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AN ENGLISHMAN'S OBSERVATIONS ON SWISS BUSINESS LIFE.

By R. A. LANGFORD, Zurich.

(Member of the Efficiency Club Zurich)
(Continuation).

Strange though it may seem, the Swiss business man has numerous advantages over those of other nations. True, his country is small and his public therefore restricted, but this very smallness, nowadays at any rate, is as much an asset as anything else, for it eliminates to a great extent the element of risk where the home market is concerned, and even if Switzerland were three times as large as she is, she would still be forced to export — to cater, that is, for the foreign market. But being small, she is forced, in commerce as in almost every other department of life, to let her big sisters lead the way. She allows them to experiment and make mistakes, herself profiting by their experience. Her business men, on their travels, look around for the new and successful in other countries, follow up the fashions and crazes in vogue elsewhere, and, knowing the tastes and requirements of their public to a "T," appropriate and adapt to their needs the most suitable. What these tastes and requirements are, it would lead too far to describe, though it would be possible to enumerate, tabulate and classify them like the articles in a catalogue, so defined are they and so uniform is the public in this respect. Moreover, what one layer of the public can afford, the others also buy, even if more everyday expenses have to be cut down for a time to make up for the outlay.

Behind all this there is a *State*, financially and politically sound, working and helping to quite an extraordinary degree in the interests of the business man, conscious that what Switzerland lacks in size and power must be made up for in commercial reputation. Curiously enough, however, the spirit which saved millions for Britain with the "Bury British" slogan is conspicuously lacking in the Swiss public, patriotic though the latter is in other respects. The reason for this lies perhaps in the fact that the essentially Swiss products are without serious competition anyway, owing to their superlative quality, while the newly-developed industries do not quite come up to the scratch as yet. That "commercial patriotism" is lacking, however, was clearly proved when the Franc was depreciated.

The Swiss business man drives a *hard bargain*; he makes no allowances or concessions for extenuating circumstances, yet always expects them from others — and especially from the foreigner, who is led to believe that here in "poor little Switzerland," surrounded by big, bullying brothers, it must be a hard struggle to make both ends meet. But one point must be emphasised: when the foreigner is a visitor to the country in a private capacity, he gets as fair a deal in shop, hotel or consulting room as the Swiss himself. That is perhaps the greatest difference between the treatment of guests in Switzerland and in other countries. It tells of the fundamental honesty of the nation as a whole.

Switzerland is rich, even in these times of stagnation. Her population is thrifty, efficient and shrewd. They are not afraid of *hard work*, which is respected as in few other countries, but it must be amply rewarded. The shopkeeper, for instance, prefers a larger profit on fewer articles than a smaller profit on a greater quantity; he turns up his nose at deals that many another would jump at. But the country is over-commercialised as well as over-industrialised. Almost every block of flats has a number of shops on the ground-floor, and competition is becoming keener and keener. Yet expensive foreign motor-cars are still imported in considerable numbers — and sold, for the latest models may be seen at the kerbstones of the main street of any fair-sized town.

And the more difficult times become, the more suspicious and cautious is the Swiss business man. As already indicated, the small man especially takes it for granted that he will be cheated at the first opportunity; or if he has confidence in your integrity, he still makes sure that there will be no chance of your taking advantage of him. To do smooth business with him, therefore, it is necessary to eliminate the vague, the indefinite, the "human" element, to know what you want, see that you get it, and fulfil your side of the bargain to the letter. Even *friendship* has no place in this sphere, and suffers a complete eclipse. When friends have to communicate with each other on a business matter friendship is temporarily forgotten, and they write as complete strangers. A few years ago, on taking over the management of a large English manufacturing concern, an Englishman started paying the usual formal calls on the Swiss firms his books told him had been his predecessor's best customers. The object of these visits was only to make the necessary acquaintances so that future dealings

with these clients would be put on a personal and friendly footing, in the best English tradition. Judge of his surprise when he was received in each case with open suspicion, sometimes not even being asked to take a seat. It took him three calls to each of his clients to convince them that he really only wished to make their acquaintance and find out "how things were going," and not to sell them something or raise his prices. And even then, for a long time afterwards, they looked on him as eccentric and unbusinesslike. — It is typical that in Switzerland the *humorous form of advertisement* is almost unknown; for, though humour in other countries sells more beer and motor-spirit and soap and sardines than does any other style of publicity, yet in Switzerland buying and selling is too serious a matter to make jokes about, unless it be a question of a corn-cure or something equally frivolous.

One thing has impressed me more than all others about the Swiss business man: the *promptness with which he attends to small matters* — his readiness to oblige. A letter to a firm, whether the contents is of immediate interest or not, elicits a reply, signed by somebody who matters, without the slightest delay. It is in the nature of things that the foreigner, his best customer, has priority. (If I wish to ask a favour, or to secure immediate attention, I always write my business letters in English). At any rate, I have yet to come across a Swiss firm negligent or even slow in answering an inquiry, regardless of whether a direct profit or advantage is likely to accrue therefrom. Nobody can deny the politeness, efficiency and sensible organisation of any good English firm, but still their tardiness in dealing with inquiries, orders — or, indeed, any business matter — originating on the Continent, leaves something to be desired. The home market comes first, the foreigner afterwards — a fact which the foreigner knows, and resents.

It will always remain a puzzle to me that Switzerland, usually so ready to adopt any really practical idea pertaining to business and commercial life, has not long ago realised the advantages of the so-called "*English*" *week-end and arrangement of the working-day*. In England the Saturday afternoon is everywhere devoted to sport and those functions generally held on Sunday on the Continent. As regards business the difference between the two systems is that the Englishman must of necessity turn up to work on Monday morning rested and refreshed after his idle Sunday, which has cancelled the effects of his strenuous Saturday afternoon and evening; while the Continental is hardly at his best when he begins his working week, still suffering as he is from the after-effects of an over-indulgent Sabbath. Again, a heavy midday meal is hardly conducive to a clear brain and a maximum of effort, physical or mental, during the afternoon. Besides this, the allotment of two whole hours for the single purpose of eating is obviously more than the most confirmed glutton is likely to require, and has to be made up for in the evenings by working longer than we do in England.

The "*English*" system has, of course, been tried out by a few Swiss firms, but it is easy to picture the resistance offered to it. For, even if it found favour generally among employers, the older generation would hardly welcome such an innovation, which would disturb the whole daily round and interfere with the habits of decades. Father likes his little nap after lunch before returning to the office, and Mother is only

too glad to get the principal meal of the day over and done with, besides which it would not be convenient to have Father coming home from business every day an hour or so earlier than before, and hanging about the house and making a nuisance of himself. So the younger generation has a completely useless hour to spare at midday, and does not get away from the office in the evening until it is almost too dark for a game of tennis, or for any other activity that needs daylight.

In commercial as well as in private life the thorough, characteristic *cleanliness* of Switzerland is all-pervading. A butcher's shop or a hairdressing saloon in the most out-of-the-way village compares favourably in this respect with even the smartest establishments in the towns and cities of other countries. The cheapest inn, hotel or restaurant can be depended upon for cleanliness. Dust, litter and shabbiness are dealt with as being what they really are — unappetizing, unhygienic, the enemies of healthy mental and physical existence. It is not only good business, it is the natural instinct of a people who, even the most poverty-stricken, refuse to live in slums. Indeed, the word does not exist in their language. The oldest quarters of the oldest towns, where some of the buildings, separated from each other by narrow streets or lanes, have stood unchanged for centuries, show no evidence of squalor or unhygienic living conditions. The authorities are strict and watchful, but they are almost superfluous, for the people, one and all, need no incentive to cleanliness and hygiene. In this there is not a race in Europe to come up to them.

All this, together with a certain doggedness and canny shrewdness without which nobody has a chance of survival in Swiss commercial life, completes the picture. Great though the influence of American business methods has been, the Swiss business man and the Swiss buying public remain types apart, whom none but a Swiss himself can understand thoroughly.

The End.

SWISS YOUNG MENS CHRISTIAN ASSOCIATION.

(50th Anniversary Programme: May 14th-19th,
1938.)

May 14th, 7.30 p.m. At Westgate House; Reception of Old Members and Friends from Switzerland, by Members and Wives of the Swiss Y.M.C.A., London.

May 15th, 11 a.m. Service at Swiss Church (St. Anne's and St. Agnes), Gresham Street, E.C.2., Preacher Rev. D. Witzig from Aarau.
May 15th, 4.30 p.m. Public Jubilee Meeting, with Delegates, at Westgate House.

May 19th, 7 p.m. Bible Study with Old Members from Switzerland. Introduction by Secretary, A. Emile Wirz, of Olten.

May 19th, 8.30 p.m. Farewell Meeting with Refreshments.

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