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Foreign Criticism of Switzerland

by Jean Rodolphe de Salis

One thing is certain: Switzerland used to be much praised and now is much criticised. Anyone concerned with Switzerland's foreign relations during the post-war period found his experiences and impressions confirmed in the *Weltwoche* articles. Anyone who has tried to make Switzerland's character, attitude, politics and culture understandable to foreigners, whether by means of lectures, articles of cultural events, or at scientific congresses and political conferences, knows that smile of politely sceptical incomprehension with which our efforts are met—not to mention the much more disparaging views about our country that people express in private conversations. Any anyone who is accustomed or professionally obliged to follow the foreign press knows that it either—indeed usually—prints nothing about Switzerland, or else something unpleasant. Little or nothing on politics, but lengthy stories about the typhoid epidemic at Zermatt, about the Jaccoud case, the Mirage affair, about xenophobia, incidents at Chiasso and naturally about ski and mountain-climbing accidents. And of course about international conferences in Geneva which usually have nothing to do with Switzerland, but are the slender link between us and the outside world of today.

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Swiss Smugness

To be offended at what was reported in the series of articles "Switzerland in Foreign Eyes" would be absurd. But a self-satisfied shrug of the shoulders at foreign incomprehension would be worse.

Besides we have nothing to complain about. What we ourselves say and write about other countries does not entitle us to be thin-skinned about foreign criticisms.

It is true our newspapers get little attention in foreign countries that do not use our language, and are seldom quoted under the heading of "Foreign Press Comment". But a notable anthology of Swiss smugness and presumption could be compiled from what our newspapers offer their public at home in the way of criticism of conditions abroad, of judgements on the policies of other countries, of homilies to foreign governments who in our view are doing their job badly. But we do not want to talk about this here, although it deserves to be pilloried.

And conversely we do not want to use foreign judgements to depreciate ourselves in our own sight and inflame our discontent, to the extent that we feel any, about our own failings and shortcomings. This series of articles was not published for that purpose. But in the foreigner's image of us we can and should find, as it were in reverse, what we ask of ourselves and our people, namely, a serious self-examination. Of course we should frankly correct a good many things that others get wrong about us, and replace stereotyped ideas about Switzerland by something closer to reality. But the foreigner deserves our attention whenever he touches on sensitive spots, especially those which represent virtues to us but failings to him, or where he discovers real weaknesses and sins which we cannot so easily brush off. The foreigner says indeed (in Belgium) that we are "clean, punctual, reliable, prosperous, successful and self-satisfied." Why shouldn't we just forget the last three words and stick to the first three as we check over our appearance in foreign mirrors, and, all clean, punctual and reliable, see how we strike others?

A Century's Leave

First and foremost we must note that Switzerland constitutes no problem for other countries. Here things go on in a normal and orderly way. Our country plays no part in international politics and has no influence. Switzerland as a historical and cultural entity has not entered the foreigner's consciousness.

History, says the German, has granted Switzerland a century's leave. We would like to be recognised as, so to speak, the heart of Europe, since we are in the middle of the continent, surrounded by great nations whose languages we speak. But this is a pious illusion that our neighbours do not share. The conclusion we are forced to draw from foreign judgements is that no use is made of our unusual situation, of the mission that could be linked with it, of the real services we could

render thanks to our policy of remaining unfettered by alliances and partisanship, or of the world-wide connections and cosmopolitanism we owe to our diversity of languages and our economic activity.

Even our cultural achievements, which are not so few, do not seem to be considered by us as means to the whole nation's active participation in the great intellectual, moral and artistic exchanges of our time. The two most famous Swiss, Frisch and Durrenmatt, are outsiders for the intellectual life of Switzerland, as C. G. Jung was, and abroad they are celebrated as great writers and dramatists of the German language. In his lecture tour of America Karl Barth spellbinds thousands as no Swiss ever did before, but our press takes no note of it. Giacometti's exhibition in London is the great artistic event of the summer in England, but in Zurich he is rejected. Le Corbusier is world-famous, but he, like Cendrars and Honegger before him, like Giacometti now, had to go to France to gain recognition. In the life of nations, political events and crises, the names of statesmen, the alternations of the fat and the lean kine in economic affairs, are all transient and soon-forgotten things. It is the achievements of the mind that count for a nation, its thinkers, its art, its writers, its composers, its science. But it seems that our people make all too little account of these very things, in which we are certainly not wanting, when the country's fame is in consideration.

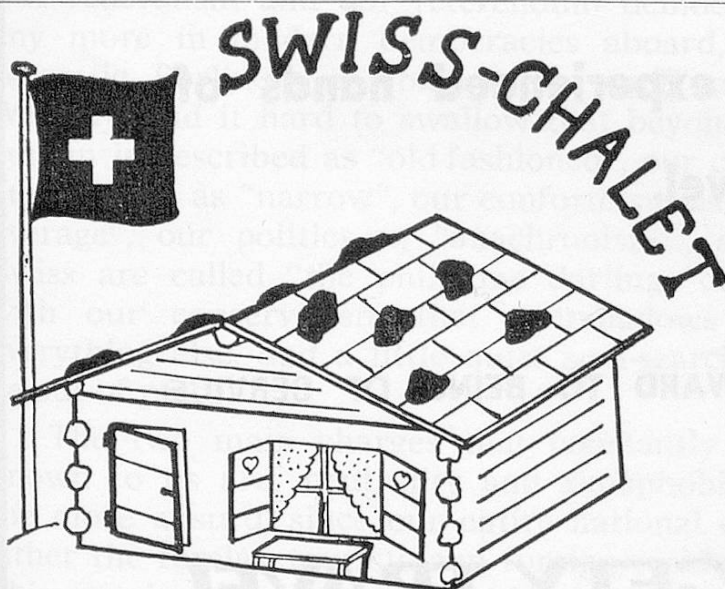
For this reason we do not appear in foreign eyes as primarily a nation that has always made its contribution to civilisation and still does.

The Gnomes of Zurich

Significantly it is the Swiss citizen's interest, in money that, without exception, takes first place in the views of foreign countries, as ascertained by the contributors to *Die Weltwoche*. The old saying, *Pas d'argent, pas de Suisses*, which dates from the time of Swiss mercenary service abroad, seems still to be, or to have again become, the most striking characteristic of the Swiss in foreign eyes. Among ourselves we know that generations of Swiss have made a rich country out of one that was poor by nature. We know that our neutrality does not derive from the desire to make money. We know that we have not kept out of the wars of the last 150 years in order to profit from the misfortunes of other peoples. But it is very difficult to make the foreigner change his views in this matter. Of course there is a touch of envy. But surely not in the case of the American who remarks in a publication of Columbia University, New York: "there would be no exaggeration in thinking of Switzerland as a great business concern . . . when it was a question of turning new ideas into hard cash, the Swiss displayed a genius, a degree of audacity and stubbornness such as could hardly be found in any other country." The Frenchman believes we "founded a bank on Europe's disasters" and the Belgian thinks that while he too loves money, he is not as avaricious and mean

as the Swiss. This reproach of greed and avarice recurs again and again in one form or another.

It is difficult to convince the foreigner that while it is true that the enrichment of Switzerland is a result of neutrality and freedom from war, Switzerland is not neutral in order to become rich. As everyone knows the much-discussed bank secrecy, which is often held against us, is seen abroad as connected with our neutrality. Since we cannot deny that our country provides a highly discreet haven for money in flight from abroad, the criticism on this point is understandable. But I would be inclined to agree with Martin Hurlimann that in this controversy about bank secrecy "the arguments are more moral than the motives." It is well known that Zurich's banking policy so exasperated a British minister concerned with economic affairs that he was betrayed into hostile remarks about our bankers. Since the last war the tone in Britain in regard to us has been far from pleasant and the reason is clear to anyone who was in a position to know about the last war. Hence the complaints of former members of the British embassy in Berne, hence too the indignation of government circles at Swiss criticism of the 15 per cent surcharge on imports into Britain. To the British this emergency measure was not primarily an infringement of the EFTA agreement, but a bitter necessity in defending sterling. When the Swiss of all people, who got rich during the war, cast reproaches at Britain, which was bled white and has still not recovered from the over-exertions of the war, the British call to mind



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their unhappy memories of Switzerland's wartime attitude. When the British call us "gnomes" they mean to say that we are the last people to have any moral right to criticise the British import surcharge. There is a note of disappointed love, greater than in those of others, in comments from Britain, which went as far as the wisecrack in a B.B.C. satirical broadcast that: "If Switzerland did not exist, there would be no need to invent such remarks with enough sense of humour."

An Ageing Democracy

What is striking is that two things of which we are especially proud, our national defence and the Red Cross, are obviously not perceived at all by foreign eyes. An enquiry made by Radio Beromunster through its foreign correspondents — it was a broadcast anyone could hear— showed that the average Frenchman, Briton and Italian did not know that Switzerland has an army. Our familiar conception of "armed neutrality" is generally speaking not understood. As far as humanitarian assistance is concerned it is taken for granted, though not entirely without the suspicion that "it is tinged with business motives and self-interest" (Britain). Perhaps we have sometimes not sufficiently observed the Gospel teaching that the left hand should not know what the right hand is doing.

Our democracy no longer seems as attractive as it used to do. It is merely felt to be queer. The result is that of all our institutions almost the only one that is known is the disfranchisement of women. Our federalism and our referendum democracy are hardly understood any more in modern democracies abroad, and are described by the sarcastic Berliners as "backwoods stuff" and "beer-table democracy". We may find it hard to swallow that beyond our frontiers our political system is described as "old-fashioned", our character as "too bourgeois", our outlook as "narrow", our conformism as "directed to the respectable average", our politics as "anachronistic", and in Austria, indeed, the Swiss are called "the philistine darlings of fate". All this has to do with our conservatism that overshadows and sometimes paralyses everything else, and a little quiet soul-searching on our part would not be out of place.

The two main charges that constantly recur and have long been known to us are: neutrality and xenophobia. The latter charge is all the more absurd, since our entire national economy cannot do without either the foreign tourists and foreign residents, or the foreign workers. This requires an article to itself, and many will certainly still have to be written on this subject. It was news to me, as the *Neu Zürcher Zeitung* recently reported, that in letters to the editor of the paper, anti-Semitic remarks are occurring again, and that *Austandschweizer* (expatriate Swiss) is being used as a term of abuse. What do our people think they are doing, when they write like that? Since these xenophobic expressions and attitudes are steadily increasing, it is no wonder that foreigners begin to have doubts about our humane principles

and consider us as "fallen angels", as they do in Italy.

Neutrality, too, is a big subject, since foreign countries, at any rate those in the West, the only ones covered by the *Weltwoche*, will not buy our blend of "neutrality and solidarity." The West finds, on the contrary, that we show no solidarity, that we belong to the West, certainly, but are not disposed to do anything for it.

I have never considered Swiss neutrality as out of date or mistaken. But I have always believed this neutrality could only have meaning if it really became a mediator between the various worlds of the West, the East, and the developing countries, that is, if it were universal and generally valid, objective in judgement, factual and useful in approach. Then there would be no justification for the American remark that "the disappearance of Switzerland would not mean much to the rest of the world." If this American meant that the outside world no longer seems greatly interested in the Swiss mission in intellectual and moral fields, this severe judgement could be just the thing to turn our attention to those spheres which we have far too much neglected, and to make us attempt to recover among the peoples of Europe and the world the importance that Switzerland once had. Switzerland could reconquer it again, amid the greatly changed conditions of the present time, if our people made a great effort to rise out of the trough of foreign criticism to a higher valuation in the eyes of other countries.

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