

Major Paul de Vallière's lecture

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Major Paul de Vallière's Lecture

CONWAY HALL — MAY 5th, 1938.

"Comment la Suisse est née - Premières luttes - Le Secret de sa Vitalité."

The "New Helvetic Society's" untiring effort to bring the Swiss Colony in London into closer contact with the homeland has again met with success. Mr. A. F. Suter, the Society's devoted president, addressed the large audience saying how fortunate we were in being favoured with a lecture by Major Paul de Vallière, a distinguished soldier, because all his life he has been interested in the Swiss Army and has made a special study of it. Major de Vallière has lectured to various learned societies and it was mainly through the generous initiative of Mr. E. Wepf, a member of the Society, and who heard the speaker in Brussels, that this invitation was extended to the Swiss Colony in London.

Opening his lecture with a well-timed reference to Austria, Major de Vallière gave direct emphasis to the undisputed rôle of our army. To know Switzerland, one must look back upon a history of conquests resounding with the woe and the glory of countless battlefields. Surrounded by powerful enemies, religious troubles and political disputes, the history of Switzerland is one perpetual struggle. With ceaseless wars and revolutions, the Map of Europe was ever changing, but Switzerland has weathered the storm. Powerful Austria, the first adversary of Switzerland, was a mighty opponent, yet she was beaten — to-day she is no more.

The art of war was imposed upon the Swiss by the necessities of the struggle for existence. The protection of her independence rests with her soldiers. The army was, and still is, an impelling force vital to the life of the country.

Service for the defence of the land and the safety of its liberty is the Swiss strongest and noblest call to duty. For high courage, for endurance, for tenacity, for fidelity to the cause he was serving, the Swiss warrior had few equals and no superiors, his reputation was known all over Europe.

At the early time of their struggle for independence, the Forest Cantons — Uri, Schwyz and Unterwalden — had only twenty thousand inhabitants against Austria's fifteen millions. During the two hundred years that followed, they were constantly at war with neighbouring and turbulent states. Having successfully rid themselves of the German Emperor, the three confederates were joined by the inhabitants of the mighty towns of Lucerne, Zurich and Berne, all animated by the same desire for autonomy.

Our eloquent lecturer melted into a clear and consistent narrative the aim which inspired the famous pact of 1291, and the series of wars in which the Swiss extended their sway over German and French territories.

The want of an access to the sea took them at one time far into present day Italy. This period marks the apogee of their power, and the days when they were the arbitrators of European politics.

The Swiss, who in the middle ages were the most feared warriors on the Continent, formed regular contingents in many of the armies of Europe, especially France and Italy. These soldiers, erroneously called mercenaries, were actually auxiliaries lent by their respective cantons and under whose jurisdiction they remained. They usually served only on condition of being commanded by their own officers. They carried their own colours, the white cross on a red field with the motto "Honour and Fidelity," spoke and sang their rude dialect and rustic war songs. The famous de Meuron and de Watteville Regiments fought in India, Ceylon, Canada, and Malta. Scores of generals, thousands of officers and over two millions of these men have served in foreign lands.

The lecturer described the evolution from the feudal system to the rule on democratic principles. Throughout those years, liberty and equality have been the common goal of Swiss unity. The struggle of the classes which manifested the revolutionary upheaval of other lands, was, in Switzerland, a movement of liberty based on the collaboration of all classes. The pact of 1291, which constituted the germ of the present confederation, is a fraternal union of all classes.

The founders of Switzerland, wise and prudent traders, soon realised that the prosperity of the country depended on its industrial development, on the improvement of technical capacities and resources and on man's growing mastery over nature — the Gothard road was made and Swiss freedom stood on a firmer basis.

Though Europe's oldest republic, Swiss democracy was only born in 1848, the year of European revolutions and of boundless hopes among the enthusiasts for the future of mankind.

The Swiss, the first to introduce conscription in Europe, have always felt a need to be strong. The soldiers were exceptionally well trained which accounts for the great victory of Morgarten, where 1,400 foot soldiers completely routed 15,000 of Austria's best mounted troops.

Tournaments, a favourite sport among the nobility of Europe, spread to Switzerland. At first the exclusive sport of a privileged few, Swiss tournaments were open to men of unspotted character in all classes of the army and became very popular. It not only stimulated military prowess but mainly helped to establish a better understanding between officers and men. Chivalry included everything relating to martial accomplishments, developing sentiments and manners which had a powerful and salutary effect on society and domestic life.

The great monasteries of Einsiedeln, Disentis, St. Gall and Pfäfers, were centres of progress and learning. Major de Vallière gave us interesting facts concerning the intellectual life of the castle and its influence upon the people. There was advice and protection within its walls, public meetings were held, orations delivered, and general patriotism found vent in various displays and manifestations of sportsmanship predisposing to the principles of democracy. Switzerland owes much to those Swiss who moulded the character of the nation.

"Men and governments come and go, but the love for one's country remains. Nothing worth while is done without love." With these words, which were received with long and heartfelt applause, Major de Vallière concluded one of the most memorable lectures delivered to the Swiss Colony in London.

M. Charles de Jenner, Counsellor of Legation, thanked Major de Vallière on behalf of the assembly for his very interesting lecture — a lecture that made a strong appeal to the heart and gave great satisfaction to our feelings. The lecturer is the author of the book "Honneur et Fidélité," an important work on Swiss Service in foreign armies, this might well be the subject of another lecture, our most ardent desire, said M. de Jenner, is to hear Major de Vallière again.

Speaking of the Swiss army of to-day, Major de Vallière did much to enable everybody present to feel confident that it will, if called upon to do so, discharge its duties as bravely as its predecessors have done. There is always pleasure in overcoming difficulties by acquired skill and the Swiss Army of to-day, with its mechanised units and most up-to-date weapons, has grown to respectable strength. It is vigorous, enterprising, and greatly daring. The very purpose of a permanent body of troops at the frontier is to discourage the aggressor to take advantage of unpreparedness. As it is, we have the tranquillity of mind that well trained soldiers are there to

meet him — they have no brass bands and no freshly cut flowers!

The writer of this short report, who actually fought with the British Forces at Arras and in the third and terrible battle of Ypres at Passchendaele and who, like most of his countrymen present that evening, served during the Frontier Occupation of 1914, was much impressed by the concentrated vigour and intensity of feeling of Major de Vallière's remarkable lecture.

How is it that the bonds that unite all Swiss are so strong? The answer is to be found in one word — "Freedom." Switzerland has been built up on Freedom. Not the excessive form of liberty which defeats its own object, but that perfect obedience to a perfect law which alone can be called freedom. Nobleness of work and altruism of spirit are the two factors that spur men on to great achievements. It is a happy reflection that the great deeds of the past have been emulated by succeeding generations. The courage, endurance, enterprise, and determination of the men that made Switzerland have been bequeathed to their descendants, the spirit of the Grütli remains and the roll of endeavour shows no diminution.

This is a lesson which should sustain us, especially at a time when our energies are apt to be impaired and our spirits depressed by the chaotic conditions of the world to-day.

P.S.

A LITTLE STORY FOR NAUGHTY CHILDREN.

Once upon a time—well, to be more exact about a century ago—I, too, was in London, I, too, was a British subject, a Londoner by birth, but ... I am afraid, not by choice, because deep in my heart, was a soft note, a sweet melody ... the refrain of which was: "Long live Switzerland, long live Ticino about all" ... And this melody could never be tuned off! May be, it was because in my veins ran, and still runs, true Swiss blood—because my parents were, and still are, true Ticinesi—kept far away from "their" Ticino by "forza di cose e d'eventi," but who could never forget their country, although, to be just, it must be said that they, and I, liked very much England and English people and have been happy also in London ...

I belonged, then, to the younger generation of Ticinesi, spoken about by the now President of the Unione Ticinese, Mr. Eusebio, on the occasion of the 64th Banquet of this club—and it is this younger generation that I, very unkindly, call naughty children! Naughty because they let themselves get too much absorbed by the English life they led, because they become absolutely "Englishified" and keep themselves too much apart from Ticinesi and Ticino. I don't blame them—I quite understand them—but I simply want to ask them, nay, pray them, to try and keep in touch, just a little, with their parents' country; it is all so beautiful, all so wonderful to be a true British subject and to have as well a sweet, loving feeling towards Ticino, this Ticino that deserves all the best thoughts of his children, also of those living far away; this Ticino that is sought by so many foreigners—just now, for Easter, only in Lugano arrived more than 10,000 persons, all eager to admire the beautiful, sunny, Tessin. And lovely, it is really, also when ... it rains!

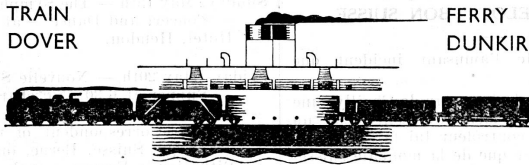
If you, "naughty children," cannot come here for one reason or the other, try then to join the Unione Ticinese, this Club that has been founded may be also by your father, your grandfather, because they simply had to meet other Ticinesi, so not to feel too lonely in a foreign land; and Unione Ticinese helped them to be able to live among

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