

Education in Switzerland

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EDUCATION IN SWITZERLAND

At the Assembly of the Swiss Abroad at Murten in August last year, Mr. Philippe Garraux, member of the Council of the Commission of the Swiss Abroad, gave the main address on the Swiss educational system. He began by saying that however poor the soil and however hard-up the population had been for a long time, education began in very early times.

The first schools go back to Roman times and in the district of the Valais of today, there existed already a higher school for the whole adjoining Alpine areas. Even if the invasion of the Alemans put an end to this, it was only temporary. Very soon it was the monasteries, above all St. Gall, which fostered schooling and education and whose reputation went well beyond Swiss frontiers. The churches were leading in the educational field right into the 16th and 17th centuries, mainly because of very scant means of the Cantons of the old Confederation. It must be said, however, that already at the time of the so-called eight Old States it was often stipulated in treaties with foreign powers that young compatriots could attend foreign schools free of charge — for example the universities of Milan and Pavia — so as to satisfy the need for education, which was impossible at home. This changed when, in 1460, the University of Basle was founded and a certain affluence began to be felt also in Switzerland, not least as a result of the victorious Burgundian Wars. Of course, one must not imagine that there were schools of today's kind already then; instruction usually stopped again at the age of 12 and consisted largely of dreary catechetical memorising. Teachers' pay was so miserable that they had to follow all sorts of other occupations on the side. But these schoolmasters took learning and discipline most seriously as is shown by the example of a teacher on the Rafzerfeld (Zürich) who, around 1600, threatened the tardy schoolboys that "all those who cannot write and read are of the devil and go to hell".

Due to the smallness of the country and the great political importance of the farming population, schooling extended right into most isolated valleys very early on, although naturally the main effort was concentrated in the towns.

It is remarkable, too, that compulsory schooling was introduced in Switzerland very early, in Europe in 1607 in the German Principality of Anhalt-Bernburg, and in Switzerland only 20 years later with the Bernese *Landschulverordnung* of 1628.

As everywhere in the 18th century, there were abuses in Switzerland in the educational system. In the aristocratic Cantons the right to higher education was on paper only for many social classes, whilst the schooling of members of privileged families was mainly concentrated on fencing, riding, dancing, as well as on learning foreign languages.

With the efforts to reform

schooling towards the end of the 18th century, in which the old Helvetic Society was greatly concerned, and after the decline of the Old Confederation, all this changed suddenly. The educational legislation worked out by the Minister of Education of the Helvetic Republic 1798-1802, Philipp Albert Stapfer, was permeated by modern thinking, not least because he had been living abroad for many years. It provided for compulsory schooling from the age of six to 14, for an adequate network of secondary schools and *Gymnasien*, medium, good selection of and pay and pensions for teachers, consideration of the child's development, gymnastics and handicraft, civic and military training for boys and domestic teaching for girls, material aid to poor schools, school libraries, etc. Yet the most memorable of Stapfer's deeds was the promotion of Pestalozzi by giving him the management of the orphanage at Stans and later of the teaching institutes of Burgdorf and Yverdon, where he had opportunities to realise his reform plans for educational theories.

In the subsequent stormy times of the Mediation and the Federal Treaty of 1815, schooling was given special attention. The shining example of Pestalozzi, which reached universal importance, resulted in the State looking upon schooling of children of all classes as one of its major tasks.

Apart from state schooling, some private educational institutions gained importance in Switzerland, not least due to the co-operation of numerous refugees: Wilhelm de Wette in Basle, Wilhelm and Ludwig Snell in Basle and Berne. At the same time, a number of Swiss teachers acquired a high reputation right up to the most important European principalities, as for instance César La Harpe who became tutor of Tsar Alexander I. Thus a most fruitful exchange developed across the frontiers.

The Swiss educational system of the early 19th century was very progressive compared to other European countries and contributed considerably to the start of economic affluence, since it was the thorough and sound general schooling which was the basis for quality work in life. In addition to elementary schooling, a many-sided vocational training system was built up, here, too, guaranteeing high quality. The new vocational colleges carried on the training of young people previously undertaken by the guilds, which had secured well-trained artisans already during previous centuries. Very early, these had been much in demand internationally, as builders, printers and others. Our trade colleges, commercial schools and agricultural colleges all go back to the period between 1820 and 1860.

It is also very gratifying that Switzerland showed itself very advanced in the education of women. The Young Girls' Institute of Montmirail near Neuchâtel acquired European importance

already in 1766; the Swiss teachers' training colleges for women were the earliest in Europe, and the Swiss universities were amongst the first to accept women students.

All these factors resulted in Switzerland reaching the top educational policy already 100 years ago, although the German philosopher Count Hermann von Keyserlingk, founder of the Darmstadt School of Wisdom, reproached Switzerland around 1920 that Swiss schools and universities were too much aligned to the needs of the middle classes. Yet it is exactly to this alignment to what the Baltic aristocrat Keyserlingk calls the large middle strata, that Switzerland owes her international position so much above average.

And how are things today?

Has Switzerland been able to keep her top position in education and training?

The Federal Constitutions both of 1848 and 1874 contain provisions for compulsory and free primary schooling, and the Cantons are given considerable sums to carry out elementary schooling, since they are basically responsible.

According to the Constitution, the Confederation only has the right to create a technological institute, a university and other higher centres for vocational training. This competence was used in 1860 when the E.T.H. was founded in Zürich and in 1969 for the creation of E.P.U.L. in Lausanne. On the other hand, no use has been made so far of the possibility of opening a federal university. The eight universities (Basle, Berne Zürich St. Gall, Fribourg, Lausanne, Geneva and Neuchâtel) are cantonal or municipal.

Since schooling is the task of the Cantons, the systems are as varied as they are. A seriously planned proposition to reform the system which should have brought a little uniformity into it — if only to start the school year everywhere in spring — was not realised two years ago. The roots in the individual Cantons proved too strong. The various Cantons, also the small ones, do an excellent job regarding schooling and vocational training as well as educational aids and apparatus. And one must not standardise everything if the country is to be kept alive as a Confederation of States.

On the other hand, the fact that there are 25 different school systems does create problems for parents and children when the place of residence is changed. Yet even children of average intelligence can cope quite easily, and the parents of other children have the excuse that the change of system is responsible for the inadequate academic results of their offspring!

In all the Cantons, serious efforts are being made to adapt the educational system to present needs. One has realised that the role of the school should not only be to *make* a pupil learn and to

accumulate knowledge, but also to *teach* to learn, to make each pupil realise his method of work and to afford the possibility of acknowledging his limits, to develop individual interests and thus to create a firm basis, so that what the school offers can be properly digested.

One also tries to adapt instruction to the fast technological development of today, not only by providing modern equipment like television and electronic apparatus, but also by adjusting the school curriculum. It is understandable that the pupil of today takes a more lively interest in the pre-requisites for a new landing on the moon than in the enumeration of the various *renonculae*.

Since the demands in civic and vocational training are growing, one talks of an extension of compulsory schooling from eight to 10 or even 12 years, as has been done in U.S.A., Sweden and elsewhere. But this would not be without problems and carries the danger of "over-schooling" and alienation from practical life. Much more important than the period of compulsory schooling is to awaken the wish and readiness to go in for further training and education and to develop the technique of learning. In this, the dual principle of Swiss vocational training, i.e. practical work in shop and factory under expert supervision coupled with special courses at trade and commercial schools, makes an excellent contribution. The well-established and very extensively used adult education

facilities go hand in hand with this in Switzerland. Although in this field it is doubtless the Scandinavian countries which acted as pioneers, Swiss achievements in the most varied sectors well deserve attention.

Together with the new vocational training law of 1965, with its natural and diverse structure, the basis is given for up-to-date and individually conceived schooling and training from the first elementary class right through to the start of working life, and all one can hope is that with the proposed university law academic training, too, may be included in this scheme.

In the 'sixties, a witty Swiss from Western Switzerland stated that if Heinrich Pestalozzi were to come back today, he would start again immediately with his great reform. "No! - We have continued in his spirit, and we are fully conscious of the responsibility which we have towards our children, and we try within all our means to prepare them for the conditions which await them in life. We are aware that only in this way can we strengthen the efforts towards a political and social democracy consistent with life today and its development, in which every member of our national community will have a fine feeling not only for his duties but also his rights.

"On the other hand we must not expect full salvation from schooling - however progressive and perfect it may be.

SWISS EVENTS

"Let us remember Pestalozzi's words:

"Domestic wisdom in the formation of man is like the trunk of a tree: upon it alone must be grafted and implanted all branches of human knowledge, science and direction in life; yet where the trunk itself is ailing and weak, the grafted twigs will die and the implanted shoots will wither."

Phillippe Garraux, Berne
(Freely translated by M.M.)

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