

Letters from Switzerland

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LETTERS FROM SWITZERLAND

By Gottfried Keller

IN VINO NO LONGER VERITAS?

The grape harvest in the Swiss vineyards has been in full swing this autumn and the expectations regarding quality and quantity of the 1976 wine have been very high indeed. The weather conditions in 1976 have been almost ideal for wine-growers, especially in Western Switzerland: warm before Easter in spring, very hot in June and July and with warm, sunny days in autumn — all this without any major hailstorms or similar catastrophes.

However, in spite of this optimism concerning the production of high quality wine in large quantities, there is one topical question which tends to overshadow the scene, namely the question "Who is going to drink all this wine?" As is well known Swiss wines are not exported in very great quantities — although they travel well enough — because the high value of the Swiss franc renders the price per bottle in most countries abroad practically prohibitive.

But even inside Switzerland it has been established that the past three to four years have seen a measurable reduction in wine consumption. Apparently the recession has influenced a good many people to stop drinking a glass or two glasses of wine with every major meal. Moreover many of the tens of thousands of foreign workers from such southern countries as Italy and Spain were, it is said, amateurs of wine — perhaps not of top but still of good quality. But the main reason for the reduction in the consumption of wine is that generally speaking wine has nowadays simply become too expensive.

The vintners — and producers — contend that the hoteliers and restaurateurs are insisting on too high a profit margin, since their generally accepted rule is that every bottle of wine must, when sold, yield a profit of — at least — 150 per cent. Thus a bottle bought for, say, Sw.Fr. 10 costs the guest Sw.Fr. 25, which is quite an item on a restaurant bill. At the end of June an official survey has shown that a good 50 million litres of red and white Swiss wine — not counting the stocks held in hotels, restaurants and private cellars — were unsold in the stores of the licensed wine dealers in the country.

If in addition to these existing stocks large quantities of wine are now being produced this autumn, the question of what will happen is indeed a topical one. Apparently it is being asked with some anxiety in the wine-growing circles.

According to an exposé published by the Institute for Sociological Studies of the University of Zürich only about one per cent of the hundreds of thousands of foreign nationals who live and work in Switzerland are interested in naturalisation. In other words: only a tiny part of the foreign population is desirous of becoming totally integrated here as Swiss citizens. The motivation of the few who do want to become Swiss is clearly materialistic in that they expect to improve their material standing and social security. The fact that by becoming Swiss citizens they also acquire the active and passive right to vote does not seem to be an attraction. Most foreign nationals expect to return to their countries of origin sooner or later, but ten per cent of them have stated that they hope to remain in Switzerland for good — but without wanting to be naturalised and having to undergo all the stiff tests and unpleasantness connected with the process of naturalisation. The conclusion drawn from these facts is that most foreigners who live and work here (at present some 800,000 still) have been driven from their own countries by adverse economic circumstances, rather than attracted culturally to become members of the Swiss society.

However, at present the case of the two German brothers Gunter and Wilhelm Sachs — both are multi-millionaires and Gunter is known as the ex-husband of Brigitte Bardot and playboy-member of the so-called Jet-Set — who are to become Swiss citizens presently, attracts much attention. They have both been accepted by the Grisonais village of Surcuolm which boasts 89 inhabitants. "At last", the President of the borough council of Surcuolm has stated "we can now build our sewage treatment plant." According to Swiss law candidates for naturalisation have to be "suitable and worthy", apart from many other requirements. Obviously the two brothers Sachs have been found to be "suitable and worthy", for with their wealth they fit well into the Swiss scenery. This all the more since they first donated Sw.Fr. 100,000 (£25,000) for the restoration of Surcuolm's village church, whereupon Wilhelm Sachs also promised to move his residence from Valbella to Surcuolm, there to pay his annual borough taxes amounting to Sw.Fr. 300,000. This will be such a boom to Surcuolm that borough council President Cavegn has already stated that his council will now be in a position to lower the rate of taxation for the 89 inhabitants. The motivation behind the move of the two Sachs brothers is no secret: during more than a year they have both been quarrelling with the German tax authorities and the Federal Cartel Office because they want to sell a majority

WHO WANTS TO BE SWISS?

SOME STILL DO!

holding of the inherited firm of Fichtel & Sachs to the British concern of Guest, Keen and Nettlefolds. Thus it can be said that while many foreign residents of Switzerland spurn Swiss citizenship, some desire it very ardently.

FORTHCOMING EVENTS

27th November, 7.30 p.m. — CHRISTMAS DINNER PARTY, Swiss Club Liverpool, at the Devon Doorway Hotel, Telegraph Road, Heswall.

Thursday, 2nd December, 7.30 p.m. — French Institute Theatre, Queensberry Place — MONODRAMAS by HEDDY WETTSTEIN — organised by Nouvelle Société Helvétique — see editorial regarding details.

Thursday, 16th December, 6.30 p.m. — Swiss Church, 79 Endell Street, WC2 — MUSIC IN ADVENT — Swiss Churches in conjunction with the International Liszt Centre for 19th Century Music — followed by a CHRISTMAS GET-TOGETHER organised by the Nouvelle Société Helvétique — Please ring 01-624 5360 if wishing to take part.

Saturday, 5th February 1977 — Swiss Mercantile Society — Annual Dinner & Dance, Dorchester Hotel, Park Lane, London W.1.

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