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Morges is 700 years old:

The development of a market town in western Switzerland

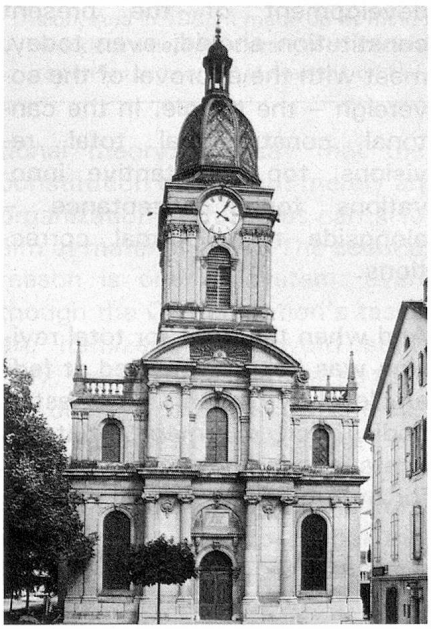
Morges, lying as it does in almost threatening proximity to Lausanne, international metropolis and capital of the Canton of Vaud, is still proud of its own way of life. A situation on the shore of the largest and perhaps most beautiful of all our lakes; still a rural centre; both aristocratic and yet down-to-earth; even a little plebeian, perhaps; dreamy and at the same time energetic – all this is Morges, a town with 13,226 inhabitants, with its trades, its commerce and its industry. And the 700 years of its urban history.

We say «urban history», for the region of Morges already played a significant role in the Stone and Bronze Ages. Indeed, probably the most important pile settlements at the lake of Geneva lay at present-day Morges, the most convenient stopping-place for transit via the waterway from Geneva to the land route towards the lake of Neuchâtel and the northern regions of our country.

From the 11th century the region of Morges belonged to the Bishops of Lausanne. None the less, the Dukes of Savoy managed to put up a fortress there (opposing Lausanne) beside which a township settlement was soon to spring up. This was first mentioned in 1286, a year which has been taken for the 700th anniversary celebration of Morges.

Eventually, the reigning Bishop of Lausanne renounced his right to the region of Morges, and, to a large extent, the town then gained its own rights from the Dukes of Savoy. At the beginning of the 15th century, Morges already numbered more than 1,200 inhabitants.

Then, the burgeoning little market town started to suffer a series of vicissitudes. In 1475 the Confederates, on their campaign against Savoy, sacked the town, burned it to ashes and still demanded a king's ransom. A few decades later, Bernese and Fribourgeois troops set fire to the Minorite friary (which had been founded only shortly before that time), where they had passed the night on a renewed campaign towards Geneva. In 1536, Hans Franz Nägeli occupied the town which then, and until 1798, came under the sway of Berne, as did the rest of Vaud.



The «Temple» in Morges (Photo: Santo).

For all that, it appears that Morges and its populace did not fare altogether too badly. Like the lake-dwellers of antiquity, the masters in Berne also recognized the importance of the site, and enlarged the harbour on a fairly large scale as a base for the Bernese fleet.

Moreover, the products of the rich agricultural hinterland and of a number of well-run workshops were sold in the market town. The many embellished residential buildings of the 17th and 18th centuries as well as the church, the most important Reformed church building in our country in the 18th century, still today bear witness to the prosperity of the burghers of Morges.

In the 19th century, Morges, like other places around the lake of Geneva, was able to benefit from tourist traffic and from the reputation of western Switzerland as tutelary genius of a high educational *niveau* and treasure-house of peaceful idylls.

Museums with astonishingly rich collections, art galleries, shops of distinction, concerts and theatre performances ensure for Morges a life of its own. Unique, the view from the lake over the rolling hills with their beautifully-kept vineyards and orchards and the many lordly mansions and chateaux, up to the darkly-wooded heights of the Jura and, on the other side, over the broad expanse of water of the Léman, the lake of Geneva, to the Savoy Alps – as far as to Mont Blanc, the highest mountain in Europe. No wonder, then, that for many decades *cognoscenti* have settled in this region, whether in search of a home for old age or a place of refuge from the confusion of world affairs. We name but Jan Paderewski, the famous pianist and first premier of independent Poland, or Igor Stravinsky.

And, last but not least, there are the promenades with the pleasant lake breeze. How could this little wind be called other than «Morget». As congenially refreshing as it is, however, it has its wiles too. It tempts the yachtsman to let himself be wafted blithely out to the middle of the lake where it will suddenly die down as if it did not have the heart to let the boats leave the realm of the Jubilee town.

Marcel Ney ●