Zeitschrift: Helvetia : magazine of the Swiss Society of New Zealand
Herausgeber: Swiss Society of New Zealand
Band: 15 (1950)
Heft: 6

Rubrik: Reminiscences

A P P R E C I A T I O N

By E.Merz,Auckland.

Last year I published in this paper a series of articles, describing some of my experiences and travels in lovely Switzerland whilst on holiday there in 1948. The reaction from my compatriots has been spontaneous, as many dozens of appreciations were expressed verbally as well as in writing. For several months I have intended to thank these friends through the medium of our little paper, as I could hardly find the time to reply to each of you individually. Your appreciation and gratitude has awakened fresh emotions of my intense admiration and love towards our Fatherland. And naturally too, I am happy and appreciative to know that many of you found a few moments of relaxation and pleasure to read a compatriot's travel impressions.

Although I hesitate to "broadcast" further views and again be in the "limelight", I feel that many of our readers will find interest in a few more articles which I may be able to compile in the near future. I am rather uncertain at the moment what I am going to tell you; it might be about Switzerland's vast foreign trade; the hotel industry; the transport; the watchmaking; science and economy; and,of course,of the people themselves. During my 8 months stay in Switzerland, I had ample time and opportunity to observe and study the people and their manifold activities and my store of memories is not yet exhausted. I shall now commence relating some further memories and will intitule the articles :

" R E M I N I S C E N C E S "

In New Zealand there is much talking and writing recently,relative to the electric power shortage,and it might be a suitable topic to give a few facts and impressions of Switzerland's water power and hydro-electric development.

Let me tell you at the outset that,although the generative power production is immeasurably larger than most other countries, Switzerland had to ration electricity twice in recent years. Both in 1947 and 1949 the supply was severely restricted due to prolonged drought. To counteract such deficiencies, further strenuous efforts are being made to harness the energy hoarded in water, as it is such a basic problem both for industry and the economic welfare of the country. I shall now try to describe the development of our water power installations,etc.

Switzerland has no coal-deposits, and in view of its mountainous aspect is able to support hardly 2 Million people from its own soil. Before the war we had to import 48% of all our food supplies. Already prior to the outbreak of the World War the electric power development had been immense, but promptly with the commencement of hostilities, fresh plans were made and put into effect as soon as circumstances permitted. Thus, the output of kwh was steadily increased and Switzerland was able to sell electric power to neighbouring countries,and in exchange obtain precious food so badly lacking. And today further vast projects are under consideration, and in actual construction, thus lessening the country's dependance on foreign supplies. Within perhaps 50 years, Switzerland has developed into a land of electricity and can be regarded as the most electrified country in the world.

From the snow capped peaks and the great glaciers the water runs down the valleys to form the many lovely lakes as vast reservoirs for collecting and storing the "white coal". The outlet of the swiftly flowing rivers can often be put under control relatively easily and thus countless horsepower can be harnessed and converted into potential power. Today,

the electric current is distributed over the whole country, lighting homes and stores, driving locomotives, turning countless wheels in factories and is utilised for manifold industrial and domestic purposes. Electric energy obtained from running water has become the very life-blood of Switzerland.

Our power stations are situated at very different altitudes, and are placed in various "strategic" positions throughout the land. In winter the highlands are icebound for many months and little flow of water is then available. Well do I remember a visit to the great barrage of the Grimselsee, high up in the centre of imposing mountain chains. An engineer willingly gave a few explanations of this great power station. From the large "Aare"-glacier the water flows into a valley into which several tributaries also send their snowy supplies. This valley has been blocked by a high dam of solid masonry. Behind the barrage great masses of water are accumulated; they flow at great pressure through a tunnel from the Grimselsee to the lower situated Gelmersee. This tunnel is hewn out of solid rock and therefore did not require lined walls. The diameter of the tunnel is $8\frac{1}{2}$ feet and has a capacity of 10 tons of water per second. The total fall to the power house at Innertkirchen is over 4,000 ft. spread over a distance of 10 miles. The storage capacity of the two lakes is over 110 million tons. At Innertkirchen the power house is a subterraneous hall of imposing dimensions in the base of the mountain where 5 large generators are installed. Each of these produces about 40,000 horsepower, a total of 200,000.

Switzerland output of electric power per square mile is by far the largest of any country, and I was able to find out that in 1942 we had 209 larger generating stations, apart from many smaller ones, dispersed all over the country. The high tension network, approx. 12,000 miles long, links up all the larger stations, so that in case of emergency the power can be changed over from one to the other. There are over 400,000 electromotors and nearly 2 million heating devices. The production and the distribution of electric energy has been developed to such a high stabdard of efficiency that it will be hardly possible to make very considerable improvements in the near future.

****

THE UNIVERSAL POSTAL UNION.

Among the many international organisations which have their headquarters in Switzerland, is one of great importance: the World Postal Union. The staff, housed in an unpretentious building on the outskirts of Berne, is comparatively small, but its function is important.

The officials, numbered about 50, are statisticians of the first order, and to see them juggling with the astronomical figures created by the multiplicity of the world's exchange rates, is amazing. The bureau is under the surveillance of the Swiss postal administration, which also serves as intermediary between members of the Union. Its main tasks are to collect, co-ordinate and distribute all information concerning international postal affairs, give advice on legal questions and generally act as a clearing house.

The expenses of the bureau are divided among the States members, in seven different classes. The standard value for all transactions is the gold franc. Postal fees are established on the basic equivalent of the nation's currency value to the gold franc.

Every three years a gigantic "census" lasting 15 days is made of all postal matter in transit throughout the world. The mystery of who gets the fee on a letter, say from Zurich to Sydney, is less complicated that it appears. Special backs, denoting the