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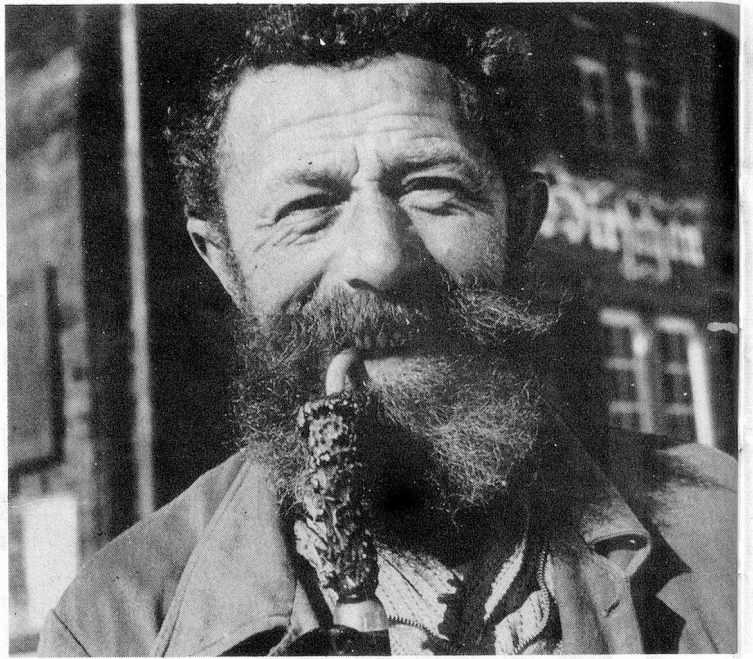
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A typical Swiss? – There's no such thing!



THE Swiss are generous, charming, cheerful, open-minded, courteous, sociable, humorous, modest, progressive, expansive, fearless, idealistic, eager to be liked, prudish, reserved, reticent, morose, materialistic, anxious, humourless, clumsy, choleric, conservative, economical and unreservedly stingy.

If you now think you have found a few subtle antitheses in this summing-up of the typical Swiss and are therefore inclined to believe that there is no such thing, but that the 26 or so qualities we have ascribed to him here are just crass self-contradictions, you are absolutely right.

There is in fact no such thing as a typical Swiss, there are only the inhabitants of 26 cantons or demi-cantons speaking the four national languages – German, French, Italian and Romansh – and innumerable dialects in the bargain.

And Alemannic matter-of-factness, French-Swiss charm,

Ticinese temperament and Romanic amiability express themselves in no less numerous human traits.

Twenty-six cantons? Just a minute – a year ago there were only 25 of them. Here again elements of the Swiss character have been at work.

It is not so long since the Confederates noted with anything from amusement to indignation that a few Bernese living on the fringes of the canton didn't want to be Bernese any more, but would prefer to be Jurassians. And most people at that time said or at least thought very clearly and definitely that such a thing was entirely out of the question.

Then, on a fine Sunday in 1978, they voted on the issue of whether a canton of the Jura should be founded or not and answered with a forthright Yes.

Admittedly, reaching such decisions takes time, particularly in Switzerland. But decisions are reached, and in fact the

country's voters have to decide all sorts of things: whether a school building is to be renovated, whether a bridge forming part of an express highway – already partly constructed – is to be finished, and whether it is right or not is decided not by this or that individual politician but by all – or rather by all who want to express themselves on the matter. And in the last few years that has been only about 45 per cent of those entitled to vote in Federal ballots.

But if you are still full of curiosity about the character of the Swiss, we have a good tip to give you: ask a citizen of Basle what he thinks about the people of Zurich, or somebody from Lausanne what sort of folk live in Geneva.

You won't hear many truths about Zurcher and Genevese, but you'll find out quite a lot about Basler and Lausannois...

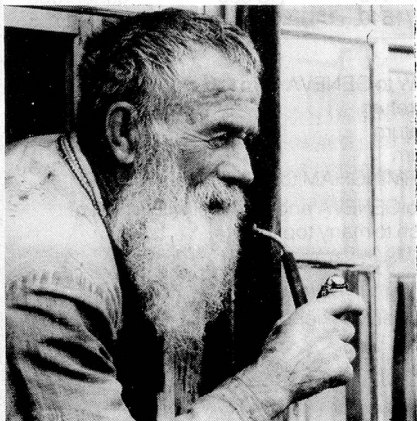
While it would be wrong to lump together all the Swiss in

respect of their character, generalizations are justified in speaking of the attitude of the Swiss towards work: they all work a great deal and with painstaking application.

They turn up very punctually at their jobs each morning. If Herr Oberholzer leaves his house some murky dawn, his neighbours at once know that it is just 6.03 and can set their quartz watches accordingly.

Staggered working hours have today been introduced in many Swiss companies. In theory that means, say, that people can start work at any time between 7.30am and 8.30am.

In practice quite a lot of them will pass the perplexed computer well before 7.30, and it may be that in the evening they will stay a little longer to make up. Surprisingly enough, the people who do this most are not those who are bent on getting ahead, but those who already have got ahead – to a manager's desk, for





instance.

From this it may be deduced that the Swiss are of a grateful turn of mind, and that they are really much fonder of work than they generally admit.

If it is asked where the Swiss work, it must first of all be stated categorically that not all the country's inhabitants are employed in banks.

There are, it is true, rather more banks about than in most other lands. But that might be a form of revenge taken by the Swiss, who have been told for so long that all they can do is make cheese and watches. Now they make hard francs for a change.

Foreign humorists sometimes claim that the favourite evening pastime of the Swiss is counting the shining francs they have earned during the day. This is of course strictly untrue.

For one thing, the Swiss have no time for such things. Their leisure, especially that of the male, is already carefully allocated.

They have formed themselves into tens of thousands of clubs and societies. Almost all Confederates are members of several clubs, and those who aren't are probably just forming a club to protest against the proliferation of clubs.

The example of the city of Zurich will serve to show what proportions Swiss club life can assume. It has well over 1,000 established clubs and societies that provide a means of passing leisure hours in one way or another, and this figure does not even include the dozens of smaller clubs that cater only for card-playing or bowling.

There are, for instance, 37 male voice choirs, 30 women's or mixed or yodelling choirs (the fair sex is here hardly at a disadvantage) and 24 church choirs.

The number of marksmen's clubs in Zurich is also impressive, with 66 using army weapons – these are kept at home by the

men belonging to the Swiss militia – and 11 clubs specialising in sporting arms, crossbows and longbows.

The Swiss marksman will not simply join one or another of these clubs. When he has completed the shooting exercises demanded of him by national defence – usually on a Sunday morning – he will perhaps enter a working-day shooting club, or an abstainers' club formed by those who think alcohol might impair the steadiness of their aim.

He also has other choices: there is a marksman's club for the milk trade, others for post office employees, for railwaymen and tram-drivers, and it goes without saying that all these clubs have also joined forces to form a national association of marksmen's clubs.

There are just as many clubs for the various sports and hobbies. Canary breeders have their own, so do bee-keepers, hunting-dog or pigeon fanciers. The last-named even have to be divided into civilian breeders and members of the military carrier pigeon service.

The object of a Club to Promote the Appreciation of Blood and Liver Sausages, which are part of the staple diet of the Alemannic races, is obvious from its name.

Since every club has to have a treasurer as well as a president and secretary, it is clear that a lot of franc-counting must after all go on in thousands of homes of an evening. But this is less a hobby than a duty, and performed only for honour, not for gain.

The Swiss will also be heard complaining frequently about the time-consuming work which their hobbies involve.

What is the opinion of Swiss women, who incidentally do a lot of do-gooding in clubs of

their own on their free afternoons, about the large-scale activities of their husbands at such advanced evening hours?

In recent times they have begun to protest against these privileges of the male population. A man from Zurich has read the signs and founded a club for the protection of the interests of men.

A German proverb says that love goes through the stomach, but the love of the Swiss for the grande cuisine today goes through the electric pocket calculator. For just now they can buy over two French francs with one Swiss franc, and many of them therefore take a trip to the land of Escoffier to treat themselves, for a mere 50 Swiss francs, to a gala dinner that costs over 100 French francs.

They ought really to add the travelling expenses, the cost of a night in a hotel and breakfast and possibly lunch on the way back, but all these things are regarded as venial sins that need not be put through the portable computer.

While the Swiss thus undertake pilgrimages to France or to Italy, although they know that they can get a good meal at a reasonable price in their own country, the initiates at home and abroad are well aware that there have been a few Swiss restaurants for some years now that would easily deserve two or three Michelin stars if they were in France.

Unfortunately the stern judges of the Michelin guide only manage to penetrate into the fringes of this country, apparently because too few of their tyres are sold in Switzerland, and they have consequently not yet given Swiss chefs their due in all cases.

The writer of these lines has often thought of compiling a culinary guide to Switzerland himself but has been discouraged by the fact that he knows nothing at all about the

manufacture and the sale of tyres.

Even though the Swiss may not be entirely free of a few minor weaknesses, they are on the whole quite amiable folk, and it is therefore worthwhile for the visitor to get into personal contact with them. But how, when and where?

There are of course the conventional methods of making acquaintance, for instance on the dance-floor or on a bench in the park.

It is less advisable to try to start a conversation in a tram, for as the visitor will soon realise the Swiss – or at least the German-Swiss – hardly talk in trams, at most dropping a few uncomplimentary remarks about the weather. To break the silence timidly in a half-whisper would also be unwise, as it might be misunderstood.

The really safest plan is in fact to buy a bank or to found a club, say a club for amateur alphorn-blowers. The Swiss will then come to you.

For you to go to the Swiss – perhaps because you would like to see how they live – is admittedly a more complex undertaking. For this reason the tourist organisations of some of the bigger towns have started "Meet the Swiss" campaigns, and if you present yourself at the tourist office and say that you would like to meet an architect or a head gardener or simply a Swiss family, they can usually help you to do this.

In Zurich, for instance, you will be put in touch with a Zurcher – and the rest will be left to you and your hosts. It may be that they will show you round the town or invite you to a meal of the local speciality, *Geschnetzeltes mit Röstli*.

Don't expect them, however, to show you the fridge and the car, American fashion, and to invite you to help yourself. In fact, it might be that your hosts haven't got a car.

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