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The 23rd Canton of Switzerland has been created

The author

Michel Margot (34), born in the Canton of Vaud, has been correspondent of the French-speaking Swiss radio in the capital. At present, he is President of the Association of Parliamentary Journalists. For the benefit of his audience at home and abroad, he has been commenting on the Jura problem for more than 10 years.

On 23rd June 1974, the electors of the Jura answered in the affirmative the question «Would you like to create a new Canton?» Thus the birth of the 23rd Canton of Switzerland was induced by a majority of approximately 2750 votes.

On 5th July 1959, a consultative plebiscite still resulted in a majority of 1191 noes.

This complete reversal in the whole of the Jura, however, must not make one disregard the fact that the gulf between the separatist North and the anti-separatist South has become even wider. Observers and responsible politicians wonder whether the unity of the Jura has disappeared for ever, all the more so as the Southern districts have already affirmed their loyalty to Berne. Corresponding Initiatives were launched immediately after the plebiscite, and the people of the three districts will, like that of the Laufental, decide finally in a second poll.

In order to study the history of the Jura problem, one has to go back at least to the year 1815: That is the time when the last Canton joined the Confederation and the boundaries of Switzerland were fixed. With it, the general military and political position prevented the formation of a Canton Jura. The vehemence of the cultural struggle in the Jura at the time indicates that the root of the separatist movement lies in the annexation of the former Episcopal Principality of Basle with Berne. This separatism exploded for the

first time in 1920 when a definitely Roman Catholic movement emerged which, however, soon faded away again. Two decades later, the autonomist current began afresh in various demands by the «Emulation» and «Pro Jura». The real catalytic agent, however, for all these separatist aspirations was the case Moeckli immediately after the second world war.

Georges Moeckli, a prominent representative of the Jura Socialism, died on the eve of the Jura plebiscite. He did not live to see the historic day which, after all, some of his adventures in the Council Hall in Berne, had helped to bring about.

The Detonator

Twice in 1947, the Bernese Great Council refused to hand over the Department of Building to the Jurassien Moeckli — it is known to facilitate getting on various boards ... —. The excuse given and openly voiced by Councillor Tschumi, was that «to give such a Department to a Councillor of French tongue would be an injustice to the inhabitants of the Old Canton».

This decision worked as a detonator. Varied and vehement protest flared up in the Jura. The Committee of Moutier was formed in order to represent the interest of the French-speaking minority with a programme of demands and campaigns. Already one heard talk of an independent Jura, and the Committee announced «studies with a view to a possible separation».

The Birth of Separatism

Parallel to this autonomist movement another group began to grow, demanding action in a much more decisive and energetic manner: The «Rassemblement Jurasien». Indeed the Committee of Moutier, weakened by interior dissidence, proved incapable of carrying on the fight after a few months. As champion of the separatist idea, the «Rassemblement» now also became its most vehement propagandist. Even then, political observers still did not take the movement seriously. One asked what was to become of it all. It was only in the 'fifties that one realised the «RJ» was growing, getting sympathisers and began working on a uniform police. The reaction was not long in coming. In 1952, the «Union des Patriotes Jurassiens» was founded. This movement, right from the beginning, has been as strictly anti-separatist as the «RJ» separatist, and for over 20 years, the two groups have been fighting each other.

Seventeen Proposals for Reconciliation

The parts were distributed once and for all: The imaginative and belligerent «RJ» dominated the combat whilst the «UPJ» was

satisfied with more or less fortunate reactions. Thousands of skirmishes occurred, until the Jura deputation to the Grand Council managed at last in 1965 to reach a certain unanimity amongst members of the various alignments and parties. As a result, 17 proposals as to improving the Jura constitution were handed to the Cantonal Government.

The main idea of the proposals can be summarised as follows: Enlargement of the Government from 9 to 11 members, which would allow the Jura to have a Christian Democrat representative as well as a Social Democrat and a Liberal; to create a Jura constituency for Government and National Council elections; to introduce an obligatory double majority in every amendment to the Cantonal Constitution. This was to apply to the Old Canton as well as to the Jura.

The Plan of the Government

In the 'sixties the position became critical. The «RJ» grew more uncompromising and began to use terrorist methods. The public began to be aware of the troubles, especially in Western Switzerland. In view of this development, the Bernese Government started to work out a plan which finally should allow self-determination to

the Jura people. That was in the year 1967.

The Government's plan comprised three parts:

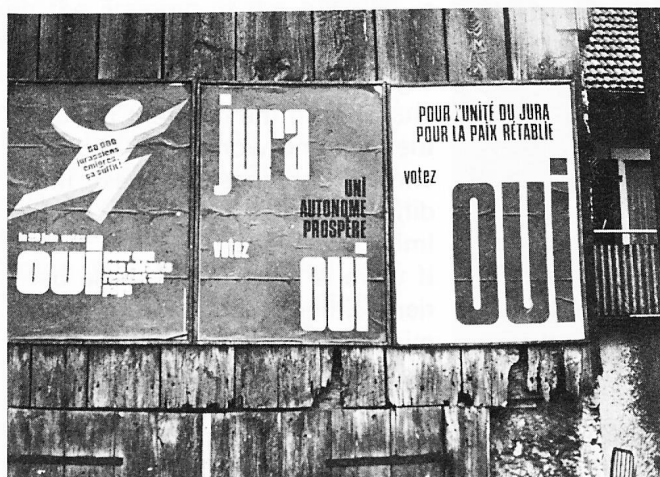
- a number of measures to improve the Jura constitution within the Canton of Berne (one phase of information – commission of 24 – and one phase of consultation),
- parliamentary consultation on the proposed measures and voting by the people,
- preparing the plebiscite.

The separatists declared themselves totally opposed to the manner of presenting the procedure.

The Confederation intervened

The Confederation did not remain inactive. It was most careful not to interfere in internal matters of the Canton of Berne. But in 1968 it offered its services with the «Commission confédérée de bons offices». The first report of this commission under the former Federal Councillor Max Petitpierre resulted in a third Jura movement, the «Mouvement pour l'Unité du Jura». This third party tried to find a way of reconciling the leaders of the «RJ» and the «UPJ». Its aim has been to preserve the unity of the Jura, either within or without the Canton of Berne.

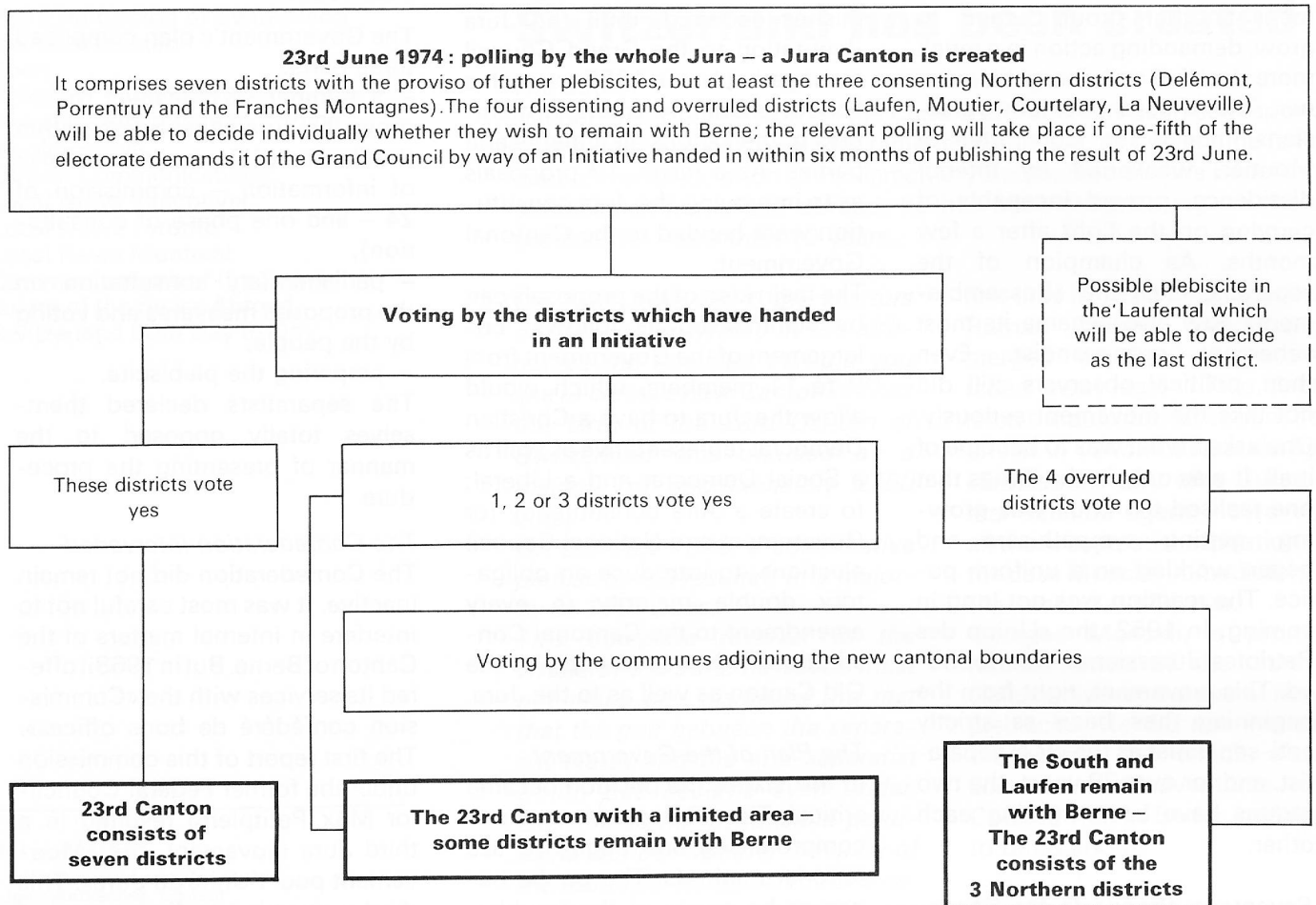
Posters galore ...



A patriot slightly ahead of his time! (Keystone)



The mechanism of the plebiscite



The Jura Constitution

The last important stage was reached, the publication of and consultation on the constitution of the Jura, which was contained in a report by the Bernese Government on the creation of cantonal regions. The report visualised a number of amendments to laws and constitutional articles. The Government hoped to give the Jura a new political character which would satisfy the largest possible number of Jura citizens. In the meantime, two most important referenda took place:

– in 1959 the Jura people, in a consultative referendum, refused the carrying out of a plebiscite.

The gulf between North and South was becoming more and more evident.

– In 1970, the electorate of the Jura and of the Old Canton accepted overwhelmingly the amendment to the constitution, on which the realisation of the plebiscite of 23rd June 1974 was based.

The Political Climate

Which is the climate in which the Jura problem originated and grew? The Jura region is divided into many fractions and anything but homogeneous. No fewer than seven parallel mountain ranges intersect the country between Bienne and Porrentruy. Equally

great are the differences between the various sections of the population. So first of all the two denominations, although the differences have become less violent than before. Next the two languages; for the German-speaking Laufental belongs to the French-speaking Jura. And finally the people's character in the different regions: the men and women of the Franches Montagnes are cast in a different mould from those of St. Imier.

If there is only one of these barriers, either of language or denomination, the climate is not too disturbed. Comparatively harmonious are the relations between the Laufental and the Old Canton; they are separated from each other

only by the difference in denomination. In spite of the two languages, the Protestant Jurassiens of the South get on well with their compatriots of Old Berne. It only becomes critical where language and denomination play a part: The Northern Jura is French-speaking and Catholic, the Old Canton German-speaking and Protestant.

Another thing which the Jura lacks apart from geographic, linguistic and denominational unity, is a central focal point. The whole region depends on several major neighbouring towns.

All this may help to understand the above-mentioned internal Jura problems.

Further Decisive Points

In this summary we must not forget important points such as the speech in 1963 by the former Federal President F.T. Wahlen at Saignelégier, the first clear indication that the Confederation was beginning to take an interest in the Jura problem; the discreet supervision of the polling stations on 23rd June 1974 by the Federal Administration; the beginning of obvious sympathizing by the «RJ» with other minorities, francophone and ethnic movements; the demonstrations of young people in the Béliet group and their list of spirited actions; the prompt reaction by the young anti-separatists with the creation of the Sanglier group; the slightly queer initiative «Off with the Jura», with which a Bernese demanded the expulsion of the Jura from the Canton of Berne; the wavering of the French-speaking people of Bienne whose hearts beat for a further *Romand* Canton and whose reason tells them that the loss of present *Romand* support would be serious; and finally the resolute attitude of the Bernese who would rather let the Jura go than a good part of their sovereignty.

One thing is certain: With its plan for a number of self-determining plebiscites, the Canton of Berne has pushed democracy to its utmost limits. This is unique in the annals of world history.

What of the Future?

On the first Monday in September, the Bernese Grand Council officially declared the result of the Jura plebiscite as valid. According to the outcome of the poll, with 36 802 votes for and 34 057 against, the three Northern districts (Porrentruy, Delémont, the Franches Montagnes) overruled the three Southern districts (Moutier, Courtelary, La Neuveville) and the Laufental). Without doubt, it was the very small majority in the district of Moutier which decided the issue. It is now up to the Southern districts to decide a second time whether they want to remain with Berne or prefer annexation with the new Canton. The third power reminds them that they should not easily take part in a separation of the Jura; it appeals

Everyone has his own way of showing pleasure (Keystone)



to the political parties to use all their influence to prevent irreparable damage. The «RJ» recommends to the South a definite no, regarding their adherence to Berne and at the same time speaks in favour of Jura unity. Not so the anti-separatists. Some remain loyal at any price, whilst others still weigh up for and against, i.e. remaining a minority in the Bernese or a majority in the Jura State. The Bernese Government puts its cards on the table: «Since the North will constitute a 23rd Canton in any case, the Jura's special autonomous status within the Cantonal Constitution is now out of the question.» In this respect at least, the situation has been clarified. The Laufental has additional possibilities to determine its future on its own.

At federal level, it seems, the maintenance of unity in the 23rd Canton has one big advantage: the French-speaking minority would be strengthened considerably. In future, one would have to count with an additional *Romand* vote in federal plebiscites, and two further French-speaking members would join the Council of States.

A Viable Canton

As it may be, a Canton Jura with only three districts is capable of living: with a total population similar to that of Schaffhausen and an area corresponding to that of Neuchâtel, the North on its own can easily form a «self-sufficient» State.

The new Canton will have to give itself a Constitution some time, to express itself in form and spirit. With this, perhaps, it may have an influence on the present total revision of the Federal Constitution: The whole of Switzerland may bring up questions which one thought resolved for all times.

Michel Margot