

Air and space in Lucerne

Autor(en): **Ritter, Irene**

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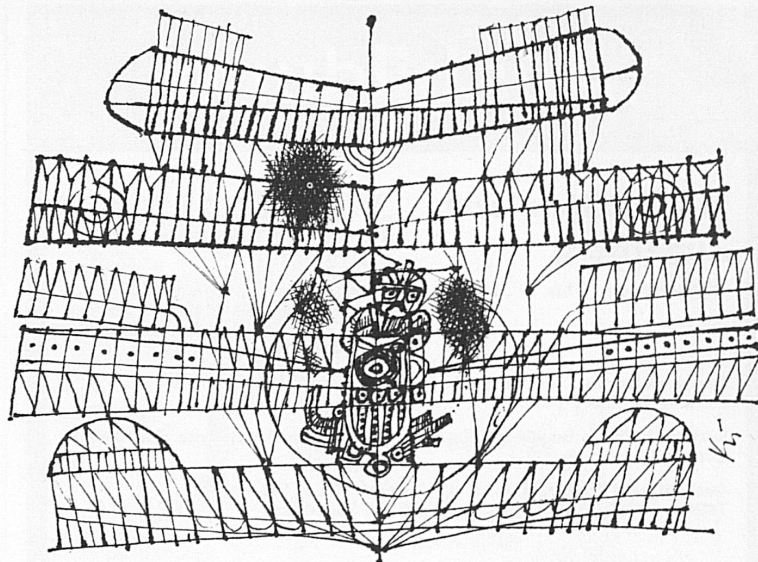
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AIR AND SPACE IN LUCERNE

IRENE RITTER

The guide books will tell you that Lucerne and the Lake of the Four Cantons were the cradle of the Confederation... that Lucerne was a vital link on the North-South trade route over the Gotthard Pass... also, of course, all about the Lion of Lucerne. But what no guide book ever mentions was a most important moment in the history of Lucerne—more—since tourism is the be-all of Lucerne—in the history of tourism. Yet, because the site is now long built over with a modern housing estate, few of the millions of tourists who visit the town are aware that Lucerne was also the cradle of world commercial air passenger traffic.

Tribschen, on the left bank of the bay of Lucerne, is better known as the estate bordered by huge poplars where Richard Wagner spent six years and composed some of his greatest works. But just before you reach Richard Wagner's house is Tribschenmoos, once Switzerland's first airship station. From a huge aerodrome, a regular passenger service was operated from 1910 through 1912, and the "Ville de Lucerne I", a French-built zeppelin-type airship filled with 158 cubic feet of gas, carrying a five-man crew and eight passengers, became a familiar sight. 56 flights and a total of 235 passengers were noted in the first year. In 1912, an even larger German airship, the "Parseval VI", was also using the Lucerne airstation. Then came engine-powered aeroplanes: biplanes, monoplanes and seaplanes, until 1914 when the outbreak of World War I put an end to Lucerne's air service. One notable fact remained: not one accident to pilot or passenger throughout the entire period of service.

If the First World War wiped Lucerne off the map of active aviation, the town, undaunted, returned to the scene half a century later to take first place in passive aviation. What is passive aviation? Stuff that dreams are made of... and museums. Across the bay, almost directly opposite the one-time airship station, the Swiss Transport Museum houses a galaxy of dreams which have made history. From airships to spaceships—they are all there: intricate models of the "Ville de Lucerne I", the "Graf Zeppelin", and the flying machine of the brothers who gave man wings, Wilbur and Orville Wright, to the Jumbo Jet and the new DC-10. From the ceiling 25 genuine original planes gently sway in their element—the air. Switzerland's oldest living pioneer, Henry Dufaux, now 93, felt deeply touched—and not a little awed—as he gazed at his own biplane, built in 1909, repainted and restored hanging in a place of honour at the museum. It is the same plane in which he and his brother had made a record-breaking flight over the Lake of Geneva in 1910. So much has happened in the air in the space of one lifetime.

"Twelve seconds that changed the world," reported the Norfolk "Virginian Pilot" on December 18, 1903, as the Wright brothers flew 200 feet and "proved that they could soar through the air in a flying machine of their own construction". "Today's Boeing B747 aircraft", says Alfred Waldis, director of the museum, "carry several hundred passengers over a distance fifty times greater, in the same length of time, than was flown by the Wright brothers, and the fuselage of these giants of transport outmeasures Wright's first flight." Yet, incongruously enough, two American flyers have just achieved a first flight over the Swiss Alps in a hot-air balloon, and zeppelin airships are being reconsidered in Switzerland as future transport vehicles to reduce air pollution.

Air and space... to fly like a bird and to reach for the moon... how these two ambitions have ever preyed upon man's fancy! Cape Canaveral, Florida, May 5, 1961: "A slim, cool Navy test pilot was rocketed 115 miles into space today," wrote the "New York Times." 15 minutes, or the first step towards the moon taken by Alan B. Shepard in the United States' first manned suborbital flight of the NASA Mercury project. In conjunction with NASA, the Lucerne space station has an authentic Mercury capsule, the Apollo-14 space suit worn by Edgar Mitchell, and moon rock picked by Neil Armstrong, the first man on the moon, who brought it personally to the museum.

The Swiss Transport Museum is the museum with the highest frequency of visitors in the country. In this, its thirteenth year, the figure of 5 million visitors was reached, and a record of 100 thousand registered for the month of July 1972 alone. And with the latest addition of an Air and Space wing, the museum becomes an even more exciting place. What is the secret of this success? Why is this museum so popular?

Without doubt the answer lies in director Waldis' personal determination to do all in his power to, literally, place the exhibits within the reach of other men's fancies, young and old. Instead of the usual "do not touch", most vehicles and items are there to be touched, engines to be tried out, models set in motion at the press of a button, and all the fogs of engineering mysteries become easily dissipated to even the most non-technically minded.

The advent of the space age became a source of tremendous fascination for Alfred Waldis. To stimulate interest and convey the information now available on Russian and American cosmic exploration and research, he uses the latest type projection and multi-vision equipment in his Planetarium and Cosmorama. These are assuredly the highlights of the museum and take us beyond the realities of daily life on Mother Earth to bring the stars, space programs and the investigation of our universe within our grasp.