

Letter from Switzerland : It's much too late for many an Auntie Sophie

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"AUNT Sophie's little food-shop" is in danger of being pressurised out of existence by more and more giant shopping centres.

In 1960 some 20,733 retail food shops were registered in Switzerland, but in 1979 only 9,908 were left. This is quite an alarming trend towards gigantism in catering - alarming enough for several political parties as well as individual parliamentarians now trying to stop this development.

The reduction by 47 per cent in the number of small retail food shops is all the more alarming as the Swiss population has considerably increased during the two decades in question, and as the available sales space has also increased by one third.

It is now felt that such an enormous concentration is quite undesirable. For one thing small shops, particularly in villages where everyone knows everyone, have quite an important social function. They are a kind of centre of communication in a closely-knit village society.

It's much too late for many an Auntie Sophie

On the negative side some of the shopping centres in which one has to cover considerable distances and stand in long queues in front of cash desks are of distinct disadvantage to the elderly, the disabled and to all non-motorised customers.

One of the many shopping centres around Zürich proudly boasts parking space for 4,000 cars, and its very location is such that it cannot even be reached by public transport. This means that its existence induces the potential buyer to use petrol - at a time when one is constantly asked to use fuel economically.

For the still existing small retailer who is trying hard to

keep his family firm going, the boast about the 4,000 car spaces must be particularly galling, because he has a yearly battle with the police about space for two or three cars on the pavement in front of his shop.

To be alarmed about the appearance of more and more usually ugly shopping centres is one thing, but to be able to do something about it and arrest the present trend is quite another. As things are it seems to be easier to act on a cantonal rather than on a federal basis.

Thus a motion in the cantonal parliament of Zürich, brought in in spring 1980, has been

adopted against the resistance of the cantonal government. According to it the canton's law concerning planning and building has been modified in a sense which gives the authorities power to refuse planning and building permission for more shopping centres unless an urgent need for them can be proved.

But things have already progressed so far that during the eight years I have now been back in Switzerland I have - with great regret - seen quite a number of useful little local shops being squeezed out of existence.

Gottfried Keller

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