

Valais of the past

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VALAIS OF THE PAST

By LEE EUGSTER

Young tourists spending vacations in a Valais resort cannot imagine how the natives lived only fifty years ago. Now one takes it for granted that asphalt roads lead to the highest villages and that one finds modern comfort in the smallest hotels. Not so the older people who remember having climbed steep foot or mule paths to reach their vacation goal. These were impracticable in winter, when not even the mountain people could go to town down in the Rhone Valley to see a doctor or replenish their provisions.

Now the old visitors marvel at the progress which, in a few decades, catapulted the archaic Valais into the mechanical and industrial age due to its network of motor roads. The young drive to school or work in towns, and even the aged people occasionally take the postal motor coach to go shopping down there.

But every medal has its reverse side. Although no sensible person would begrudge the mountain people's easier living conditions, cultural values are in danger now. Whereas the formerly isolated people were self-sufficient, producing their food, clothes and implements, they work now even harder to earn the cash to pay for these. Already, most of the beautifully carved, home-made wooden utensils have been replaced by vulgar plastic objects.

One day, the old-time visitor finds a glittering but anonymous bar replacing the familiar cozy village café. There, he who eavesdropped behind an unfolded newspaper to hear the typical accent or dialect of natives discussing village affairs, finds radio, TV and a juke-box blaring together, drowning all conversation with their din. Where is the radical change hoped for, if one finds in the mountains the same noise as in town?

However, it is gratifying that despite mini-skirts and blue-jeans worn during the week, the young are faithful to the beautiful local costumes in which they file into church on Sundays and feast days. And although they listen and dance to jazz, many belong to the local choral or music band. For having heard or practiced classical music from childhood during Divine Service, the Valaisans are good musicians and have admirable voices.

People no longer gather in one house during winter nights to spin, carve and tell legends. Luckily, Dr. J. Guntern gathered the folk tales of the Upper Valais and published them in his book "Walliser Sagen", to save them from oblivion.

Now, the author Jean Follonier presented us with his beautiful book of childhood reminiscences "Valais d'autrefois". It recalls the life of the people isolated in high valleys until roads linked them with the outside world. Apart from being of historical

value, this book teaches humility to city dwellers, so apt to grumble about the least annoyance.

The most beautiful chapter deals with bread — how it was obtained by tilling the ground with primitive tools before the grain was sown in the age-old majestic gesture. Women bent under the hot sun to reap the corn with a sickle. Later in the season, the bread dough was prepared according to another unchanging ritual. Finally, the family was grateful for being able to store in the attic the fragrant round loaves of rye bread which was a major item in their diet. If the city folk who throw away almost entire loaves of bread had to do some of the work to produce it, they would certainly have the respect due to bread.

Another chapter mentions the relationship between the mountain farmer and his faithful mule. Of course tractors and motor vehicles save time and strength. But can these replace the subtle ties between man and his beast of burden? A mule nudged its master if he delayed on his way home, nuzzled him with velvety lips to beg for titbits. Finally, it carried the sleeping rider safely home. What happens to people who fall asleep at the wheel? A car ditches them into a gully.

This book full of humour and tenderness is a precious witness of times dating only two generations back.

(By courtesy "Treize Etoiles".)

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Trade Exhibition

On the occasion of the international trade exhibition for surface treatment due to be held from 19th to 25th November 1969 in the halls of the Swiss Industries Fair, the Swiss Galvanotechnical Society will hold a two-day annual conference at which it will discuss subjects such as galvanotechnical processes, electroplating work and questions affecting the treatment of waste water. The Swiss Association of Varnish and Colour Chemists will also arrange to hold its autumn congress during the exhibition at which it will discuss questions of a general working nature.

YOUR NEXT "SWISS OBSERVER"

will be published on . . .

Friday, 13th June. We shall be glad to receive all articles and reports by Tuesday, 3rd June. Short news items only can be accepted later.

The "Swiss Observer" is published every second and fourth Friday of the month, and consequently, your next copy but one will be out on 27th June. All contributions for that issue should be to hand by Tuesday, 17th June.

HOLIDAY READING

"Only a Game" is the name of a book recently published by Peter Owen, London (30/-). What makes it different is that it is one of the first books to be translated into English from Romansh, Ladin to be exact. This book by the Grisons author Cla Biert was also translated into German, and it is a collection of tales of local life, beautifully told. The stories are very much alive, and the characters real and vivid. Whether poachers or peasants, youngsters or old people, there is no doubt that the author knows his fellow-men and women from the mountainous regions of the Grisons. Could anyone fail to chuckle at the crafty poacher, a fine match for the frontier guard in "Pine Branches"! and how "The Cherry Lesson" takes one back to happy school days! No wonder the Council of Europe chose the book as a masterpiece of the lesser-known European languages.

The author was born in 1920 and has travelled extensively. He now teaches at a school in Chur. His stories and poetry have been translated into several languages.

* * *

"Atlas der Schweiz" was commissioned by the Federal Council. Its Table 34 has recently been published — it is called "Swiss Abroad". The map shows the density of Swiss communities in the various countries of the world, gives details of Swiss schools, diplomatic and consular representation, Swiss Churches. On the two reverse pages, text in German, French and Italian explains Swiss emigration, the protection granted to Swiss abroad, organisations interested in and concerned with Swiss abroad. The interesting text has been compiled by Monsieur Maurice Jaccard, an expert on matters concerning the Swiss living outside Switzerland.

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Fritz Herdi is the author of "Pardon, Herr Bundesrat!" It is a small book published by Benteli Verlag in Berne. The collection of stories and anecdotes was so popular that it was out of print quite soon. But if one is lucky enough to find it, one may be assured of a few hours of entertaining reading. It opens with a short sketch of the history of the "Ochsenscheunen" as the Parliament Building is called irreverently. The stories vary from funny jokes to crude remarks, from witty tales to sarcastic critical cracks. A few photographs break up the text, and the whole collection is presented in chronological order which takes us right through to the seven "Landesväter" of today.

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