

Cultural crossroads

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CULTURAL CROSSROADS.

by OLIVIER REVERDIN.

In the 15th and 16th centuries, the Swiss, whose squares of infantry, all bristling with halberds, formed the most redoubtable military force in Europe, took part in several wars in the North of Italy, where they made some conquests. In 1515, however, at the battle of Marignano, the French artillery proved too strong for the Swiss infantry. This put an end to the military supremacy of the Confederates, and, twenty years later, the Reformation and the internal dissensions which it caused, obliged them to adopt the principle of neutrality, from which they have never departed since. It is not generally known abroad that neutrality as conceived by Switzerland at the present time is the fruit of practice and experience covering more than four centuries.

But, it is not my intention to talk to you about neutrality. These remarks were just by the way. Let us come back to the battle of Marignano, which put a period to Swiss adventures in Italy. But, these adventures have left, in addition to glorious memories, something very much more substantial, namely a territory, forming a kind of appendix to Switzerland, to the south of the Alps, where Italian is still spoken. As you will have already guessed, this territory is the Tessin.

A region conquered by the Confederates, the Tessin was administered by them for several centuries. It was not a free and sovereign Canton, but a land which was subject to them and which was governed by baillifs. All this, however, did not prevent the inhabitants of the Tessin, when the choice was offered to them 150 years ago, to vote in favour of remaining Swiss.

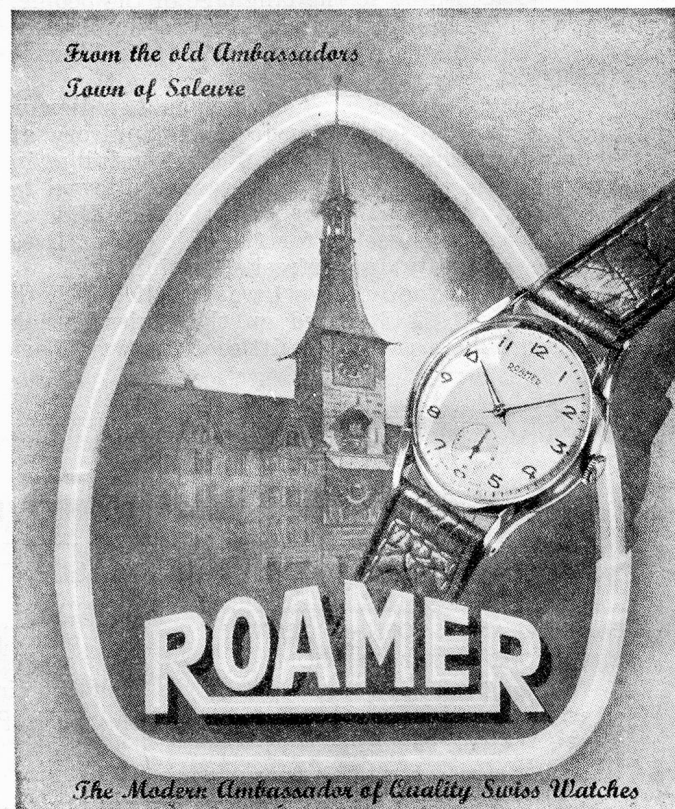
It is, as a result of these circumstances, that Switzerland of to-day, comprises within her frontiers a Canton possessing an Italian culture. This fact raises some very special problems, both for the Canton in question and the country, as a whole.

Having been bound up with the fate of the Swiss Confederation for five centuries — and indeed more, in regard to certain of its regions — the Tessin bears

the mark of this in regard to its mentality and its institutions. Within it, democracy has quite different roots to those that exist in Italy. No doubt, that is the reason why Fascism, even at the time of its zenith, never constituted any temptation for the people of the Tessin, but, on the contrary, formed an object of repulsion and contempt. The human type to be met with in the Tessin resembles the one that is to be found in all the Swiss Cantons. It is the type to which one might apply the term of "civic". Like the Athenian in the 5th century B.C. and the Roman, the Swiss is distinguished both morally and spiritually, by his quality of being a citizen of a very small State, of a city, in fact, in the ancient meaning of this term, which quality develops in him a sense of political and social responsibilities.

Thus, the Tessin, in order to remain what it really is, must cultivate, what we must call for lack of a better term, its Helveticism. For instance, it cannot use in its schools the manuals for history, geography and civic instruction, nor even the reading-books, which are in standard use in the Italian schools. It is necessary to create and print its own educational manuals, for a population of 160,000 souls, which constitutes a very heavy burden, indeed. For, this Canton, consisting as it does to a very large extent, of Alpine valleys possessing very meagre resources, is definitely poor. The Tessin must also struggle to maintain its Swiss character by means of its Press, more especially its political Press, and in order to do so, it maintains several newspapers, the editions of which are necessarily very limited.

That is one of the aspects of the problem. But there are others. For instance, the Tessin must put up a fight, within the Confederation itself, in order



to preserve its Italian character as pure as possible. It must defend its language, its culture and the external aspects of its towns and villages. And that is a task which is much less easy than would appear at first glance. For, in point of fact, the people of the Tessin form a tiny minority within the Confederation, amounting to hardly three per cent of the entire population, whereas German-speaking Swiss represent 75 per cent and French-speaking Swiss 20 per cent of the inhabitants.

No doubt, none would intentionally threaten the Italianism of the Tessin, but it is the existing ration of forces within the Confederation, which in itself constitutes a danger. For instance, a great many German-speaking Swiss who buy land in the Tessin, in order to build houses for themselves. It suffices that they should do this in a style which may please their individual taste, but which is not in keeping with that of the country, for whole villages to become disfigured, losing their beauty and their character. That is just one example, but I could cite dozens of others.

In order to defend its Italianism, the Tessin must also make a considerable effort in regard to education, devote particular attention to the teaching of its language, strive to maintain as intense a literary and artistic activity as is possible, and keep up the closest cultural contacts with its Italian neighbours.

This double defense in regard to its Italianism and its Helveticism is an advantage in every respect. For the Tessin it means that the Canton can remain itself and can follow the path traced for it by its own nature. It is also an advantage for Switzerland,

requiring as she does this contribution of Italianism for the maintenance of harmony in her trilingual civilisation; and, finally, it is an advantage for Italy, that her culture should be radiated throughout Switzerland, via the Tessin.

Fully conscious of this, the Confederation supports the Tessin by all the means at its disposal, helps it to print its educational manuals and to keep up its schools, and stimulates the intellectual, literary and artistic efforts of its élite.

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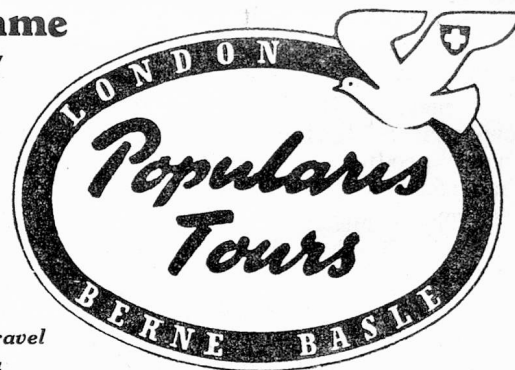
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