

Zeitschrift: Swiss review : the magazine for the Swiss abroad
Herausgeber: Organisation of the Swiss Abroad
Band: 19 (1992)
Heft: 3

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Transit through Switzerland: rail and road together. The lake dam at Melide, Canton Ticino. (Photo: Fernand Rausser)

IMPRESSUM

Swiss Review, the magazine for the Swiss Abroad, is in its 19th year of issue and is published in German, French, Italian, English and Spanish in more than 20 regional editions. It has a total circulation of over 286,000.

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Publisher, Editorial Office, Advertising: Secretariat for the Swiss Abroad, Alpenstrasse 26, CH-3000 Berne 16; Tel: 41 31 44 66 25; Fax: 41 31 44 21 58; Postal Cheque Account (Swiss National Giro): 30-6768-9. Printed by: Buri Druck AG, CH-3001 Berne.



The ways of Switzerland: you can read little or much into the expression. But most people would have a number of basic reactions: mobility, flexibility, contact with the world, openness.

Even those who have visited our mountains just for a few days of recreation have discovered a piece of Roman road hidden in the woods or a two-thousand year old fossil amongst the stones. The Romans appreciated the geography of the place because they recognised even then that what we call Switzerland was the quickest way from north to south, and they built a huge network of roads here. The most important of these led across the Great St. Bernard down to Octodurum (Martigny), then on through Aventicum (Avenches) and Vindonissa (Windisch) to the great north. They also crossed many other mountain passes, such as the Julier, the Septimer and the San Bernardino.

Nor should we forget that in medieval times some of the pilgrim ways to Santiago de Compostela led through Switzerland, that those were the days when the wanderings of the Walser took place, when our thermal spas were best patronised and when with the discovery (or rediscovery) of the St. Gotthard – known as the way of the peoples – trade from north to south and vice versa brought back prosperity after the Dark Ages.

The eighteenth century saw the first tourists in Switzerland, attracted by the "Alpine myth". This was first put in writing in 1732 by the Bernese poet, Albrecht von Haller, and continued by the German writer of genius, Friedrich Schiller, who discovered the indelible association of William Tell with the idea of freedom. Many of the intellectuals of the new age stopped in Switzerland on their way to the Mediterranean shores – where the lemon tree blooms. Switzerland was a transit land for artists and soldiers – by horse in the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries and until long after the French Revolution. In the nineteenth and twentieth centuries Switzerland became a land of asylum where the politically persecuted of Europe met to prepare and support the "Risorgimento"

in their various countries. This tradition continued into this century for those who were fighting against the criminal dictatorships of our own times.

The ways of Switzerland. Today as in the past, the expression also means the ways of hundreds of thousands of our fellow-citizens who emigrated to foreign lands; and today like yesterday we think of those other hundreds of thousands of foreigners who find their way to our country and wish to stay here – each with his own history, his own hopes and fears, his joys and his regrets. Thanks to its historical determination to meld many peoples into one – unity in diversity – Switzerland has also become a concept which implies a place where peoples meet. It forms a society in which culture becomes ever more multifarious, not exactly spared by conflict – but still in the end enriched by its meetings with ever more distant cultures which until recently were largely unknown to the average citizen.

Switzerland is also a crossing point of the ways of Europe: from the opening of the railway line through the St. Gotthard and the Simplon at the end of the nineteenth century to the opening of the St. Gotthard road tunnel just twelve years ago. Today the latter is used by millions of travellers and vehicles every year. Switzerland is everyone's favourite trading passage. Today, new railway lines under the Alps are up for discussion. These are gigantic projects marked by the spirit of economic progress and political pragmatism, and they will certainly have equally large-scale environmental consequences. But this is a service which Switzerland is rendering – and perhaps must render? – to western Europe. It is a service which stems directly from its nature, as shown down the ages. Will the Swiss people recognise this when the time comes to vote?



Giuseppe Rusconi

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