN

July 30 and 31 — Aldeburgh Festival — The tenor *Hugues Cuénod* holds master classes.

Monday, August 16 — Royal Albert Hall, 7.30 pm — *Heinz Holliger* is the soloist in Mozart's Oboe Concerto in C major and Reicha's Scène for cor anglais and orchestra, played with the Northern Sinfonia under Christopher Seamen (also in the programme: three of Haydn's symphonies).

August 16 to 21, August 30 to September 4, and September 6, 7, 8, 10 — Royal Festival Hall — *Manola Asensio* dances with the London Festival Ballet in Coppelias, Giselle, Noir et Blanc, and L'Eventail (creation).

Wednesday, August 18 — Royal College of Art, 6.30 pm / Royal Albert Hall, 7.30 pm — The oboist *Heinz Holliger* gives a Pre-Prom talk before the concert by the London Sinfonietta, conducted by Gary Bertini, at which he is one of the soloists (Stravinsky, Berio, Dallapiccola programme).

August 22 to September 11 — Edinburgh Festival — Performances by the *Berne Mime Ensemble* (details from the Festival Fringe Society).

Tuesday, August 24 — Usher Hall, Edinburgh, 8 pm — The oboist *Heinz Holliger* is the soloist at a concert by the London Sinfonietta, conducted by Mark Elder.