

Swiss Democracy [continued]

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SWISS DEMOCRACY.2. DEMOCRATIC CELLS.

1 Under the heading "Joint forest and pasture-land property" follows a description of the Alp Corporation of the district of Schwyz.

"Older than the Swiss confederation is the market co-operative society of Schwyz. Long before the confederation existed, the peasants of Schwyz were joint owners of forests and pasture-land which they worked in common, co-operatively. Out of the market co-operative society grew the co-operative society, collective owner of a common, still existing now, under the name of 'Oberallmein Corporation of the District of Schwyz'. Like a museum piece it deserves to be contemplated with awe, and veneration. But it is much more than that, since it is still alive today, still rendering indispensable economical services both to the country and its inhabitants, faithful to the old sound principles.

Professor Gmur, who has expert knowledge of old co-operative societies, writes on this topic: "Law historians and political economists have at all times pointed to the fact that Switzerland is the country of corporations par excellence, particularly market and pasture-land co-operative societies. Nowhere else is there to be found such a comparatively large number of co-operative societies, which can look back on so remarkable a past and even now keep firmly to their place in the sun.

Here we have the result of an original, so-called "mark of a hundred-ship" (community of a hundred people) which has pertinently been called the "original cell" of the Swiss confederation, for on such a principle has grown the old state of Schwyz which took the initiative and the lead in the early days of the Swiss confederation. In a community that is so vigorous politically, neither the levelling influence of land-ownership nor the Roman right has been able to break up the rich inner life of the co-operative society, and even to this day this is manifest in practical forms of development, a picture of which is elsewhere only to be reconstructed from medieval documents".

On the "Oberallmein" (highland common) - the higher pasturages extend to altitudes of up to 7546 feet - as many as 7000 heads of horned cattle and as many sheep and goats besides can graze during the summer months. The public roads crossing the estate of the "Oberallmein" alone measure about 43.5 miles. The value of all this property is estimated to be about £ 376,000 or \$1,500,000 whilst in case of a sale it would probably fetch double".

The landed estate of this corporation is the joint property of some 5900 citizens, all members of the co-operative society, who belong to 94 families with old, venerable names. Outsiders are not admitted, not even against payment. There is no danger of this stock of robust farmer families dying out; the number of "Oberallmein" members is rather increasing than declining.

The "Oberallmein" member is entitled to a certain quantity of wood, and that, according to time-honoured rules, partly free of charge, partly at auction prices. Special consideration is bestowed on associates in poor circumstances, especially those living in outlying parishes. Then again the "Oberallmein" members living within the district of Schwyz may claim to have their cattle grazing on the common in summer.

Every two years, in the ring at Ibach, the corporation members hold their general meeting, which opens with music, with an address and the Lord's prayer said three times. Then they deal with the regular business (road making, building of huts etc.) whereupon the elections take place.

If debating in this ring sometimes appears somewhat reckless, it must be remembered that on these occasions many a peasant has won his rhetorical spurs. The "Oberallmein" is a little state within the state. But it is also the citizen's training ground where he prepares himself for his future political activity. From the time of his youth the "Oberallmein" member finds himself placed in the midst of the associates' intensive communal life.

When, in 1933, an associate made, at one of these general meetings, the rebellious proposal to dissolve the time-honoured corporation and to share out to each member his quota of forest, pasture-land and money, he found himself defeated by a thundering opposition. On that occasion every one became aware of the corporation's utility both to himself and to the country. The leader's position regarding that proposal was then recorded as follows:

"The fate of the country and its people shall be decided and conducted on sound principles. What has stood fast for centuries and is equally useful today, shall neither be torn to pieces nor demolished. The "Oberallmein" was in existence before the foundation of the Swiss confederation, it was the foundation stone and the incessant source of Swiss liberty. It is a source still from which all may draw, whenever united strength is required and a special effort to be made for the community's sake.

The proposed distribution was vigorously rejected by the assembly. Thus the "Oberallmein" corporation which has stood its test for seven centuries will continue to exist, a blessing for the country and its inhabitants and evidence of the magnificent endurance of time-honoured democratic institutions".

Water-conduit Supervision in the Valais.

2. The water conduits (called "bisses") which have, from the remotest time, irrigated the dry mountainsides of the Valais and thus rendered cultivation of this large valley and its side-valleys at all possible, are well-known. The parish of Ernen furnishes an example of these water-conduits having been the motive of manifold and unique unions of individuals.

"Within the bounds of the parish of Ernen there are in all eight water-conduits. Each has a name of its own and its peculiarities. One is the property of an individual farmer, another (the 'Dorferai') that of the parish and the remaining six that of corporate bodies, i.e. of very old communalities similar to co-operative societies, which still exist, which maintain the water-conduits co-operatively and apportion the claim to the water, in accordance with ancient rules by the hour and the minute. Each of these corporations which have their own old laws, has also its own books, its own warden and, if any one cared to trace it, no doubt a century-old history.

What an amazing variety! Not enough that Switzerland consists of 25 cantons, each comprising hundreds of autonomous parishes. Any one of these villages may possess some eight water-conduits each the core of a community akin to subdivisions of the parish. And these corporations - a particularly moving reflection in these days - keep alive, unflinchingly, and outlast centuries while some dictators, after having promised an empire to their peoples, are overthrown and a Reich meant to last a thousand years, crumbles".

A few examples show according to what rules abutters may avail themselves of the water-conduits and how they have to repair these in joint effort, on a certain day in spring. The administration of these small corporate bodies is exceedingly simple. "Besides the warden who is manager, supervisor, president, treasurer and secretary, all in one person and who draws a yearly remuneration of some 10/- or \$2,-, there is no other function; a meeting of all the members as a rule only takes place for the purpose of squaring the accounts. Nor is there a statute-book. The rules are preserved by tradition, except for a few casual notes in writing, in this era of paper! Nevertheless the water distribution works accurately day after day, hour after hour, in many a place exactly to the minute".

The City Guild.

3. In the town of Berne the craft-guilds have preserved themselves so well that, up to this day, they assume, as subdivisions of the borough corporation, public functions of the civil law. The guilds are old corporate bodies to which one is admitted by virtue of being a member of certain families, i.e. one is born a guild-member. Only exceptionally and against payment of several thousands of francs may outsiders be received. The means obtained from the ancestry, which are invested in guild-houses and other real estate or in securities, constitute

the guild's stock and allow in particular for relief of the poor and to assume the guardianship among the guild-members.

The membership of the Bernese guilds varies between about 160 and some 1400. Where, as a rule, a large rigid municipal administration would exercise its authority and power, the said functions are taken care of within the smaller circle of guild-members. These know one another from childhood when, on occasion of the guild's annual festivity, they meet at the "innere Enge", where Bernese buns are served, joyful games are played and every child may chose a present from a table laden with a wealth of gifts. Boys may receive scholarships. When, on coming of age, the young man attends at the general meeting and has to make his maiden speech - he realises the fact that he is a member of a small democratic community which, though subject to the changes of the time, has, true to tradition, done its duty for centuries and in closer human and personal touch than would be possible to a large administration.

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De Kantonsroht.

Im Schwyzerlændli isch halt schoeh
do haemmer zwöezwaenzg Kantoeh
ond üuseri Vorvaeter, die alte
haend no drüü Kantoenli g'spalte
So isch, wie die Sach bishuet no stoht,
ond jedes haet en grosse Roth
Drom isch es i üüsere Schwyz so nett
wo jede 5te Maa aes Aemtli haett
Treffst eine aa, ond weisst noed wie ner heisst
tuest am beste, wenn d'ohm Herr
Kantonsroht seist.

A. Moosberger

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SUNDRY NEWS FROM SWITZERLAND.

In place of the previously elected Prof. Hug of Zurich, who subsequently declined the honour, Nat. Counc. Kurt R. Dürby has been appointed a Federal Judge by the two Houses in a joint session; he obtained 112 votes against the 83 of his liberal opponent, Dr. W. Geerig, who is an official at the Federal Court. Judge Dürby, a socialist, is a well-known Zurich lawyer noted for his expert treatment of refugee problems. His place in the National Council will be taken by another socialist, Hermann Oldani, a leading figure in the Zurich labour movement who has already been a member of our second chamber from 1928 to 1934.

Prof. Dr. Hunziker died in Zurich at the age of 77. He was the dynamic force in the cultural life of Winterthur. A scientist, an acknowledged authority on literature and a prolific chronicler of Swiss authors and poets he displayed an active and leading interest in musical manifestations of the town.

Standerat Julius Bühler died unexpectedly in Schaffhausen at the age of 56; he belonged to the upper chamber since 1943 and was also a member of the Grosse Rat of Schaffhausen.

The sickness insurance fund in Basle which is on a voluntary basis and open to everybody has now reached a membership of 120,477 out of a total population of 176,636. After many years of adversity the accounts for last year closed with a surplus of about 750,000 francs.

Former Nat. Counc. Richard Zschokke died at the age of 82 at his home in Gontenschwil (Aargau). Apart from military works in the St. Gotthard region his name remains identified with the construction of the Jungfrau railway.

Maurice Köchlin died near Montreux at the age of 90. An Alsatian by birth, a citizen of Zurich and a graduate of the ETH he is reputed to have contrived and designed the plans of the Eiffel tower which was built for the Paris exhibition in 1889.