

The Valais

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THE VALAIS

by

Arnold Burgauer

The Rhone valley stretching from the glacier regions where the river springs from to the Mediterranean-like shores of Lake Geneva is renowned for its clear cold winters and lovely warm, dry summers. It is the land of luscious fruit — pears, apples, peaches, apricots, strawberries — and on the sun-baked slopes grow some of the choicest wines in the country — Fendant, Dôle, Johannisberg, Malvoisie and Amigne. . . . To this broad valley surrounded by snow-capped mountains April and May convey all the splendours of spring, intimating the enchantment of Provence, as the whole landscape is turned into a huge luxuriant orchard: the ancient grey walls of Romanesque churches are the time-honoured background for the delicate pink peach blossoms, and the clusters of pure white pear trees contrast with the yellowish-green of the birch trees and the young silvery leaves of the poplars. But the nights can still be very cold and to protect the promising beauty of the fruit trees and vineyards the Valais farmers set up small oil burners, the so-called *chaufferettes* to take the chill. . . .

The Charm of the Small Towns

The Rhone river flows past several small, quaint towns such as Loèche-Ville, Sierre, Sion, Martigny and St. Maurice in the Valais and Bex, Aigle and Villeneuve in the Canton de Vaud. The busy town of Brigue, turntable of international tourism, is a good starting point for trips and excursions either to the stern Lötschental, to Visperterminen and Stalden or to Zermatt and Saas-Fee, the famed summer and winter resorts where ski-ing not far away is excellent even in summer. . . .

Sierre, in the heart of the Rhone valley, excels not only in climate but also in its unique location. It grew through the centuries out of a number of neighbouring villages to form a proud community. The town is surrounded by vineyards which reach high up into the green meadows, the appropriate setting for many an eighteenth-century mansion like Venthône and the Château de Muzot, the last abode of Rainer Maria Rilke, the great poet who felt inspired here where he grew roses and wine. . . . His memory is honoured in the local museum of Villa.

Compared with Sierre and its graceful charm, Sion, the capital, appears far more austere. It is dominated by the two abrupt church and castle-crowned hills of Valère and Tourbillon which give it an almost Spanish silhouette, recalling the mediaeval character of Toledo, as Rilke admitted. . . . Sion is reputed for its picturesque narrow streets, old doorways and elegant wrought iron balconies, its pretty fountains and gargoyles. It is a live centre where

the past, present and future meet. Townspeople and peasants in their traditional clothing mingle in the market square while the ruins of Saillon, the ancient fortress of the Dukes of Savoy, still tower high above the valley. . . .

Martigny, situated at the strategic point where the Rhône turns north, is of an entirely different character. With its well proportioned, plane-studded squares, its outdoor cafés and solid housefronts it reminds one of the little towns in Piedmont. From here, a network of roads leads to the Great St. Bernard, to the romantic Val Ferret and the flowering pastures of Chemin, Finhaut and Trient. . . .

As one turns north and nears the Lake of Geneva, the colour scheme turns lighter, paler, one might say more “civilized”, with one exception, that of the typical little lakeside port of Le Bouveret, where a genuine part of the Valais holds its own.

Haven for the Persecuted — Land of Odd Characters

Since times immemorial, the remote Alpine valleys have served as refuge for men persecuted for political or criminal offences. Among those who found a second, cherished home here special mention should be made of the “deserter” who fled during the French revolution and of the wayfarer from the Italian valley of Aosta, a forger who became the national hero of the Valais. Indeed, Joseph Samuel Farinet was a legendary figure even in his lifetime, like Mandrin in France and Robin Hood in England. The peasants of the Val de Bagnes took to the newcomer because he was frank and outspoken and happy to share his modest fortune. His memory is alive to this day as the peasants still sing some of the songs which he had composed and dedicated to them.

The former theological student or clergyman who had emigrated from Alsace under the name of Charles-Albert Brun was very different in character. He had nothing to his name and to make a meagre living he painted saintly pictures and family portraits for the people of Haute-Nendaz which have acquired a certain value. . . .

[S.N.T.O.]

In the Confederation for 150 years

“It is this Valais, surrounded by the highest mountains, and yet has grain, wine, animals, fruit, mines, spas . . .” This is what Matthäus Merian wrote in his “Topographia Helvetiae in 1664. It is a country of many characteristics, and its history has been turbulent. The numerous castles remind us of the fights for power carried on by the Bishops of Sion, the Dukes of Savoy and native families like von Turn and Raron.

The entry into the Confederation took place after the difficulties had grown worse and worse. In 1802, Napoleon made the Canton a Republic, and eight years later it became part of the French Empire as *Département du Simplon*. When the Valais became tied to Switzerland, its troubles did not stop, and as late as 1844, the Canton was the scene of a civil war. It was only after the Confederation had been formed into a *Bundesstaat* that the Canton could start to catch up the delay in economic development.

The entry into the Confederation was to have been commemorated last year, but it was postponed on account of the Mattmark catastrophe. The celebrations have now taken place. Several thousand spectators assembled in Sion on 11th June for the first performance on the Valère castle hill of the pageant "Valais, Terre Helvétique", words by Maurice Zermatten, music by Jean Daetwyler.

On Sunday, 12th June, Federal President Schaffner gave an official address at the celebrations which had begun that day with an ecumenical church service. The Presidents of the Council of States and the National Council were present, as well as Federal Councillors Bonvin and Spuehler, representatives of the Army, the Tribunals, the Cantonal Governments and many other personalities. 800 guests attended the banquet, and a picturesque procession was held on Sunday afternoon.

Thus, the 4th August 1815 when the Diet had agreed to accept the Valais into the Confederation as twentieth Canton, has been duly recalled and celebrated.

(A.T.S. and "Basler Nachrichten".)

FEDERAL MOSAIC

In April, the Federal Council published a **report** on happenings inside and outside Switzerland in 1965. This was the second time such a review preceded the ordinary report on the Government's activities. The Federal Council referred to the image of Switzerland which, as had been stressed at the last Assembly of the Swiss Abroad in Solothurn, was no longer as unblemished as it used to be. To improve the image was a complex matter, but the Federal Council would do everything to support efforts in this direction, both inside Switzerland as well as in the Swiss communities abroad. The increased subsidy to the "Pro Helvetia" Foundation was a first important step. The report then went into details regarding the general political picture of the world and the changes which are taking place.

The principle of Swiss policy was still to entertain good relations with all the States in the world, regardless of their political direction, in fact to keep up Swiss neutrality and independence. The Federal Council is of opinion that the disadvantages of joining the United Nations are still greater than any resulting benefits, though co-operation with all U.N. Specialised Agencies would be continued and strengthened where aims and objects are compatible with Swiss neutrality. Entry into the Common Market was being considered and any chance of building a bridge would be taken. Assistance to the developing

Nations would go on, and co-operation with international organisations would be strengthened.

The two main topics in the Federal Council's report on happenings inside Switzerland were long-term finance planning and the development of the economic boom. The report claims that the measures taken by the Federal Council to stop the excess boom have been successful, and that this was shown in particular in the improved balance of payments.

The Federal Department for Finance and Customs have published the drafts for the two new laws regarding federal **finance administration** and **finance control**. Economic organisations and political Parties now have a chance to study them until September. Tighter controls and various changes are proposed. The question of new sources of revenue are to be studied. Taxes and customs come under review, especially in connection with EFTA, EEC and GATT.

A first group of **additional credits** to the 1966 budget has been asked for totalling 30.6m. francs, of which 12.5m. alone are for PTT services.

The **export risk guarantee** of the Confederation has been used to a larger degree in 1965. This is not surprising in view of the increase of exports from 11.5 milliard francs in 1964 to 12.9 milliard last year. The number of applications granted in 1965 was 3,070 as against 2,883 in the previous year. The amount reached a net total of Fr.1,249m. as compared with 2,883 in 1964. Damages paid amounted to Fr.210,000.— in connection with exports to Uruguay, Iran and the Dominican Republic.

The Federal Council decided early in May to grant a **new loan** of 108 million francs to **FIPOL**, the property foundation for international organisations in Geneva. This sum will be used for purchasing the building of the International Labour Office and for a loan to the same organisation for a new building. A message to Parliament will be published in due course.

The following **agreements** have been made between Switzerland and . . .

- . . . the Republic of Dahomey regarding trade, investment protection and technical co-operation;
- . . . France, the Netherlands, Sweden and Spain on double taxation; the agreement in force between Switzerland and Great Britain (1954) has recently been changed;
- . . . Germany and Austria regarding the use of water in the Lake of Constance;
- . . . Germany concerning improvements of the navigation of the Rhine including installations;
- . . . Roumania concerning goods traffic by road;
- . . . Liechtenstein regarding old-age and invalidity insurance (ratification).

[A.T.S.]