

Switzerland's economic situation in the middle of 1951

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Near Bellinzona is the valley of Verzasca, a lonely and wild gorge, through which flows the turbulent river of the same name. An excellent motor road leads through solitary and austere villages up to Sonogno, which lies at the head of the valley and is a good fishing centre. Most of the people in the valley have that stern, weather-beaten look, which comes from the constant fight with the elements in this isolated region. The winter is so rough that the greater part of the inhabitants are forced down into the plains.

North of Bellinzona is the village of Giornico, which boasts the early Christian basilica of San Nicolao. This remarkable structure is a small but beautiful example of early Church architecture, with its Romanesque walls and arches, its sacrificial altar and its carved lions. It is the finest and most interesting building of its kind in the Tessin.

We now come to the conclusion of our endeavours in depicting various interesting aspects of our Fatherland and we terminate with a summing up of Switzerland, as expressed by a well-known English writer and admirer of our land and people: "The Swiss are proud of their country. They like to hear it praised. To give them their due they are glad to share it with the foreigner, and the motive is not simply a mercenary one, as institutions like the Pestalozzi village in Trogen, and as the wonderful hospitality extended again and again to the stranger and the refugees, have proved so often. When going there we observe with admiration a civilised, a pleasing and amiable people whose amiability lies largely in the absence of strain, a people who know nothing of that bitterness which results from privation and misery. Switzerland has been built up out of the strength of certain convictions bred into the very soul of the nation, and by her willingness to learn. She has managed to avoid falling into a pit of unprincipled greed in which the unscrupulous pursuit of wealth tends to end. Deterioration threatens Switzerland just as it threatens all nations, but so long as she clings to her ancient virtues she is safer than most."

SWITZERLAND'S ECONOMIC SITUATION IN THE MIDDLE OF 1951

In spite of certain rather pessimistic prognoses, economic activity in Switzerland continues at a high level. The American recession whose repercussions, it was feared, would be felt all over the world, was much less serious than expected and its effects were hardly felt at all in Europe.

Not only has the activity of Swiss industry as a whole been maintained at a high level, but in many fields it has even been increased. This was the case, in particular, in the cotton industry, where the employment index has risen 29 points in the space of a year, from 111 to 140, and in the embroidery industry, which continues to work full time and has more orders on its books than it has ever had during recent years. Since the end of last year there has been a marked improvement in the chemical industry as well as in the paper, leather and rubber industries, in the timber industry in general and in all the trades dependent on the building industry. The metal and machine industries, which are so important in Switzerland, are working to full output. Towards the end of 1953, there was a slight falling off in orders, the only effect of which actually was to shorten the delivery dates, which were admittedly rather long. But during the second quarter of the year this industry, for the first time since June, 1950, recorded a slight increase in the number of orders.

The situation is therefore good on the whole; this however does not mean that there are not black spots in the picture. Throughout the watch-making industry the employment index has fallen during the last year from 132 to 109 (1938 equals 100). As this is one of the leading industries of the country, there is no denying the seriousness of this decrease. President Eisenhower's recent decision to raise the import duty on watches has increased the fears felt for the immediate future of this industry, for the United States, which receives on an average 12 per cent. of our exports, absorbs a third of them where watches are concerned.

In the field of textiles, the silk and rayon industry shows a slight falling off as compared with the second quarter of 1953, while the wool textile industry is even below its employment index for 1938. Although the activity of the clothing industry also shows a slight falling off as compared with last year, it nevertheless continues at a comparatively high level.

One of the main factors contributing to the maintenance of the period of great industrial activity in Switzerland is certainly the present boom in the building industry. During the first half of 1954, the number of houses built in Switzerland exceeded that for the same period last year by a quarter. The number of applications for permits to build, which also exceeds the figures for last year, leads us to believe that this intense activity will continue. There is also an appreciable increase in building for industry.

The number of visitors staying in hotels, in spite of the rather inclement weather, was somewhat greater than that of last year. This had its effect on the number of passengers on the railways which was 3.6 per cent. greater during

the second half of this year than the same period of last year. Goods traffic follows the general trend of the situation and exceeds the tonnage for 1953 by 6.8 per cent.

Switzerland's foreign trade remains very active. During the first half of the year imports increased by one-tenth as compared with 1953, thus once more causing an adverse balance of trade which last year, exceptionally, was a favourable one. Exports have continued at a more or less the same high figure as 1953. But there have been appreciable changes in the relative importance of markets and in the nature of these exports. Swiss exports to the United States, for example, have dropped 30 per cent. compared with the first half of 1953. This drop is compensated for by the increased exports to other countries, particularly Germany. Exports of watches have fallen off by 7.8 per cent., but this loss is offset by the exports of other branches of the metal industry and by those of the chemical and pharmaceutical industries.

In conclusion, it may be asserted that although a few fields of Swiss economy are meeting with difficulties, that it is hoped are only temporary, the prospect for Swiss industry as a whole is quite satisfactory. Of course it has to face increased competition, both at home and abroad. Prices, delivery dates, terms of payment and credit and the quality of products play an increasingly important role in the struggle for markets. But Switzerland has always demanded liberal principles in the matter of trade, and is not afraid of such struggle.

WHAT IS THE AREA OF SWITZERLAND?

During the last thirty years, Switzerland has shrunk—by some 1740 acres to be precise. This strange and unexpected phenomenon is due above all to certain adjustments made in the frontier with Italy and to the correction of errors discovered in previous surveys. Leaving out of consideration the parts of the country where the frontier is still not exactly defined, on the Lake of Geneva and the Lake of Constance, Swiss sovereignty at present extends over a territory of an area of 15,880 sq. miles. If, for the two lakes in question, we take the same area as that recorded during the 1923 surveys, the total area of the country amounts to 16,080 sq. miles.

The booklet issued by the Federal Statistics Bureau on the area of Switzerland in 1952 gives complete details concerning the size of Switzerland, its cantons and communes, the area of its forests and of its productive and unproductive land. The total area of the productive land amounts to 3,155,367 hectares (1 hectare equals 2.47 acres), of which 980,654 are covered with forests, bushes and undergrowth.

However, of the productive land remaining once the wooded area has been deducted, 750,000 to

850,000 hectares are situated at an altitude where it is difficult to gain access to them and where the productivity of the soil is so small that they can only be used as pasture land, if at all. No less than 45.62 per cent. of the total area of the country is at an altitude of 4000 feet or over.

Leaving aside this part of the country to consider only areas with a normal productivity, it must be agreed that Switzerland is one of the most densely populated countries in Europe.

Aluminium Industry in Switzerland

The Societe anonyme pour l'industrie de l'aluminium, recently opened the doors of its plant at Chippis to the Press of French-speaking Switzerland, thus making it possible for its representatives to become familiar with this important undertaking, which was established at the end of the last century.

It was in 1892, as a matter of fact, that the first laboratory for aluminium was created at Neuhausen, near Schaffhausen. Fifteen years later, the new company erected a big factory at Chippis, provided with its own hydro-electric plants.

Today, the plant at Chippis employs nearly 2000 workmen and employees. It produces raw aluminium, various kinds of alloys, and semi-manufactured products such as sheet-iron, iron bands, circular plates, sections, tubes, and aluminium powder which is used both for painting purposes and for pyrotechnics, and also aluminium paper.

At the present time, the Societe anonyme pour l'industrie de l'aluminium constitutes a holding company, which comprises no less than 44 companies, of which fourteen are in Switzerland and thirty abroad. It is in a position to carry out all the processes of fabrication, beginning with the extraction of bauxite and ending with semi-manufactured products. The raw metal is produced in four plants, both Swiss and foreign, to the amount of 100,000 tons of aluminium per year.

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