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# Meeting Place Ticino

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## THE SUN-TRAP OF SWITZERLAND

It is not without reason that the Canton of Ticino is called the sun-trap of Switzerland. With an annual 2,230 hours of sunshine it compares favourably with Zurich (1,704), Berne (1,708), Basle (1,756) and Geneva (2,047), and deserves that "meteorological title".

When one connects the Ticino with sunshine, one dreams of deep-blue skies framed by tall, thickly wooded mountains, of the smell of the partly tropical plants and, of course, of the sun covering everything in its brilliant light and enhancing every corner of the old brickwork with special magic. Unfortunately, such dreams are often spoilt by the encroachment of technology and environmental pollution.

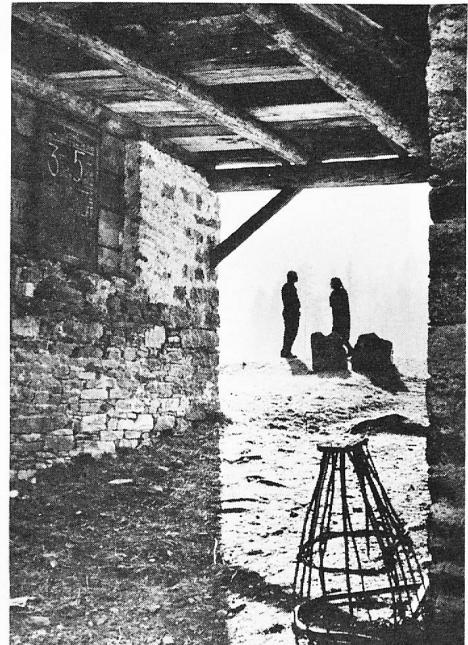
### With Wines . . .

Any traveller to the Ticino will realise that vines grow everywhere, in every possible and impossible place, on the plain, at the lakeside, on the sunny slopes of the narrow valleys, along houses and garden-walls. Sometimes, vines are trained on struts to form a covered way, a pergola. Heavy bunches of dark blue grapes hang from these green foliage roofs. It is remarkable that the ground under the pergola roofs are cultivated with vegetables or maize – an aspect of the diversity of the Ticino.

In the Ticino, it is mostly red wine that is grown and drunk: "Barbera" and above all "Nostrano". The old vines of the "Nostrano" have largely died out, and in their place, one plants mainly the heavy, fruity "Americano", though the wine is still called by its old name. At Arzo, Meride and Tremora, one of the rare white wines of the Ticino is grown, the "Vino dei Tre Castelli". Whoever passes through these districts should not miss tasting them.

### . . . Maize . . .

On the outside of many farmsteads, golden yellow bunches of corn-cobs are hung up to dry. Maize is cultivated above all in the Magadino Plain and in the Mendrisiotto and supplies the main



*A scene in Valle Maggia.*

ingredient for one of the best-known Ticino dishes, the "Polenta".

### . . . and Tobacco.

Tobacco cultivation is one of the most typical aspects of agriculture in the Ticino. The main districts for it are the Mendrisiotto, the Luganese (Malcantone) and the Magadino Plain. Over 300 large and numerous small producers cultivate more than 9½ million square metres. The work is done to a large extent by women and young people. The tobacco is planted in May and harvested in August/September. The green leaves are threaded on string, and hung up in sheds or on the outside walls of houses. In the course of winter, the leaves are carefully pressed into bales and prepared for collection by the manufacturers. The tobacco is then fermented as certain properties, such as protein, must be reduced.

Tobacco growing, maize and wine provide the Ticino with characteristics without which one cannot picture the Canton.

## The People

Visitors to the Ticino, be they foreigners or compatriots from northern or western parts of the country, marvel again and again that the Ticino should be part of Switzerland. This Canton is so different from the rest of Switzerland; the people and the language so unlike those of other parts of the country: Melodious names appear; words usually end in o, a or i. No more *Verboten* which indicates discipline, but a *Vietato*, though it is not difficult to believe that under the southern sun, this word is of far less significance than elsewhere. On the other hand, though, it is said that the word *Nonna*, grandmother, still carries much weight. The story goes that a young man from the Ticino, displeased with his home, expressed a wish to emigrate to America in order to start a new life. His wife approved of the plan, as did his mother-in-law, though somewhat reluctantly. The *Nonna*, however, was not at all in agreement and said *no*, upon which the young man stayed at home!

## At the Grotto . . .

The *Grotti*, the small inns, are dotted all over the Ticino. They are a

favourite meeting place for men. There they discuss events and political topics, eat a trifle and have a drink.

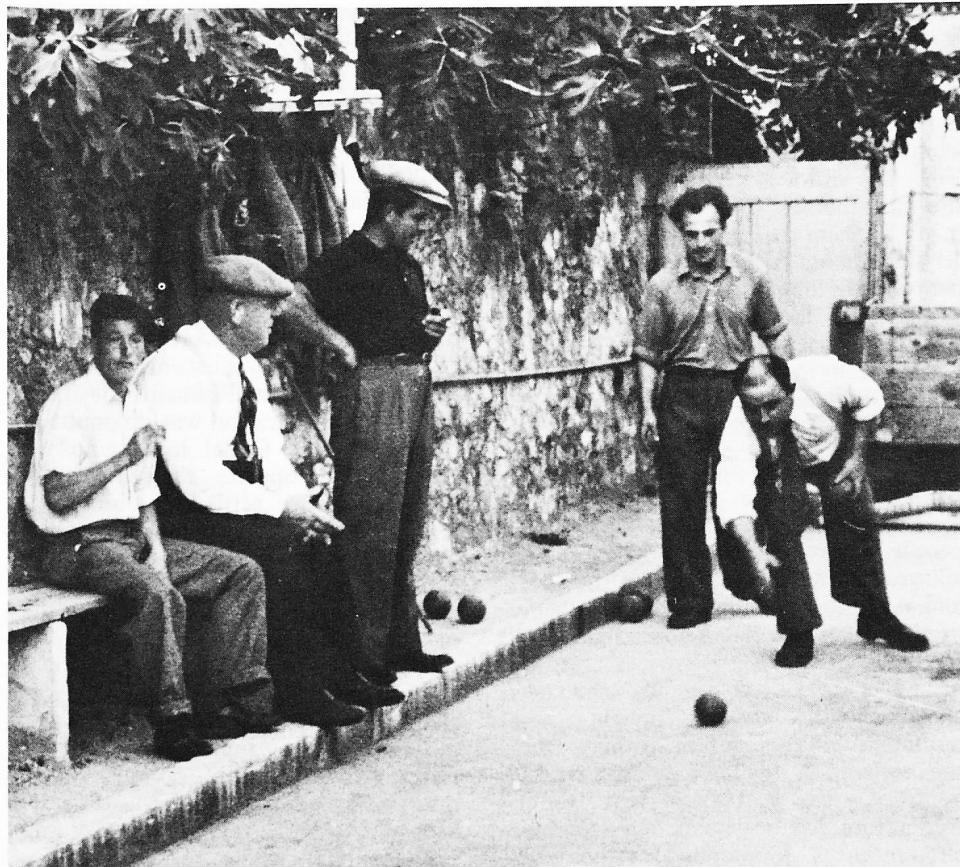
Outside the *Grotto*, there are rough seats with wood or granite tops. Trees or vines are trained along wires form a green roof which protect one from the hot sun and which make a stay at the *Grotto* particularly relaxing.

## . . . and playing Boccia

Next to nearly every *Grotto* there is a *Boccia* alley where one finds men, their shirt-sleeves turned up, choosing a bowl, aiming and throwing . . . The bowls in the alley roll away and strike against the barrier at the far end.

First one throws a small bowl. Then the other players try to get their larger bowls as near as possible to the small one. The aim is to push the opponents' bowls out of the way in one single throw. Specially clever players succeed in throwing their own bowls in such a way that those of the opponents roll away whilst their own remain put.

Spectators play an important part in the game. They stand along the alley or sit at the *Grotto* tables, giving their expert opinion on the players' performance.



## THE LANDSCAPE

### Lago di Lugano

Of the many lakes adorning the Canton of Ticino, that of Lugano is probably the most interesting. Framed by mountains like Monte Brè and San Salvatore, it appears like a labyrinth of gulfs in its irregular shape. At its greatest depth, the lake reaches 17 metres below sea level. Yet, between Melide and Bissone it has a ford which enabled people to build a bridge across the lake, over which all the road and rail traffic passes today. Boats can glide underneath the arches if they put down their funnels.

Equally famous as the Lake of Lugano is the Lago Maggiore with its holiday resorts such as Locarno, Ascona, the Brissago Isles and their botanical garden. Both regions have a mild, almost Mediterranean climate. The most impressive fact for any Swiss living the other side of the Gotthard, is the realisation that there is a part in his country where cypresses, palm trees, orange, fig and olive trees grow in abundance.

### Plain . . .

To the west of Bellinzona lies the triangular plain of Magadino, the alluvial tract of the Ticino river. Compared to other plains, such as that of the Po, it is but modest. Yet it is of some considerable importance to the Canton of Ticino, seeing that there are some industries, especially the only linoleum factory in Switzerland, at Giubiasco.

### . . . and Highlands

The picture of Corippo in the Verzasca Valley shows how narrow the valleys of the Ticino are and how mountainous the character of this part of the country. Granted, there are no giants of 13,000 ft, but many peaks provide worthwhile mountaineering on rock and ice for the Alpinist.

The Ticino has to contend with the same difficulties as the "classical" mountain Cantons Valais and Grisons. As an example, one only has to look back to the avalanche year of 1951. Previously, an avalanche had gone down four times in the same spot above Airolo; but on each occasion the strong protective wall had arrested it. Not so in that fateful night — it went over the defensive wall at a width of 300 metres and burst right into the middle of the village.

"Boccia" players.



View of Lugano and Mount San Salvatore from Monte Brè.

## TOWNS AND MOUNTAIN VILLAGES

### The Tourist Trade

Ever since people discovered the beauty of the Ticino, the tourist trade has become one of the most important aspects of the economy. The Canton is a poor one, and the security offered by the tourist trade to many Ticinese is most welcome.

Hotels, swimming baths, motor-boat harbours and places of entertainment began to appear on the lake shores. Ever more strangers wanted to enjoy the beauty of the lakes throughout the year and had fine houses built at Lugano or Ascona; the latter is now considered "hyper-snobbish".

Some people gave up their strenuous work in the vineyards on the lake shores and sold their land to Swiss from the German-speaking region of the country and above all to foreigners. They began to live on the purchase money and opened businesses. Germans specially, had mansions built on the slopes above the lakes.

This speculative development in the Canton of Ticino caused talk about the "*Ausverkauf der Heimat*" — selling out the homeland. It resulted in parliamentary intervention and legislation by the Government to regulate the sale of property and building sites to foreigners.

Expensive approach roads now cut across the slopes; houses and hotels of every class cling to the rocks. Concrete walls have partly replaced the previous chestnut groves and vineyards. In some of the Communes along the lake, the native population barely accounts for one-third. This foreign influx had and has to be paid for. Water pollution resulting in partial or

full prohibition of bathing, garbage dumps in unjustifiable places and other ecological crimes are the consequences which the Canton now has to bear.

### ... the other Side

Rasa is one of those villages which is not situated on a lake, but on the other side of the mountains, in the Centovalli. Even today there is no road leading up to the little village at an altitude of 900 metres. For the last ten years there has been a cable-railway across the deep Melezza Ravine and high up to Rasa. Previously, all the traffic had to use a mule-track leading steeply and laboriously up to the village.

The visitor is struck immediately by the large houses. Who would guess that many of them are empty! There are only 13 inhabitants left, all aged. The young people have long gone down to the valley where they have better opportunities. The school has been closed for decades — no children live there any more. Fifty years ago, there were 60 inhabitants. How many will be left in ten years?

### Emigration

As far as one can think back, young people have left the poor mountain villages for the valleys, because the fields and vineyards could not feed them. Many of them acquired riches abroad and then remembered their native villages by having a road constructed or a new church built. Mostly, though, these mountain villages gained nothing from the emigration of their youth; on the contrary, they lost their best labour. Agriculture was neglected, and economic circumstances deteriorated further still.

Emigration from the Canton of Ticino showed strange phenomena: The young emigrants from any particular district all took on the same occupation. The chimney-sweeps in Upper Italy, for example, all came from the Verzasca Valley, the Centovalli and the Onsernone Valley. On old maps, the latter still bears the same *Kämifegertal*, valley, of the chimney-sweeps. Builders and artisans came from other valleys; the most famous among the Ticinese builders, Carlo Maderno, erected the façade of St. Peter's in Rome.

### Bosco-Gurin

Near the end of the Maggia Valley, one finds the highest village of the Ticino, at the same time one of the strangest places in the whole of Switzerland. In order to understand why the houses remind one of the Valais, why the village has two schools, one German- and one Italian-speaking, and why the inhabitants speak an almost unintelligible Alemannic dialect, one must go back in history.

Historians agree that in the 13th and possibly even the 14th century, strong groups of daring colonisers from the Upper Valais trekked south- and eastward in order to find a new home in the upper valleys of Piedmont, in the Grisons and in Vorarlberg. They were of Alemannic origin. Their ancestors had settled in the Bernese Oberland and the Upper Valais long before the year 1000, and thus one might say that this emigration was a last remnant of the European mass migration.

The main reason for this resettling during the Middle Ages still plainly discernible today, must have been the poor soil of the Rhone Valley. This inner-Alpine migration was no doubt also helped by the feudal lords who were anxious to populate their valleys by colonisers. Once settled, the immigrants were employed in the upkeep of communications or recruited as warriors used to mountainous conditions. The new arrivals had to work hard to acquire their meadows. But once they had cleared the soil, they were in a better position to demand improved legal status. A special characteristic of these "Walser" settlements are the widely scattered farmsteads. The now famous holiday resorts Davos, Arosa and Klosters are a typical example of these early settlements.

The district of Bosco-Gurin was colonised from the Upper Valais and *via* the Val Formazza in the Piedmont. In a document dating back to 1311, one finds mention of an agreement made in 1244 according to which the Commune of Losone leased some alpine pastures in the district of Busco de Quarino to certain persons from Formazza for a period of 29 years. Further on, the document states that according to an agreement made in 1273, these alpine pastures were made over to the people of Bosco for "eternal feudal benefice".

## A COUNTRY OF CHURCHES

The Ticino is reputed to be the homeland of great artists. Particularly in the Renaissance period, great master builders left for other countries. Artists and skilled artisans from the Sotto-Ceneri created the Kremlin towers in Moscow, churches in Venice, Triente and Rome, the Royal Palace in Naples. Yet in their Ticinese homeland, we rarely find one of those beautiful buildings similar to those commissioned by sovereigns of the big world — no such wealthy men in the Ticino.

Nevertheless there are many examples testifying to the great artistic talents, viz. many small and large churches whose architecture was influenced from Italy. This is more especially evident in the beautiful belfries, the *Campanile*. Many of these churches, often very old, are hidden at the far end of a mountainous valley, at the last stage of a steep pilgrims' path or high above the roofs of a town, clinging to a mountain side. These churches have been the only luxury of the poor valleys for eight centuries. The life of the believer is a hard one, for the beauty of these valleys is far greater than their fertility. Yet the churches are often painted in cheerful colours, in orange, white or pink.

### Via Crucis

As in Italy, the figure of the Virgin Mary is much revered. Its effigy is often found in wayside chapels, and invariably it is decorated with fresh flowers. In processions, too, statues of Mary are carried through the villages. There are many stories and legends telling of the Virgin's apparition. On such a manifestation, the founding of the pilgrims' church Madonna del Sasso near Locarno is based.

In the Ticino, one often finds a church on high ground above the village. The path leading up to it is lined with the

Stations of the Cross, the *Via Crucis*. North of the Alps, this is found inside the churches.

## Communications

### Swiss Federal Railways

The Gotthard has been of importance ever since the Middle Ages, especially since the crossing of this mountain pass is possible in one ascent and one descent. The era of finally conquering the Alpine barrier between North and South began with the cutting through the Gotthard massif and the construction of the Gotthard railway.

It took ten years of work until the railway could be opened in 1882. Even today, the Gotthard railway is considered ideal as far as its siting and elevation is concerned. It allows for a maximum gradient of only 2.6% and thus allows for flexible operation. How fortunate that the project with loop-tunnels was chosen in preference to a funicular or rack-railway! Today, a freight train can travel from Basle to Chiasso without changing the locomotive. The Gotthard tunnel itself is 15 km long with an apex of 1,154m.

### The Centovalli Railway

The Centovalli — literally the hundred valleys — forms the quickest connection between the Ticino and the Valais. It leads *via* Domodossola and the Simplon. As its name implies, many small and very small valleys join the main one. It is a picturesque and rather wild district, and it was not until 1908 that the first postal coach ever ventured onto the dangerous roads.

Four years later, the railway line from Locarno to Domodossola was planned. In order to carry out this daring project, many bold bridges of steel and concrete had to be constructed. In 1923, the first travellers were able to undertake the impressive journey, though many a passenger must have looked down into the awful gorges with some trepidation! One must not forget that this railway line consists almost entirely of bridges and tunnels apart from the stops on the way.

### Postal Motor-Coach Services

Any traveller in the Swiss Alps knows the yellow postal motor-coaches. Before moving into the hairpin bends, they warn the oncoming traffic by sounding their melodious horn.

In the narrow side valleys of the Ticino where the mountainous and very narrow roads are difficult to negotiate,

the postal coach is the most important connection between the villages and the larger places in the plain and at the lakeside. There are no fewer than 55 different postal coach routes in the Canton. Anybody who wishes to visit the narrow valleys by car should consult the timetable of the coaches most carefully, so that he won't meet any of the yellow buses on roads where it is impossible to make way. It is not advisable for anybody inexperienced on mountain roads to drive along these narrow roads. It is preferable to leave the car at home and travel by coach. Their drivers are most skilled and experienced and have the know-how necessary to drive along the adventurous hairpin bends.

## Bridle-Paths

The Centovalli is paradise for bridge engineers; there are three different kinds, for the railway, for the road and for the ancient muletracks. These are narrow bridges constructed from rough stones. Yet they form elegant arches across the ravines. Green plants grow between the stones and climb up to the parapets, so that the bridges look as if they were part of the rocks.

## THE GOTTHARD PASS ROAD

The most important North/South communication of Switzerland is the Gotthard, both road and rail leading from Basle to Chiasso. Whilst the railway passes under the Alpine massif in a 15 km-long tunnel, the road winds its way up to the Gotthard Pass at an altitude of 2,100 m. Many thousands of vehicles crawl over the pass every summer. Today it is the most important crossing in Switzerland. Though in the past, the road was not always as vital for international traffic.

In Roman times, it was the Schoellenen Gorge North of the pass, which formed an unconquerable obstacle, and the Romans preferred to let their legions cross the Great St. Bernard or the Julier Pass. It was not until the Middle Ages that the construction of the Devil's Bridge made the Schoellenen Gorge negotiable.

An old legend says that the Devil built the bridge overnight. The people of Uri had to pay for it by letting the Devil have the first living soul that crossed the bridge. The crafty men, however, did not send a human being across, but a billy goat!

### ... in Olden Times ...

Once the Devil's Bridge existed, the Gotthard route became one of the most

important trade channels in Europe. Thousands of mules carried goods from Italy to the North and the other way round. The valleys through which the roads led, extracted toll. The people of Uri wanted to keep the money for themselves and after they had united with the people of Schwyz and Unterwalden and founded the Confederation in 1291, they threw out the Habsburg bailiffs. The inhabitants of Central Switzerland were not satisfied with the toll money they gathered at the North side of the Gotthard and wanted to get hold of the full route. Gradually they conquered the whole of the Canton of Ticino and would probably have added further territories if they had not been beaten badly at the Battle of Marignano in 1515.

#### ... and Today

The Gotthard road was built between 1820 and 1830. Since then, it has been improved and enlarged several times, but on the whole it still follows the route as it was built originally in the last century.

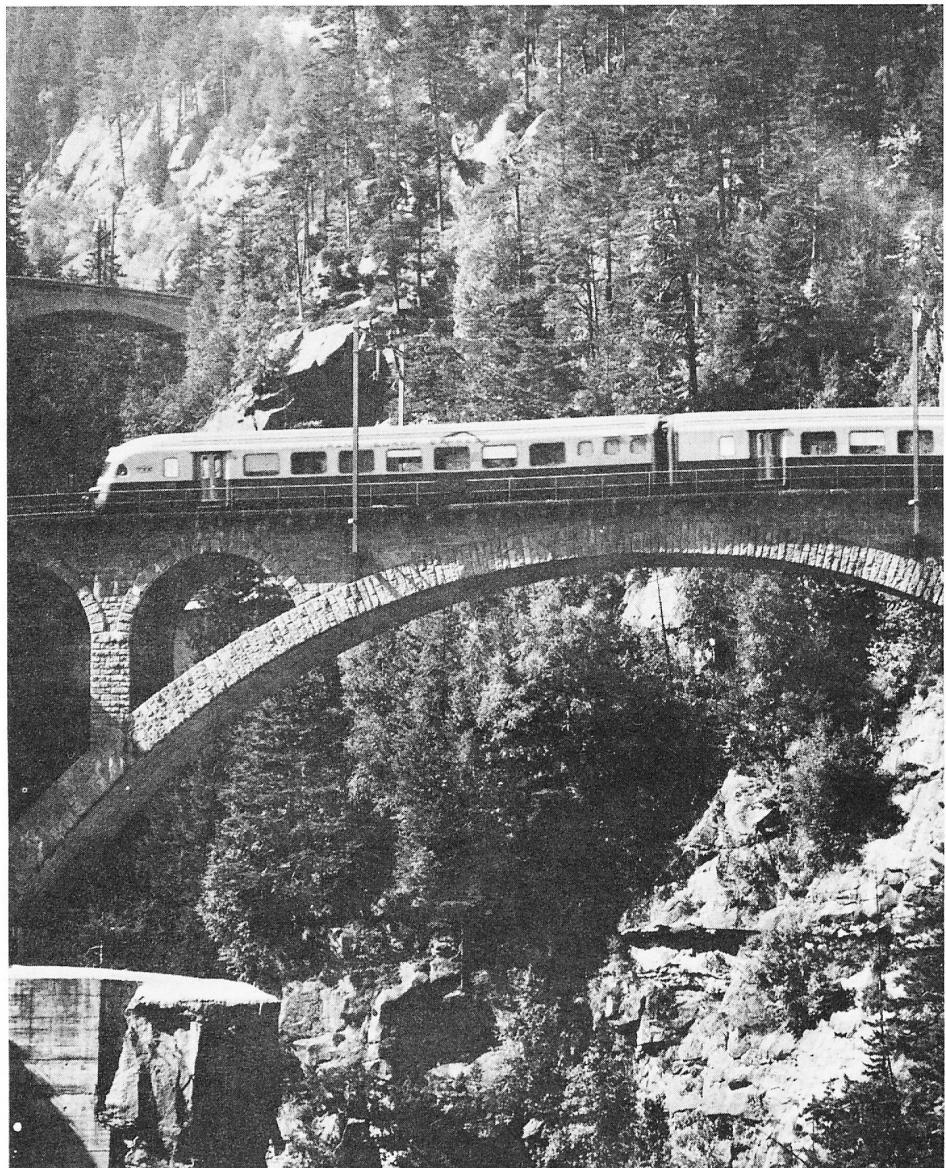
In 1967, a magnificent new road was inaugurated which leads in sweeping curves from the pass down to Airolo and makes driving much more pleasant.

#### "Trade"

In the trade with Italy, the Ticino holds a special position. Apart from the gigantic freight traffic which is handled at Chiasso, there is also another type of trade, not official. The goods actually do reach Italy from Switzerland, but without passing the customs. Although no official figures and reports exist, it is an open secret that above all cigarettes leave Switzerland in such a manner. Sometimes it is maintained that several lovely churches and chapels in small villages near the frontier were built only thanks to the money made in smuggling.

It must be said that many of the Ticino smugglers are practically forced to make money illicitly, for their soil is so poor, and once they have realised that in a single hour of smuggling they can make as much as or even more money than in a full day's work, temptation is great. Naturally, much is put at risk in a smuggling venture, and it is by no means harmless. Customs men and smugglers have lost their lives.

At a house of the village of Caprino on the Lake of Lugano, a variety of articles are exhibited which the customs authorities have confiscated in the course of the years. A visit to this strange "museum" gives one an insight into the methods and means of the smuggling trade.



*The Gotthard line at Wassen as it climbs over 600 ft. in a huge S-bend, crossing the Meienreuss torrent three times. Here the TEE train "Ticino", on its way from Milan to Zurich, crosses the middle bridge some 230 ft. above the torrent.*