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**Artikel:** Jean Rodolphe von Salis  
**Autor:** Thuerer, Georg  
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# Jean Rodolphe von Salis

## Table of Contents

- 2 Jean Rodolphe von Salis
- 4 Strikes in Switzerland
- 7 Assembly of the Swiss Abroad in St. Gall
- 8 Official Communications
- 11 Communications of the Secretariat of the Swiss Abroad
- 15 Switzerland back at Man and His World
- 16 Local News Vancouver
- 18 Local News Winnipeg
- 19 Local News Toronto
- 21 Local News Montréal
- 27 Switzerland from Day to Day
- 28 Sport

If you require who are the ten best-known and most meritorious Swiss of our times, most of those consulted both at home and abroad would certainly mention Prof. von Salis. Yet he neither sat in Parliament nor on the Federal Council. He taught history at the Federal Institute of Technology in Zurich for a third of a century and distinguished himself as influential publicist and as leading adviser on questions of Swiss culture.

## The Publicist and the "World Chronicler" on the Radio

J. R. von Salis comes from an old Grisons family and was born in Berne, the son of a doctor. He finished his studies by publishing two volumes on the far-sighted Geneva economist and historian Simonde de Sismondi who lived in the early nineteenth century. During his Paris years already, Dr. von Salis was outstanding as correspondent of Swiss papers. His thesis was the essential qualification for his call as historian of French language to the ETH in Zurich in 1935. During the passionately turbulent second half of the 'thirties, the politics of the dictators put many values in question, and one expected an answer from the historians as to what was of lasting value in our State, and in what way a minor State could contribute to the political culture of our contemporary world. Prof. von Salis, too, put his sharp powers of observation, his feeling for correlation and his responsibility towards his country and the world to proof: he became "World Chronicler" on the Swiss Radio.

Thousands of Swiss families vividly remember the Friday evenings on Radio Beromuenster during the second world war, and the familiar voice of a clear-sighted compatriot who, between 7.10 7.25 p.m., described the world situation from his point of view. How did he see things? Where was there a glimmer of hope on the horizon obscured by brown-black clouds? "Von Salis said ..." one

heard next morning on the way to work, again and again.

Later one learned that his world chronicles had even more listeners abroad, although tuning in to Radio Beromuenster was most dangerous in totalitarian States. But thousands were eager to hear the truth from a country where words were not twisted and science was not politically co-ordinated. The Federal Council in no way instructed Prof. von Salis when it asked the scholar in the spring of 1940 to inform listeners once a week on the world situation. When the "World Chronicler", reduced to one-third, appeared as a book five years ago, the author was able to confess: "My radio transmissions were in no way officially inspired. I received no hints from the "Federal Palace", no advice and no information. Neither had I any contact with the Army".

The Chronicler stood for freedom and human dignity, and he was deeply averse to the "demoniacal aspect of power". His weapon was the striking word. "Analysis is the best controversy", said Franz Werfel. Only too gladly would the National Socialists have replaced the uncomfortable man by a more accommodating one. But the Swiss authorities realised the resistance value of his voice, which corresponded to the mission of our neutral country.

## Historian of our time

Prof. von Salis experienced that history and present time could be in fruitful reciprocal action. The publicist was not to be disconcerted by daily events, because, as an historian, he could see the permanent features of the centuries, and his alert grasp of the present animated his understanding of the correlation of historical forces in the past. This is the reason why he wished every historian "that he should be given a chance to comment publicly on history in the making".

To our regret, the present issue of the *Swiss Canadian Review* has been delayed due to unfortunate circumstances and a lack of coordination in the transmission of the publishing material by the "Swiss Observer" in London.

His own field of research comprised mainly the last hundred years. Guiseppe Motta was born in 1871 and was a member of the Federal Council from 1911 to 1940. Prof. von Salis dedicated a biography to him with the subtitle "Thirty years of Federal Politics". His true life-work "World History of the most recent Times" also begins with 1871. It covers the period from the Franco-German War to the end of the Second World War and was published in three volumes in 1951, 1955 and 1961. One may say that the magnificent work serves as an encyclopaedia thanks to its register. Except that it does not put off the reader with a few key-words, but allows him to delve logically into the past. Is it surprising, therefore, to wish that the scholar should present history up to the present in a fourth volume?

On relinquishing his university teaching, J. R. von Salis began to study the relationship between "History and Politics". He knew that with all conscientiousness of scientific research, it was impossible to achieve a purely objective understanding of the past. In our thoughts concerning the matter, as well as in the written form of any findings (von Salis calls this an art), our own person is always involved. History and politics are concerned with man, and thus historical science is of considerable service to political science, even to politics themselves. It classifies examples, points out generally valid criteria and

*Jean Rodolphe von Salis*



sharpens the eye for analogies. It is true that no historic manifestation completely equals any other, but history teaches how previous generations mastered their problems. We must, however, not expect salvation from statisticians and technocrats only: we depend on the aid given by those who are knowledgeable as to the human soul, the conscious and the unconscious.

### Head of the Foundation "Pro Helvetia"

Does the State have a soul? In ordinary good or bad times any inner values are denied it. But in times of emergency one senses something of a closer bond between members of one nation. By nation we mean neither mere blood language relationship – the very make-up and characteristics of this Nation of Confederates speaking four languages prevents us from thinking thus. Prof. von Salis loved the playing together of languages and, like Rilke in his years in the Valais, he used French as well as German. With his work on "Rainer Maria Rilke's Swiss Years" he made a mark, too, in literature.

After the presidency of former Federal Councillor Haeberlin (1939–1943) and Mr. Paul Lachenal (1944–1952) the authorities looked for a third President of the Foundation "Pro Helvetia", and in Prof. von Salis they found an admirably endowed personality. Culture means cultivation. The activities of the Foundation cover literature, dialect research, folklore and ethnological studies, popular theatre, adult education, academic questions; they comprise all the arts and the Foundation promotes cultural exchanges inside Switzerland, with special attention to the regions of the Italian and Rhaeto-Romanic languages. In addition, "Pro Helvetia" represents Swiss creative work abroad and endeavours to make it known adequately and – at the most favourable – effective in a worldwide sense. Thus "Pro Helvetia" is not an administrative body in the usual sense: that would not have been in accordance with the ideas of the first Presidents, nor of those of the two General Secretaries Dr. Karl Naef (1939–1959) or Mr. Luc Boissonas (since 1959). Both the second and the fourth President, Dr. Michael Stettler (1964–1970), as well as Mr.

Boissonas have close connections with the arts. Dr. Naef was an expert in literature. Thus Prof. von Salis was in his element in this field of activities. Not the State as such creates culture. But where there is genuine creation, it can be fostered by public enterprise.

To supervise such an extensive field of activities and to dispose of the means intelligently is a confidential task and requires profound education, deep reverence for creative work, and above all, knowledge of human nature. Prof. von Salis liked to call the Foundation "Pro Helvetia" his child, he took care of its worries in a fatherly way and was happy when efforts were rewarded, when a supported enterprise became independent, when a creator succeeded.

Whoever was lucky to work together with Prof. von Salis anywhere, is grateful to him for much encouragement, all the more since conditions in Switzerland are not always easily discernable, and even less easy to mould. "Difficult Switzerland" is the title of one of the more recent works of Prof. von Salis, now a septuagenarian. Our Confederation is gift and obligation at the same time: again and again it needs counsellors and personalities of the order of a Jean-Rodolphe von Salis. May he be able to arrange his eighth decade in such a way as to enjoy leisure and creative work in balanced measure.

Georg Thuerer  
Collection "Pro Helvetia"