

Letters from Switzerland

Objekttyp: **Group**

Zeitschrift: **The Swiss observer : the journal of the Federation of Swiss Societies in the UK**

Band (Jahr): **- (1976)**

Heft 1714

PDF erstellt am: **29.04.2024**

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LETTERS FROM SWITZERLAND

The parliamentary elections for the renewal of the two Federal chambers, held at the end of October, have shown that they are a very different thing from general elections in the United Kingdom. To begin with their timing does not, as it does in Great Britain, depend on the decision of any one man (The Prime Minister in office), but it is fixed by Constitution to take place at 4-yearly intervals. Next the electoral system is based on proportional representation, which gives a better chance to smaller or minority parties — hence the understandable call by the British Liberals for a change in the U.K. electoral system. If I say that their call is understandable, I have also to admit that there are possibly too many political parties in Switzerland. No fewer than 21 of them competed with one another in the Canton of Zürich recently, only to be beaten in numbers by the Canton of Berne with 24 parties. Apart from the traditional parties many new ones have sprung up during the last few years, both on the extreme right and on the extreme left. On the right wing there are the Schwarzenbach Republicans and the "National Action", both aiming at more and more drastic reduction of the foreign population in the country, and on the extreme left side we now have a "Revolutionary Marxist League" as well as "POCH" (Progressive Organisation CH), both of them looking on the mere Communists of the "Parti du Travail" as more or less fascist organisations. The result of the elections has shown a slight move towards the moderate left, the Social Democratic Party gaining 9 seats in the National Council — having lost five four years ago, thus enjoying a net gain of 4 mandates in a chamber of 200. In the smaller chamber, the Council of States, with 44 seats, there has practically been no change. In 22 cantons, incidentally, the 2 Councillors of States are elected by the people, but in the remaining ones they are still elected by the cantonal parliament.

If the moderate left can be said to have won some additional seats, it can also be said — with satisfaction — that the parties of the extreme right and left have been the great losers: the Schwarzenbach Republicans lost two of formerly four mandates in Berne and Poch and the Marxist Revolutionaries only got a few hundred votes. On the whole the system has once again proved its political stability and maturity in spite, I am bound to admit, of its very complicated structure with its roots deep in federalism. If anybody has done well out of the election campaign it was the newspapers and pamphlet printers whose advertisement pages have enjoyed a colossal boom during about four weeks. Having observed, at close quarters, so many parliamentary elections in the United Kingdom, it has been of special interest to me to watch one now in

by Gottfried Keller

Switzerland. On the whole the Swiss system, complex as it is, seems fairer to me than the British one which enables the two big parties more or less permanently to keep others, above all the Liberals, under-represented at Westminster.

Blessing in disguise?

In a very short paragraph in the November issue of the *Swiss Observer*, dealing with the recent Swiss Federal Elections, it is stated that according to some correspondents the poll was held "under the worst economic recession since World War 2".

There are, as I intend to show, certainly signs of an economic recession

noticeable in Switzerland. Yet, to put things into their proper proportion, it has to be stressed that there are recessions and recessions and what we seem to be going through in Switzerland appears to me to be more of a quite healthy shrinking process of what during the last 25 to 30 years has been a super-super boom.

If people generally have become a little more price-conscious nowadays and if a few hundred fewer new cars are sold every month, if furthermore some 65,000 luxury flats (built during the boom years by speculators) stand empty now, this is perhaps not such a bad thing. The economy has, no doubt, been over-heated during many years and things have for so long gone so well that the recessionary period the country is going through now may well turn out to have been a blessing in disguise.

In many ways the oil-crisis has produced a health shock by waking-up the "Throw-Away-Society". It is surely a good thing if empty bottles and glass jars



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are nowadays collected for re-processing and the same, incidentally, applies to old newspapers. It is also a healthy thing if some of the building-speculators now have to reduce their prices for floor property and rental for flats. Some of them now go so far as to offer 6 months rental-free living in their flats in order to attract potential tenants, while others nowadays offer to carry the removal cost as well as the cost for fitting curtains. Tens of thousands of people still own second and even third cars and according to a study just published some 180,000 citizens also own a second house or flat in some other part of the country.

In repair or service garages the waiting period used to be anything up to three weeks — but nowadays this has come down to two to three days. Some years ago it was practically impossible to find hotel accommodation in Zürich at short notice; but since then so many super luxury hotels have been erected that several of them are half-empty today. Gone are the days of snooty receptionists turning away guests, gone are the days when super-snooty wine waiters looked down on people who did not order champagne. In the shops too people have become more price-conscious, which again is not such a bad thing. I myself recently needed a new cork-screw (for opening bottles) and was first shown one which seemed extravagantly expensive to me. It obviously is still the sales personnel's tactics first to offer the most expensive article — but asking for a cheaper one I

eventually got one at half the first one's price, just as good and handy, even though it has a little less chromium decoration on it.

Of course, there are negative sides to the recession too: the approximately 18,000 unemployed who are registered at present, the shorter working hours in quite a number of factories, the economically uncertain outlook in different industries — amongst them certainly the watch industry. Whether it is a good or a bad thing that some 180,000 foreign workers have been compelled — by the economic circumstances, not by the authorities — to uproot themselves and leave the country for good I would not care to say. It may be very hard on them, for they were good enough to assist in producing wealth during the boom years, but on the other hand it is logical that if an enterprise is forced to reduce its working force the non-Swiss citizens are given notice first.

Is Switzerland going through a crisis, or "only" a recession, or — third interpretation — merely a healthy contraction of an over-inflated economy? The experts are not united on this point, nor do they really know whether the outlook gives cause for optimism or not. Nevertheless, if what Switzerland is experiencing at present on the economic front is "the worst recession since World War 2", then I think it can be said that apart from producing hardship in some cases it has its redeeming features also.

SITTING HELVETIAS GO ON SHOW

Rare Swiss stamps from the last century are currently on display at a special exhibition at the Swiss Postal Museum in Berne. Loaned by the prominent Basle collector Dr. W. Roth, the material spans the period from the earliest Swiss printings to the Sitting Helvetia issues — including the scarce "Strubel" and "Rayon" stamps. The exhibition, which also includes rare covers and documents, continues until January 19.

SWISSAIR MANAGEMENT APPOINTMENTS

Swissair has announced several important management appointments to take effect shortly:

Hellmuth Scherrer, at present Swissair's vice-president Product Development and Sales Policy, has been appointed executive vice-president Marketing and member of the airline's top management from January 1, 1976. He succeeds Hans Aeppli who retires at the end of this year after 43 years with the company.

Mr. Scherrer, who is 57, has been with Swissair since 1946; he became passenger sales promotion manager in 1957, general sales manager in 1961 and vice-president in 1974.

The new vice-president Product Development and Sales Policy will be Claude Christe, at present Swissair's regional manager for North America in New York; he has been in his present post since 1974, having earlier been sales promotion and passenger sales manager at Swissair's Zurich head office.

Named as his successor in North America is Reynold Schwab, at present regional manager for Northern Europe, bases in Frankfurt. He has held the position since 1974, having been general manager for Germany since 1967.

His position as regional manager for Northern Europe is being taken up by Walter Speck, general manager cargo and mail division at the airline's HQ from 1963 and general sales manager from 1974.

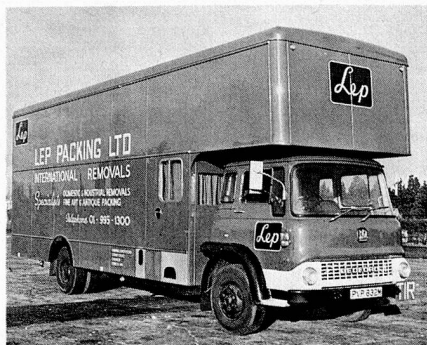
Restoring the last judgement

Restoration work is continuing on one of Switzerland's most valuable art treasures — the sculpture of the Last Judgement on the main portal of Berne Cathedral.

The 236 painted sandstone figures which make up the work have been so badly damaged and so poorly maintained since their completion by Erhard Kung of Germany some 500 years ago, that they are now having to be copied.

This is being done by Swiss sculptor Walter Fuhrer, using a similar copying method to that employed by Michelangelo.

The restoration work began more than 10 years ago, but it's still not known when the scaffolding will finally disappear from the cathedral's main portal — one of the most magnificent examples of late Gothic architecture anywhere in Europe.



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