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The Canton of Solothurn

Biographical notes on Albin Fringeli

Albin Fringeli was born in 1899. For many years, he was a teacher at Nunningen (Solothurn). For over 50 years, he has published the annual «Dr Schwarzbueb». He is the author of lyric poetry and prose, above all in the vernacular of the «Schwarzbubenland» (Solothurn Jura). He wrote the festival pageant of the Canton of Solothurn performed at the Swiss National Exhibition in Lausanne in 1964. He was awarded the Johann Peter Hebel Prize in 1961. He has an honorary doctorate in philosophy from the University of Basle.

The Canton of Solothurn is full of surprises; Whoever doubts this fact, should ask a number of men and women at random and find out what sort of mental image they have when they hear the name «Solothurn». A woman from South Tirol may answer quite spontaneously: «That is a district in the Jura, hilly like my homeland.» Her escort does not think of a state in the first place, but of a town: «Solothurn? I can see the clumsy Basle gateway, the mighty rampart and behind it the beautiful Church of St. Ursus.» And next: «Solothurn – the most bizarre state structure one can possibly imagine.» Yes, such an answer, too, we have to accept. The educated will probably use more refined language and say: «That state is devoid of any geographical logic!» The industrious pupil of yesteryear remembers his teacher who taught him that one needs a good 12 hours to get from the furthest point of the Canton on the Bucheggberg to the boundary of the Leimental. To follow the river Aar from Grenchen to Schoenenwerd would take 10 hours on foot. But if one puts someone on a seemingly remote spot anywhere in the Canton of Solothurn, he would be able to leave Solothurn soil within an hour. No need even to hurry, in order to get from the out-of-the-way corner to the Bernbiet, Basland or even the Alsace. Three en-

claves, too, the poor pupils will have to memorise: Steinhof, Kleinluetzel and the Leimental. The Solothurn people of the Middle Ages, hungry for land as they were, were hindered again and again by their neighbours from giving their state a reasonable and natural geographical form. Occasionally, they had penetrated into the region of the Prince Bishop of Basle, had occupied the townlet of Laufen, beleaguered the stronghold of Muenchenstein, had carefully moved forward across the narrow boundaries, and finally had to return again to the Aar, leaving behind the much coveted land beyond the Jura chains. Especially after the religious wars in the 16th century, the Solothurn people as Catholics, had to be most careful not to provoke serious conflicts with their Protestant confederates from Berne and Basle. And so the Canton looks like a poor, plucked bird on the map: Kienberg, immediately above the Fricktal, forms the beak. The trunk between Grenchen and Schoenenwerd has

a hole, the Bernese Bipperamt, as if a nasty animal had bitten a fat piece off the back of the persecuted bird. In the year 1415, the people of Solothurn went on the march to conquer the Aargau together with their neighbours from Berne. For half a century, they administered jointly the Bipperamt and the Gaeu. Two masters? One came to an agreement to share the cake amicably. Berne retained the Bipperamt, whilst Solothurn was allowed to keep the Gaeu as its property. Thus, if a man from Solothurn wanted to ride on an even road from his capital in the direction of the Aargau, he had to pass through the sovereign territory of Berne. Only someone who does not mind the fatiguing way across the heights of the Jura, can cross the Canton of Solothurn without trespassing into «foreign» soil. A Jura Canton? Yes, but we must not forget that one-third of this state reaches right out into the Swiss midlands. A wide valley bottom. The Aar Valley with several tributaries which lead behind

Olten at the bank of the Aar river

(SNT0)

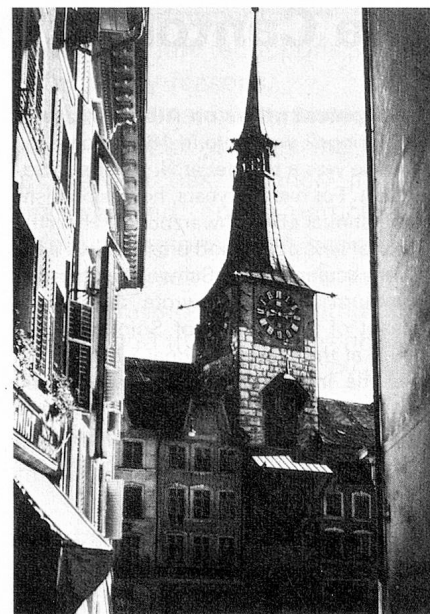


the Jura chains. Coming from Zurich or Berne, one believes that the blue Jura escarpment facing one, calls out: «Thus far and no further!»

Jeremias Gotthelf in his «Annebaebi Jowaeger» says about the beloved blue mountain extending behind a beautifully irrigated narrow valley: On the Weissenstein which nearly reaches up to the skies, there were many woods and pastures on it, but as Annebaebi Jowaeger thought, there was also some land; but nobody would think of it unless they had seen it themselves. That is the Jura mountain range densely wooded. Nowadays we only call one of the approximately 12 ranges «the Blue one». Roughly 55 km of the nearly 400 km-long Jura mountain range as such lie in the Canton of Solothurn. The Canton also has a share of the Jura plateau. That is the case in the changeable part between the Hohe Winde (1204 m) and the Baselbiet, as well as in the Schwarzbubenland. Contrasts and peculiarities developed on the sunny and dry heights of the Jura and in the parallel and lateral valleys. Since the various Chambers used to serve under many noble families and monasteries and formed, so to speak, individual, well-defined little states, a multitude of cultural differences thrived in rather confined space. The diverse nature of the soil has become the inhabitants' fate. The Canton of Solothurn does not speak an uniform Alemannic dialect. The vernacular of the Aargau and Berne got entwined with the inherited language. The dialects of the Schwarzbubenland have been

influenced by the sounds from the Baselbiet and even from the Alsace. The freedom of the industrial age and certain fashionable crazes, too, deprived the language of the Canton of Solothurn of its very own idiom. But what has remained is the mass of rock rising to the skies, with recesses in the chalk face, which used to be sought after in former times by falcons which made their nests there. There still are the wild, romantic small gulleies, as well as the gentle river valleys of the Bucheggberg which invites us to linger in this intimate, self-contained farming countryside. The other farming district, Gaeu of Solothurn, has changed its face in but a few years. Factories, business houses and modern dwelling blocks have risen on the fields. The construction of the national road has attracted greedy people like a mighty magnet. The Gaeu of many legends and customs lives on in the memory of few people only. Some writers and historians have preserved the past of this wide plain between Oensingen and Olten for posterity. The river Duennern with its many bends, flanked by native willow trees, can no longer overflow. It has been «corrected». It is with nostalgia that one talks about old times, but also with pride about the present which has allowed so much progress.

«Mir Luetli uf em Baerg deheim...» (We the people at home on the mountain...) Josef Reinhart sings in one of his songs. Gone! Once upon a time one could hear from the top of the Jura heights the shepherd songs by the blind singer Alois Glutz: «Goeh mer zu de



Clock-Tower in Solothurn

(SNTU)

Chuehne use...» Gone! The young people no longer go up to their cows on the pastures early in the morning. They ride to the factory. They earn much money and have a fine house built, equipped like flats in town. An enormous, almost frightening change has intruded like a howling whirlwind into the villages, and all within a few decades, in order to shake up all tradition, waiting to see how the battle between things handed down and new notions would end.

Once a typical farming country, today it is the Canton most blessed with industrial undertakings in Switzerland! Already in the Middle Ages, it was a countryside with enterprising inhabitants endeavouring tenaciously to extend their sovereign land in all directions. Their penetration towards the midlands was halted by the Bernese after a short time. The districts of Bucheggberg and Kriegstetten, the Wasseramt, remained as spoils. Upstream along the Aar, on the Leberberg, the Solothurn people gained a footing towards Grenchen already in the 14th century. Downstream, the fertile Gaeu and the town of Olten, subject to the Bishop of Basle,



Yes and no

Courier of the Solidarity Fund

No, sure, it's never too late in the day
To solidarity you must say aye

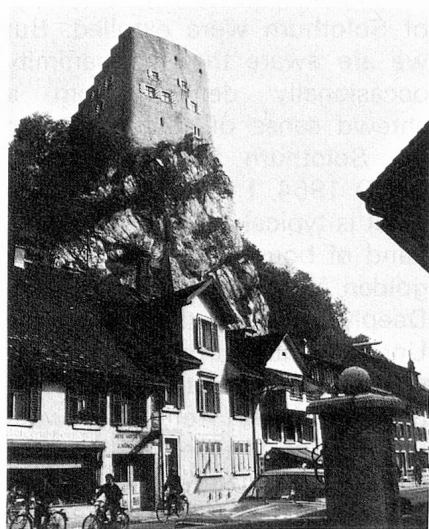
and the Niederamt beckoned. Down there, the Bernese had been masters since 1415 when the Aargau was conquered. The Solothurn people tried it in the Muenstertal and those hidden corners where worried barons watched from their cold castles how the towns turned independent and became wealthy patrons and at the same time new regents. From 1485, the people of Solothurn were successful in gaining a foothold in the Birs Valley. In 1515 they managed to buy the fertile sovereign territory of Rotberg, including the place of pilgrimage at Mariastein. An agreement with the Bishop of Basle ensured their possession of Kleinlützel, Baerswil and Himmelried. Long negotiations preceded the acquisition of the country of Thierstein and the sovereign territory of Gilgenberg. Only their wish to procure the Birs Valley, important line of communication, remained unfulfilled.

The inclination and aspiration of the Solothurn people did not end in the struggle to enlarge their territory. Solothurn was the town of the martyrs Urs and Victor, and thus its inhabitants have felt obliged to uphold the past. The «Zeitglockenturm» still today proclaims

to every stranger that only one more town North of the Alps is as ancient as Solothurn. One talks about «Sister Trier».

The town with its monasteries, fountains, churches and chapels, its bulwarks built for eternity, has again and again received great praise from natives and strangers alike. The majestic front of the Church of St. Ursus, close to the impressive «Crown» Hotel, stimulated the North-German lyrics writer Wilhelm Lehmann to compose moving poetry which lets us experience the past and the present as a harmonious unity. Gott-helf, Spitteler, Romain Rolland and Josef Reinhart never tired of searching again and again for treasures in the small town and to present them to the reader. Painters followed the course of the Verenenbach to find the hermitage and the Wengistein. Romantic aspects everywhere. One admits in secret that one is fascinated far more by this evidence of past times than by the imposing factories and high-rise buildings in the surroundings. The old palaces still remind us of the gracious masters and chiefs. Before the French Revolution, they collected gold pieces as servants of kings to build their castle-like dwellings and to fill them with suitable furniture, carpets and pictures. Solothurn is a work of art – certainly, just like many other beautiful old Swiss towns. One says that the Jura is poor and sterile. Never! A drive through the Jura lets us forget perhaps that the Alps arrest our eyes rather unduly, and that those wonders falsify our ordinary standards. The Jura is a country of castles. The coat of arms of their former owners have been preserved into the democratic age as district and commune crests. One does not look upon these old homes of the former nobility as anything ignominious, but preserves them as documents of a great past.

The 13th century castle of Alt-Falkenstein (SNTÖ)



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Balsthal, protected by castles, where the roads cross from East and West, from South and North; the railway junction of Olten, for centuries a fortified town; in the Gaeu the national road junction; In the North of the Hohe Winde and the Passwang the openings leading to the French-speaking part of Switzerland, to the Alsace and to the cultural and economic centre of Basle: on all these paths, they walked, rode and travelled, the Celtic Rauracher and Helvetians, then the Romans and after them the Alemans. Some came from the South, others from the North. The spade of historic research unearthes evidence of those past times to the light of day. But there are also the caves in the limestone range used to serve as dwelling places thousands of years ago.

The Canton of Solothurn does not lack large and beautiful volumes about the old town on the Aar, nor historic documents, pamphlets and leaflets. Many an author feels the urge and ambition to strike up a hymn of praise and to extol the beauties of his homeland in yet a new manner. History provides much stimulation. The last battle in the Swabian war was decisive for the independence of the Confederation as a state; that battle was fought at Dornach on 22nd July 1499. On 22nd December 1481, Brother Klaus mediated between the fighting Confederates and brought about the admission of Fribourg and Solothurn to the Confederation. Benevolent Solothurn still today reveres Mayer Niklaus Wengi, especially in politically overheated times, because he stood in front of the gun so that brother would not shoot at brother. Wengi spirit, Wengi town. But one also remembers other great sons of Solothurn, the painter Urs Graf, Frank Buchser, Cuno Amiet; the musicians Hans Huber, Edmund Wyss, Richard Flury, Albert Jenny and Ernst Kunz; the scholars Franz

A few figures

Surface area:	790,6 km ²
Population:	229,600 inhabitants for 131 communes (36,477 in the town of Solothurn)
Denomination:	83,633 Protestants 132,370 Roman Catholics 3,869 other religions
Language:	German
Agricultural estates:	2,209
Tourism:	132 hotels (2,369 beds)
Industrial undertakings:	499 (45,696 employees)
Limited companies:	1,058
Net of roads:	2,344 km
Total of engine-vehicles:	60,505

Pfeiffer, Amanz Gressly, Walter von Wartburg, Werner Munzinger-Pascha. Many a warrior who once fought on the passionate platform of politics has been forgotten. Some names live on: Josev Munzinger, the first Solothurn representative on the Federal Council, Federal Councillors Hammer, Obrecht, Stampfli and now Ritschard. Commemorative publications see to it that the people of Solothurn no longer have to leave the Canton's boundaries in order to earn their daily bread. Ludwig von Roll pioneered Solothurn's industry and became the founder of the ironworks. It is due to the watches of Grenchen that the modest village developed into a town. Much of the wit and humour of the French-speaking parts has penetrated Grenchen, and one now speaks of an independent and enlightened Grenchen spirit. In

1830 the democratic spirit of Olten brought about the surrender to the people of power held by the well-established rulers. It was assisted by sparks from the Schwarzbubenland and the Lederberg.

As diverse as its history, is the view of the Canton seen from the air. The Hasenmatt, the highest point, is at 1444 m, whilst Dornachbrugg lies a mere 297 m above sea-level. How much variety in between! A wealth of stimulus and ideas for the planners whose task it is to work out the regional policy for Solothurn, to achieve things both with the heart and the reason. Anyone not satisfied with looking at the description of a landscape merely from the point of view of dry statistics, runs into the danger of locking only at praiseworthy and original characteristics. In the dramatic representation of the 18th century, the magnanimity and harmonising sense of the people of Solothurn were extolled. But we are aware that magnanimity occasionally derived from a shrewd sense of calculation! In the Solothurn Pageant for the EXPO 1964, I tried to crystallise what is typical. «Solothurnerland, Land of boundaries. Land of the golden middle. Land of passage. Deeply rooted in the native soil. Unquenchable urge to find new worlds. We look at the course of time. We look to eternity... what remains for all times are benevolence and humanity.» A.F.

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