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JEAN RODOLPHE VON SALIS



Jean Rodolphe von Salis

If you require who are the ten best-known and most meritorious Swiss of our times, most of those consulted both at home and abroad would certainly mention Prof. von Salis. Yet he neither sat in Parliament nor on the Federal Council. He taught history at the Federal Institute of Technology in Zurich for a third of a century and distinguished himself as influential publicist and as leading adviser on questions of Swiss culture.

The Publicist and the "World Chronicler" on the Radio

J. R. von Salis comes from an old Grisons family and was born in Berne, the son of a doctor. He finished his studies by publishing two volumes on the far-sighted Geneva economist and historian Simonde de Sismondi who lived in the early nineteenth century. During his Paris years already, Dr. von Salis was outstanding as correspondent of Swiss papers. His thesis was the essential qualification for his call as historian of French language to the ETH in Zurich in 1935. During the passionately turbulent second half of the 'thirties, the politics of the dictators put many values in question, and one expected an answer from the historians as to what was of lasting value in our State, and in what way a minor State could contribute to the political culture of our contemporary world. Prof. von Salis, too, put his sharp powers of observation, his feeling for correlation and his responsibility towards his country and the world to proof: he became "World Chronicler" on the Swiss Radio.

Thousands of Swiss families vividly remember the Friday evenings on Radio Beromuenster during the second world war, and the familiar voice of a clear-sighted compatriot who, between 7.10 7.25 p.m., described the world situation from his point of view. How did he see things? Where was there a glimmer of hope on the horizon obscured by brown-black clouds? "Von Salis said . . ." one heard next morning on the way to work, again and again.

Later one learned that his world chronicles had even more listeners abroad, although tuning in to Radio Beromuenster was most dangerous in totalitarian States. But thousands were eager to hear the truth from a country where words were not twisted and science was not politically co-ordinated. The Federal Council in no way instructed Prof. von Salis when it asked the scholar in the spring of 1940 to inform listeners once a week on the world situation. When the "World Chronicler", reduced to one-third, appeared as a book five years ago, the

author was able to confess: "My radio transmissions were in no way officially inspired. I received no hints from the "Federal Palace", no advice and no information. Neither had I any contact with the Army".

The Chronicler stood for freedom and human dignity, and he was deeply averse to the "demoniacal aspect of power". His weapon was the striking word. "Analysis is the best controversy", said Franz Werfel. Only too gladly would the National Socialists have replaced the uncomfortable man by a more accommodating one. But the Swiss authorities realised the resistance value of his voice, which corresponded to the mission of our neutral country.

Historian of our time

Prof. von Salis experienced that history and present time could be in fruitful reciprocal action. The publicist was not to be disconcerted by daily events, because, as an historian, he could see the permanent features of the centuries, and his alert grasp of the present animated his understanding of the correlation of historical forces in the past. This is the reason why he wished every historian "that he should be given a chance to comment publicly on history in the making".

His own field of research comprised mainly the last hundred years. Guiseppe Motta was born in 1871 and was a member of the Federal Council from 1911 to 1940. Prof. von Salis dedicated a biography to him with the subtitle "Thirty years of Federal Politics". His true life-work "World History of the most recent Times" also begins with 1871. It covers the period from the Franco-German War to the end of the Second World War and was published in three volumes in 1951, 1955 and 1961. One may say that the magnificent work serves as an encyclopaedia thanks to its register. Except that it does not put off the reader with a few key-words, but allows him to delve logically into the past. Is it surprising, therefore, to wish that the scholar should present history up to the present in a fourth volume?

On relinquishing his university teaching, J. R. von Salis began to study the relationship between "History and Politics". He knew that with all conscientiousness of scientific research, it was impossible to achieve a purely objective understanding of the past. In our thoughts concerning the matter, as well as in the written form of any findings (von Salis calls this an art), our own person is always involved. History and

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