

Cultural crossroads

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CULTURAL CROSSROADS.

by OLIVIER REVERDIN.

The community feeling is very highly developed in Switzerland. It has taken on various forms during the course of the centuries. Already in the Middle Ages, pastures, and even the forests, were often common property in the Alpine villages; their exploitation and the sharing of the revenue they yielded served as one of the schools for Helvetic democracy.

In the towns, the communities were mostly represented by corporations which were originally founded on the trades, but of which, later on, one became a member hereditarily. These corporations had — and still have, in certain towns, more especially in Berne — important properties to administer. It is their duty to help those of their members who fall into distress. They, also, have been a school for democracy.

It goes without saying that these communities have played their part in the cultural life of the country. This fact can be demonstrated by the following example, that of the Brotherhood of Wine-growers in Vevey.

The history of this Brotherhood, which originally bore the name of an Abbey, of which the head was the Most Reverend Abbot, goes back a very long way. Its patron was Saint Urban, which shows that it existed already before the Reformation.

It was a corporation. Its members were composed — and still are — of the wine-growers of the region. They helped and encouraged each other, making a tour, once a year, of all the vineyards and giving prizes for those which had been tended the best — a custom which has continued up to the present. Each summer, they gathered together for a fête, which ended with a rustic banquet, under the trees, on the banks of Lake Leman.

During the course of the centuries, this fête took on an increasing importance. Towards 1650, it was still merely a gay procession, wending its way through the streets of Vevey. It was then called "the Promenade", and later on "the Bravado". Already in the 18th Century, this procession, in which were to be found allegorical figures such as Bacchus, escorted by the vintagers, and Ceres, accompanied by groups of men and women harvesters, became a grand display in honour of work on the land and in the vineyards. Here was an opportunity for art to show itself, in the costumes and in the songs specially composed for the occasion, and in the poems, due to the pen of local authors. Of course, music also had its place therein.

This festivity gradually became so important, requiring so great a display, that it was decided to have it only at regular intervals. Thus, at the end of the 18th Century, it only took place every third year. Since 1797, the fête has only been celebrated eight times. It now displays so much pomp and pageantry that years are required for its preparation. The last time it took place was in 1927; the next occasion will probably be in a few years time.

Already the festival in 1797, which was attended by a great many foreigners who had travelled here

specially for this occasion, was organised on a very grand scale. The procession, divided into four groups, represented the four Seasons. At the head of the procession came the Abbot, followed by the officials of the Brotherhood. Shepherdesses, shepherds, canephorae and men and women mowers surrounded the hay-waggon, on which was enthroned Pales, the Spring goddess of flocks. Ceres, on her waggon loaded with sheafs of wheat symbolised the Summer. Her retinue was composed of tillers of the soil, sowers, ploughmen, harvesters, gleaners; a band and a childrens' choir provided the music. Then came Autumn, singing to the glory of Bacchus, who rode astride on a barrel of wine, and to wine itself. This was a real Dionysical display. Silenus, fauns and Bacchantes, with all their mythological attributes, mingled with the leaf-crowned wine-growers, vintagers and coopers; two workers in the vineyard carried an enormous bunch of grapes of Cana, a symbol which has now become traditional. As for Winter, this was represented by a village wedding. The dead season, when the vines are asleep and the wine is becoming clarified in the casks, is this not the only time in the year, when the wine-grower can find a moment in which to get married?

The foregoing description, although incomplete, gives a certain idea of what this fête used to be like, simple and fine, at the same time. It was finished off, with a festival which took place on the principal square of the town. Those who had figured in the procession, took part in it; songs, the choruses of which were taken up by the audience, played an important role in this manifestation.

And now, let us jump from the 1797 Festival to the last one, which was held in 1927. This was a real apotheosis. During two whole years, the entire population, more than 12,000 persons — worked, to prepare it. A composer, Gustave Doret, a poet, Pierre Girard and a painter, Ernest Biéler, composed the festival and arranged the music, the evolutions, the costumes and the scenery. An orchestra was created, having no fewer than 150 performers, a choir of 600 singers was got together and hundreds of dancers were trained and taught. The women and the young girls prepared all the costumes to be worn by the 2,200 persons figuring in the procession and in the festival.

The general theme was, as in 1797, and as always, the glorification of work on the land, and more particularly in the vineyards, and the evocation of the Seasons. Its success was tremendous! It is already twenty-five years since this festival was held and at which more than 100,000 persons were present. A great many of the airs sung at the festival and the songs composed for this occasion, have now become part of the popular repertory. They are sung in the schools and in choral societies, and one often hears them being gaily whistled or hummed by people strolling along the roads or the Alpine paths.

This Wine-growers' Festival, heir to a tradition several centuries old, has no counter-part anywhere else. This is something which cannot be improvised. It is only when the urge towards an artistic creation, on the part of the whole of the people, who are determined to work gratuitously in order to achieve the success of a manifestation of this kind, is united to an authentic wine-growers' tradition, then only can success crown such an undertaking.