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Table of Contents

2 A short trip through the Canton of Neuchâtel
7 Sport
9 Official Communications
11 News from Montreal
17 News from Toronto
21 News from Winnipeg
22 News from Vancouver
24 Communications of the Secretariat of the Swiss Abroad
26 Switzerland from Day to Day

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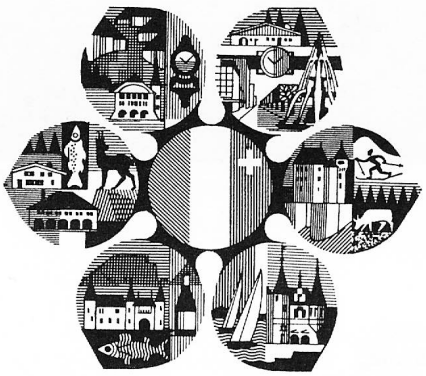
A short trip through the Canton of Neuchâtel

We continue our tour of the regions of Switzerland. After Ticino, we present – in cooperation with Pro Helvetia – the Canton of Neuchâtel where the Assembly of the Swiss Abroad will take place in August this year.



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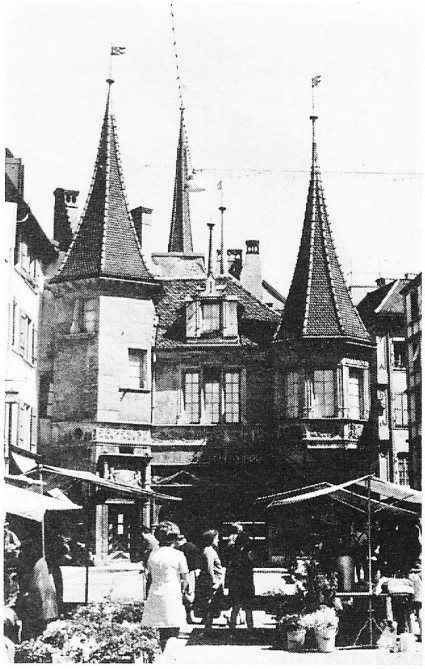
The author about herself:
Anne-Lise Grobéty was born in La Chaux-de-Fonds in the early days of 1949. She went to school there right up to matriculation. University life proved in her eyes a failure: "I had the choice of either playing a role in society which believes in the distinction of a degree, or of admitting that this system was not for me." She went into journalism. At the age of 19, she wrote her first novel "Pour mourir en février", which was already out of print a few months after publication. It was reprinted, and translated in Germany. Today, she lives with her husband Gil Stauffer in a house surrounded by meadows in the centre of the Val-de-Ruz. She continues to write stories and radio scripts and at the moment she is working on her second novel.
In the Neuchâtel elections of 1973, she was elected by the Socialist Party – to her own great surprise! – and, at 23, became the youngest woman member in the Grand Council.

*

"High" and "Low"
The Canton of Neuchâtel, like a weighty package, has a "top" and a "bottom". Many call it a front and a back, which is much the same. What is important is the strange mountain ridge, by which nature stresses the contrast (very friendly!) between the two parts of the region. The mountain ridge, the "Vue des Alpes", separates the Highlands from the Lowlands by way of a great big hunch. However many years pass, and however politicians may try to reach agreement: one comes from the Highlands, one comes from the Lowlands. . . .
The Highlands, that means the fir trees which grow on pastures higher and higher up, it means the two towns of Le Locle and La Chaux-de-Fonds which preferred to remain in the country, as they say. It is the Jura, the mountains, the short summer and long winter (when the magnolias begin to bloom on the shore of the lake, the crocuses in the fields of the Vue des Alpes passes just begin to peep timidly through the snow. . . . "Oh yes, but at least up here we have no fog in the winter!"
These remarks about weather and fog seem unimportant; but as soon as you talk to the people, you realise that in this there is a fundamental difference between the Highlands and the Lowlands, even a bone of contention. It is between the inhabitants of the Highlands who have to wait a long time for

the spring (although they take consolation in skiing) and those of the Lowlands where mist and fog veil the sun in the autumn, whilst there is brilliant sunshine up above.
The Lowlands, that means the lake and the vinyards, the fertile soil. It is the town of Neuchâtel which is reflected in the water of the lake below the Chaumont and whose pleasant suburbs extend ever further: Serrières, Hauterive, Saint-Blaise. . . .

Republics
This plot of land often changed its overlord in the course of the centuries. With the exception of the first, the Counts of Neuchâtel in the 12th century, whose line ended in 1373, it was always strangers, no Neuchâtelois. They originated from Freiburg/Breisgau, Baden-Hochberg, it was the Orléans-Longueville Family, the Brandenburgs from the Prussian dynasty. . . . Much later, the region was consolidated. Until 1592, there were two States: the County of Neuchâtel and the domain of Valangin, which comprised the largest part of the Val-de-Ruz, the districts of La Sagne, La Chaux-de-Fonds and Les Brenets.
For a long time, people put up with this foreign sovereign authority, until it finally came to a crisis. When the small territory joined the Confederation in 1814, it was literally "thanks to the fatherly invention of the King". At that time, one looked upon this unique entry into the Confederation with furtive astonishment. Funnily enough, it was the King of Prussia and his Ministers who urged the region to have closer ties with the Confederates. This union, however, finally went against the Prussians. For such a hybrid position could not possibly be anything but provocative.
In 1848, when the news came from Paris of the downfall of Louis-Philippe, the new Canton began to revolt. This started in the Highlands. After deposing, perfectly peacefully, the royal authorities in Le Locle and La Chaux-de-Fonds on 1st March, the inhabitants waded through the heavy snow which separated them from the Lowlands, in order to occupy the Castle of Neuchâtel.
And they did occupy it, without a single shot being fired. At 8 p.m., the Republic was proclaimed, and a temporary Government was formed immediately. It was the birthday of the Republic and Canton of Neuchâtel. Short work was made!
It must be admitted that a spirit of liberty has always existed in the high-lying part of the Canton. The international anarchist movement found approval there, theorists like Bakunin stayed there several times. This is connected with the economic circumstances and the border position of the region; it looks outwards and is open to ideas which concern the majority of its population, a population of workers.
Unfortunately, this spirit of liberty has disappeared somewhat during the new period of affluence, and one rarely feels it nowadays. In the Grand Council Chamber, the 115 deputies (amongst them seven women – Neuchâtel was the second Canton in Switzerland to give women the vote already in 1955) would have great difficulties to kindle the flame of revolu-


One of Neuchâtel's jewels, "La Maison des Halles" at Market Place (photo Charlet)

Neuchâtel, view from Boudry. (photo Freitag – O.N.T.)

Daniel Jeanrichard, the young and highly gifted smith. (photo Perret)

tion! Great political gestures have become rare. . . .

Development

Winters were long in the Highlands. During the good seasons, the people cultivated their fields; in the winter, on the other hand, when the snow was glued to the windows, they sat in their low living rooms and constructed all sorts of things with their hands. And finally they constructed a clock and soon the pastime was turned into the main source of income in their small part of the world.

The development of the watch-making industry in the 18th century will always be linked with the name of Daniel Jeanrichard. Legend has turned him into a blacksmith, who was once entrusted with the watch of an Englishman travelling through when Jeanrichard was a mere youth. In spite of complete lack of expert know-how, he managed to make the watch go again, and in fact even constructed from memory a similar new watch later. With that, the region had found its destiny.

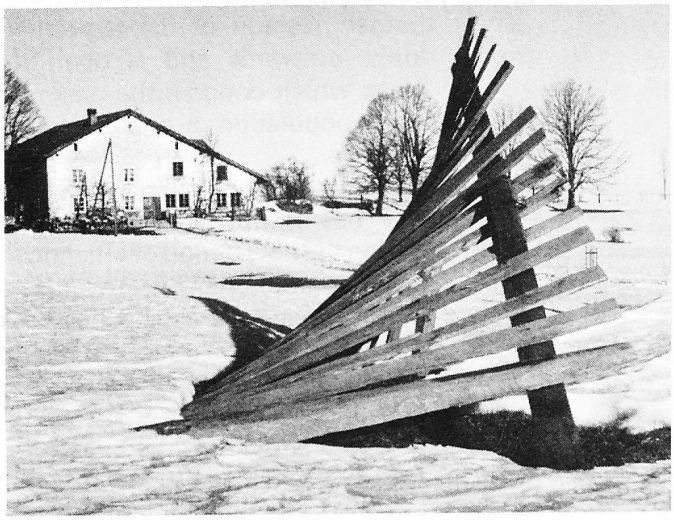
For Jeanrichard was intrigued by the whole business, got himself trained further and engaged helpers in order to satisfy the growing demand. The trade began to be lucrative, and soon there were nearly 300 watch-makers in Le Locle.

For almost 300 years, the watch-industry has reigned in the region and causes it to be upset in times of economic crisis; the growth in population is closely linked with this still all too monopolistic industry – diversification grows only slowly. In 1850, there were 70753 inhabitants in the Canton; today there are about 100000 more. The increase was by no means gradual: in 1910 it was 133061, in 1930, 124000 and eleven years later, 117 000.

At the moment, some fundamental questions face the watch-industry. Twenty years of growing affluence have practically obliterated the memories of the bad years, and the interest of the manufacturers was concentrated far more on immediate profitability and increase of production than on future prospects and the quality of their product. But then the sting of competition began to be felt and finally gave rise to research into technical fundamentals. It was none too soon – it began only a decade ago. As one manufacturer formulated it: "We now have to invest in the power of imagination" if we don't want to have a completely fossilised industry in ten or twenty years and don't want to run the risk that the watch-museum at present being built will really be nothing more than a museum, testifying to a dead past. . . .

There is no lack of problems. In the past few years, small firms have been liquidated like flies, and

On the heights spring chases winter and puts an end to the long-distance ski runs.



The town of La Chaux-de-Fonds looks very calm between its hills. However, the ideas boil in the streets . . . (photo Freitag)

the staff had to be re-employed. In order to keep alive, the watch-industry must change its structure and decide on certain amalgamations. They must also come to terms with the fact that the decision-making centres will have to be transferred to the central plain, yes, even worse, abroad, especially to the United States.

The measures taken by the Confederation to restrict the number of foreign workers in lucrative occupations, also make for labour problems. This especially since the watch-industry is by no means as attractive to the inhabitants as to former generations. Automation makes jobs less and less interesting, and the genuine watch-maker of earlier times who was justifiably proud of his craft, now has to toil forever in the same piece-work. One gingerly tries a step backwards here and there in order to humanise the work, and lets the workman have a few watch-parts to do construction work himself. . . .

All this demands energetic measures. Slowly they seem to emerge. The SSIH (Federation of the Swiss Watch-making Industry) decided to fight for the preservation of the good reputation of the Swiss watch on the world's markets. But such an effort costs a very great deal of money. The SSIH needs 54 million Swiss francs today, to meet the effects of inflation, to promote growth, to strengthen the overall structure and to develop new techniques.

Nevertheless, there are reasons for optimism. There are record orders for 1974, though there are still a few bugbears floating around. It is possible that the buyer of the electronic watch with digital indicator, on which one had put such high hopes, will not be very enthusiastic. And the difficulties to get enough labour for the realisation of the proposed plans, necessitate looking at possibly having to manufacture watches abroad and to increase automation even further. All this is by no means unique to Neuchâtel, but with the disappearance of so many workshops and occupations (real watch-makers, regulators, gold-case makers . . .) a whole attitude of mind appears likewise.

This mentality is reflected in the caricature by Numa, La Chaux-de-Fonds, in his worthy watch-maker, bending over the table at the window, with his magnifying glass on his forehead, patiently putting the watch together in the light of an oil lamp, until it slowly comes alive and begins to tick in his hands.

And one should – at least for a few minutes – hold the watch in one's hand and regret that this proportion, this life rhythm, this humanity are disappearing.

Alcohol

Strangely, alcohol characterises people far more than one imagines.

Geography

Number of districts:	6 (Neuchâtel, Boudry, Val-de-Travers, Val-de-Ruz, Le Locle, La Chaux-de-Fonds)
Number of communities:	62
Area:	796 km²

The Lake of Neuchâtel

Average altitude:	431 m
Length:	38 km
Maximum width:	8 km
Maximum depth:	153 m
Area:	217 km²

Altitude of some summits

Chasseral (Neuchâtel summit)	1552 m
Chaumont	1172 m
Montagne de Boudry	1387 m
Creux-du-Van – Le Soliat	1463 m
Tête-de-Ran	1422 m

Population

Canton	Neuchâtel (town)	La Chaux-de-Fonds (town)	Le Locle (town)
169 498	37 239	41 804	13 995

Economy

Federal Statistics of Industry (1973)

	Factories	Staff
Watches, jewellery	263	16 838
Metallurgy, machinery and equipment, instruments, vehicles	103	9 972
Food, beverages and tobacco	16	2 556
Paper, graphics, leather, rubber	47	1 972
Wood and timber, textiles, clothing, chemicals, oil, earth and stone	22	1 063

Political structure

Former principality, Neuchâtel became a Swiss Canton on September 12th, 1814; the Republic was proclaimed as from March 1st, 1848.

Cantonal authorities

Legislative: Grand Conseil (Greater Council), 115 deputies; i.e. during the period of legislature 1973–1977 41 socialists, 35 radicals, 26 liberals, 7 national progressists and 5 communists.

Executive: Conseil d'Etat (State Council), 5 members (2 socialists, 1 radical, 1 liberal, 1 national progressist).

The grapes have left the vines. Now begins the great alchemy in the barrel.
(photo Baillod)

For the inhabitants of the North, it is the beer, for those in the South, the heavy, intoxicating wines.
In this part of the world, too, everyone has his particular beverage. On one side of the mountain ridge it is the light, golden-yellow wines. In the vinyards of Neuchâtel, the same miracle happens as in all other vinyards: the gnarled bits of wood, which look perished in winter, gradually give life to the grapes; they will nourish them and make them swell until, in the autumn, laughing school children come and help with the harvest.
The wines of the Lowlands carry the names of the villages: Auvernier, Cortaillod, Cressier, Saint-Blaise. . . . From September onward, the big vats, encircled by iron hoops, are rolled out onto the street of Auvernier with its fountain at either end. They are scrubbed and left to dry until the grapes above the village have reached full maturity. They are then pressed and stored in the cellars, and that is where alchemy takes its course!
One had to fight hard in order to prevent all vinyards from being pushed away by concrete and country houses. In 1950, the vinyards still covered an area of over 858 hectares; today there are barely 567 hectares. And one prays to high heaven that the vinyards be protected, so that they will not fall victim to mighty steel-works like the vinyards in the Eastern part of the Canton. . . .
In the Highlands, alcohol is more mysterious. The people have not christened it "green fairy" for nothing; especially at the back of the Val-de-Travers, this peculiar absinth is distilled. The plants are gathered on the pastures, and distilled in copper-pots, fermented hidden in attic and cellar. It is against the law, and absinth has been illegal for many years. But even if the local policeman confiscates the coppers and cooling coils, new ones are immediately produced again!
Finally, the beverage smells beautiful in the anonymous bottles. The liquid turns the colour of emerald. The tasting is positively a ceremony: a lump of sugar is put on a fork, water is gently poured on it until the sugar melts and both fall into the absinth which begins to take on a light-green tint.

Life at the "Back"

Neuchâtel is relaxing because it is away from the busy connecting roads; and even if many complain about this, most inhabitants don't mind that they have peace. It is this very quiet which has attracted people again and again. They may have discovered it by accident and stayed on.
Even the towns don't look too urban. Just have a look at La Chaux-de-Fonds, the highest town in Europe (1000 m!). The town was planned after the manner of American cities – straight roads crossing at right angles and leading off the main street, the Avenue Léopold Robert, or the Pod as the people call it. An engraver/constructor with a love of architecture, Moïse Perret-Gentil, drew up the project at the beginning of the 19th century.
Yet only a few minutes away from the centre, and we are amidst fir trees, and it is very difficult indeed to imagine that this town, hidden in the green landscape between two ridges, offers lively cultural activities. It has a concert hall whose acoustics are amongst the best in Europe, and where famous musicians give performances; there are several repertory theatres, a film group, an art museum with special accent on contemporary works, speakers of world repute....
A Socialist movement had its origins here. Le Locle and La Chaux-de-Fonds have become reservoirs of bold ideas thanks to the watches which passed all frontiers and reached all countries. Thanks to this distribution of their products, the inhabitants have open minds, and some famous men started their career there: Le Corbusier, Blaise Cendrars.
The people have kept some of the characteristics of their peasant forefathers (the museum of Eplatures is a beautiful farmhouse of the 17th century and reminds us of the past). Old idioms, too, are used in some of the small farms.

Life in "Front"

The town of the Lowlands, Neuchâtel, is more imposing. After all,

The Peyrou Hotel and its French park at Neuchâtel. (photo Chiffelle)

it carries the signs of dignity: the Castle and the Collegiate Church on the hill, side by side for eight centuries. Today, the Castle is the seat of the cantonal administration, and typewriters rattle away in the old rooms.

Everywhere in the streets, one finds signs of a flourishing past. Buildings in French style, the Hôtel du Peyrou of the 18th century, the Council Hall built shortly before the *Empire,* the Maison des Halles in Renaissance style on the market square. Most of the large buildings in the centre of the town were constructed of the yellowish stone from Hauterive. Hence Alexandre Dumas, the Elder's statement when visiting the town "just like a giant toy carved from butter . . .".

Whichever way you stroll through the town, somehow you will always get back to the lake. On fine Sundays, its light and glittering surface is sprinkled with the white of sails, and on the shore people meander happily. The Neuchâtelois treasure their lake fervently. That is why tempers rise the moment the National Highway 5 is mentioned; for years, the authorities have been at their wits' end trying to find a solution which would not in any way spoil the aspect of the town nor the lake shore.

They say that it is in this town where the purest French is spoken. This reputation has always attracted large numbers of young foreigners every year. They come to attend schools, but above all the university which was opened in the middle of the last century. In 1948, there were 372 students. Today, there are over 1600 studying at the faculties of literature, natural sciences, law, economics and also theology.

Inspite of this considerable expansion, the University of Neuchâtel is still the smallest one in Switzerland. No doubt, this has great advantages: the student does not disappear in mass activities; he can keep in personal touch with his professors; he can express his opinion regarding the running of the University. On the other hand, he is not denied the advantages of a large university: instruction is excellent, the Cité Universitaire, one of the best appointed, offers quite a great deal also in the cultural field.

Thanks to its printing works and publishing houses, Neuchâtel also has political radiation. Situated near the French frontier, it served people and ideas banished from neighbouring France. Thus it happened that, during the French Revolution and when the Germans occupied France, voices which were no longer able to make themselves heard there, could be expressed in print here without obstacle. And how many authors have left traces in their works of the time spent in Neuchâtel: Mirabeau, Benjamin Constant, Chateaubriand, Shelley, Lamartine, André Gide, Sénancour, who had a "small weakness" for the wines from Cortaillod.

Many have been surprised to find the famous robots of the Jaquet-Droz, the almost life-size mechanical puppets which can imitate human movements and which amaze visitors of the Historic Museum ever and again. They also bring to mind that talented inventors made the Canton the land of precision work.

Between "High" and "Low"

I am a daughter of the Highlands and spent a few years in the Lowlands. And now, in order to reconcile the two poles so to speak, I have moved nearer the Highlands without leaving the Lowlands completely: I have chosen the Val-de-Ruz as my residence, that fine valley which spreads like a giant leaf and which overflows every year with wheat, oats, rape and maize.

Anne-Lise Grobéty

Sport

Rowing Championships 1974 in Lucerne

The Fourth World Rowing Championships will take place in Lucerne from 28th August to 8th September next. Competitors from five continents will try to gain the coveted medals on the famous Rotsee.

There will be five different boat categories for ladies and eight for men. As usual, the distances will be 1000 and 2000 metres.

In order to learn more about these championships and rowing in general, we talked to the young Neuchâtel lawyer Denis Oswald who has been Swiss champion already eleven times. He has taken part as member of the Swiss national team in all championships of the International Rowing Federation since the Olympic Games in Mexico where he gained the bronze medal for coxed fours.