

Switzerland's problem : seventeen per cent of its population are foreigners. Part II

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SWITZERLAND'S PROBLEM:

Seventeen Per Cent of Its Population Are Foreigners

By Kurt Muller

PART II

This article by a national news editor of the *Neue Zurcher Zeitung* discusses the problems confronting the Swiss people and Government as a result of the enormous increase of the number of foreign workers—mostly Italian—in their country due to the great and rapid expansion of the economy in recent years.

Difficulties of Assimilation

The optimum limit to the acceptance of foreign workers has the more obviously been exceeded as the assimilation of the foreigners now in Switzerland clearly meets with many difficulties.

In contrast to the period before the first World War the new foreigners, most of them from southern countries, have mixed little, if at all, with the Swiss population—a fact which on the one hand reduces their influence, but on the other also reduces the influence of the Swiss upon them. Undoubtedly linguistic difficulties play a role, especially in the German-speaking part of the country. More important are the differences in eating and living habits; while the majority of foreign workers are satisfactorily integrated at their working places, they continue to lead an isolated existence in social respects.

Their habits of an externally demonstrative life, as illustrated by the atmosphere of their piazza at home, contrast with our more reserved and introvert manner, as do their relatively modest claims to conveniences and hygiene with our habits.

Of course, these observations apply only to workers coming from the south, especially from the south of Italy, and they do not apply to all of these by any means. For many of them their social isolation is mitigated by the fact that they continue to cultivate their close family ties in this country, or in place of the family create substitutes in the form of local Italian communities.

The counterpiece to Swiss resistance to fully accept the southern workers has frequently been these workers' small desire to become assimilated. To begin with, many of them do not intend to stay in Switzerland for good. They merely want to stay long enough to accumulate a small capital with which, upon their return to their home village, they can establish a modest living, and for this reason they live very frugally in Switzerland, spending as little as possible, thus again distinguishing themselves from

their social environment and, in the process, burdening the Swiss balance of payment.

To the extent that a large number of foreign workers may be indispensable to the Swiss economy, this country will in the long run not be able to avoid assimilating a considerable proportion of them, that is, those willing and able to grow roots here. Such assimilation is necessary not only to maintain the required size of the labour force, it is urgently to be desired also from the social and political points of view.

Although the foreign workers cannot vote in Switzerland until they have acquired citizenship, they are in a position even before that to exert a certain influence on Swiss politics through the trade union organisations. It is true that until now the foreign workers have shown considerable reluctance to their being organised in the trade unions. But it is precisely through the unions that their integration in the Swiss community and its traditions can be developed. Of course, if their incorporation into the unions were to develop at the same pace as the number of foreign workers employed, the danger would be very great for the Swiss union traditions to be adversely affected, and in particular for the principle of contractual relationships and obligations to fall victim to an extremist sort of thinking.

It should not be overlooked in this context that about one-fourth of the Italians vote Communist at home, and they might well become sources of agitation within the Swiss unions if they were suddenly to swell their ranks and exert a relatively large influence.

For this reason, the process of their union organisation in this country must go hand in hand with the process of general assimilation, a necessary prerequisite being that they intend to stay either permanently or for a long time, and that they are willing to accept Swiss principles and methods.

Unfortunately, the assimilation of desirable foreign workers as an indispensable prerequisite for their eventual acquisition of Swiss citizenship is badly neglected in many parts of the country, first because the assimilation is desired but by a small proportion of the foreign workers themselves and, second, because so far only few of the Swiss organisations and cantonal and local governments have tackled the task with the necessary energy.

It is not learning the Swiss-German dialect, for example, that raises the most difficulties, but acquiring those specifically Swiss political and social attitudes that are demanded by the coexistence of four languages and two denominations within a small country composed of 22 Cantons and countless local communities.

Above all, the process of assimilation will make it necessary for a large proportion of the southern workers to carry out a fundamental change of their attitude toward the community. In

the southern parts of Italy, and especially among the lower classes there, it is the family, both in its immediate and in its larger contexts, that incorporates the idea of community, whereas the state and its agencies, as well as the unions, are often looked upon with distrust or even with hostility. A long period of adaptation is required for such people to become acquainted with the functioning of the Swiss type of democracy, and to acquire the necessary trust in the political community on all its levels and a sense of co-responsibility for its destiny. To shorten this period of adaptation as far as possible for those foreigners who wish to settle permanently in our country and who are suited for such settlement must be the aim of a purposeful Swiss immigration policy. A parallel aim must be a further sharpening of the measures to reduce the number of foreign workers admitted.

Parliamentary Action

In resistance to the action of certain xenophobic groups and the demand made by some smaller political organisations that the number of foreign workers be drastically and rapidly reduced, the National Parliament and the responsible Government authorities have adopted the more constructive principles. In December, the Council of States (Senate) after extensive debate, approved the new immigration agreement with Italy unanimously and thus gave expression to its determination not to let itself be affected by any panic, but to further improve the social and economic living conditions of the Italian workers in Switzerland.

At the same time however the Council of States charged the Federal Council or national executive, with studying the measures necessary for a gradual reduction of the number of foreign workers in Switzerland. This demand has been affirmed by the decision of the National Council foreign policy committee to continue consultations regarding the agreement until the Federal Council will have submitted a supplementary report on possible measures to cope with the present excess of foreign workers. The National Council undoubtedly will accept the agreement at a later date, but in the meantime it has considered it wise to first convince the worried Swiss people of its determination to fight the dangers inherent in the present situation, the more so as adoption of the agreement will inevitably lead to an increased influx of Italian women and children.

Even a liberal-minded small state with a liberal economy, such as are present in Switzerland, must retain control over the economic and social factors of influence and remain master of its own decisions. Switzerland will not be able to avoid taking measures to contain the danger of the admission of an excess of foreign elements; but it owes it to its tradition to take these measures in as liberal a spirit as possible.