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Autor: Langford, R.A.
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GROUP NEW ZEALAND OF THE NEW HELVETIC SOCIETY

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Hamilton

¤ The Swiss are Different ¤

By R. A. LANGFORD

THERE is no country quite like Switzerland, and no people even remotely resembling the Swiss.

Flatten the mountains out with a giant rolling-pin, and the country would expand to three or four times its size. Crumpled as it is, altitudes vary from sea-level (at Locarno) to 15,215 feet, on the summit of the Dufourspitze (peak), the highest point in the Swiss Alps. In between, you can choose your climate, from mellow Mediterranean to frozen Arctic. Why, in the course of an afternoon you can travel backward, as it were, through the seasons—from summer back to spring and thence to eternal winter—by going for a ride on the steep mountain railroad that ascends the Jungfrau.

And the people who inhabit this country are just as varied. In the West they speak French and are Gallic in race, character and temperament. The conductor on the eastbound train from Geneva or Lausanne starts by saying “Tous les billets, s'il vous plait!” when he asks for the tickets; by the time the train reaches Bern, the capital, he has switched over to German and calls “Alle Billette, bitte.”

For we have meanwhile passed the language frontier and entered the region where German dialects are spoken—a different one in each region. The “frontier zone” is only a few miles wide, and it remains a mystery why, despite generations of federal government and intermarriage, there has been so little blending and merging between the two racial elements.

But that is another of the characteristic features of Switzerland. The twenty-five Cantons (or States) making up the Confederation enjoy an amazing amount of autonomy; and they are so jealous of their independence within the Swiss family that some of them still officially call themselves republics! Far from attempting to unify the population, the Federal Government takes pains to preserve the natural order and thus prevent the creation of discontented—and therefore troublesome—minorities.

Right across the country from east to west runs the Great Divide, the Alpine barrier culminating in the St. Gotthard massif; south of this, in the Ticino, we find the Italian-speaking Swiss. Strangely enough, the St. Gotthard, though traversed by only a single railroad

tunnel and a single road, is far less effective as language barrier than the little stream that divides German-speaking from French-speaking Switzerland. The reason for this is mainly climatic: the Ticino is far sunnier and warmer than the regions north of the Alps. In spring-time you may leave Zurich by train in cold fog or rain, run into snow as the train ascends towards Goschenen, the northern end of the nine-mile St. Gotthard tunnel, and emerge ten minutes later at Airolo into a world of bright blue skies and warm, golden sunshine.

Up in the mountainous Canton of Grisons, known the world over through names such as the Engadine, St. Moritz, Davos, Arosa, etc., we find another race of Swiss speaking a tongue called Romansh. As the name suggests, it was originally the Latin of Caesar, though greatly altered now. But it is one of the four officially acknowledged national languages of Switzerland, and you will find men who speak it running the best hotels, not only in their own country but all over the world.

All these various races live side by side in the one country. But it would be wrong to suppose that they live in perfect loving harmony; like every big family living under one roof they have their squabbles and conflicting interests. But when quarrels arise, they look for the common-sense solution. They talk it over, thrash it out, fight it out if necessary—and in the end either find a compromise or agree to differ. Coercion of any kind is taboo.

By the same token industrial strikes are practically unknown in Switzerland. The Socialist Party is numerically the strongest in the country, and the unions (associations, they call them here) are quite as powerful as elsewhere; but collective contracts in the different trades, under Government sponsorship, eliminate industrial disputes before ever they can come to a head. There has not been a major strike in Switzerland since just after the end of World War I!

This is all the more surprising in that, for years past, between three and four hundred thousand foreign workers—mainly surplus Italian labour—have been helping the Swiss get on with the job. This figure may not seem

unduly large until it is remembered that the total population of Switzerland is a bare five million!

Though I may be accused of having gone native, I maintain that the Government of Switzerland is the only type of democracy capable of functioning efficiently. The country is administered rather than governed. At the peak of the pyramid is the Federal Council of seven members, representing the major political parties in a permanent coalition. Virtually, they are elected for life, resigning—voluntarily but reluctantly—when old age sets in.

In the past twenty years only two Federal Councillors have been forced out of office by public opinion. The first (a French-Swiss) was deemed too weak a personality to stand up to Nazi arrogance during the last war; the second (a German-Swiss) was regarded as too irresolute to make a good Minister of Defence after the war ended.

Each of the seven is head of a Department, or Ministry, and one is elected President—or rather Chairman of the Federal Council—for a year, meanwhile retaining his Department. Then he goes back to the end of the line and is succeeded by the Vice-President, who usually belongs to a different party. And so it goes on. There is no ballyhoo about the annual presidential elections, no TV cheesecake, no honeyed promises, for the result if a foregone conclusion. Halfway through the year the citizen has to think hard before he can remember the current President's name.

The Federal Council submits recommendations to the two chambers—the Council of States (representing the Cantons), and the National Council (representing the constituencies). These motions are tabled in Parliament as the collective findings of the Federal Council and seven members are jointly responsible. If Parliament turns one down, back it goes to the seven with the mute reproach: "Look, boys, you can do better than that if you put your heads together." And even when a bill is passed, a petition signed by 30,000 citizens can force the Government to have the issue submitted to the vote of the people.

Despite their differences in race, language and character, all Swiss have one thing in common: An urge towards perfectionism. They advertise their products without superlatives—merely as "Swiss made," which they say is a less crude way of claiming "the best quality and craftsmanship in the world."

It would be a mistake to suppose that they will live by milking cows and putting the milk into cans, cheese or chocolate. Nowadays these products, as well as half the nation's food, are imported. Switzerland has become an industrial country, with chemicals, machines, apparatus textiles, watches and everything technical that calls for technical skill and precision as her staple products. The tourist trade (roughly ten million visitors every year) and worldwide insurance and commercial interests add the invisible exports which have raised the nation's standard of living to the highest in Europe. Industry is decentralised. There are few large plants and thus no dense concentrations of labour or city slums. Healthy contact between town and country has never broken off

—few Swiss are more than a few generations removed from the soil. At one end of Zurich's smartest shopping street, in front of the windows of the dignified Swiss National Bank building—whose vaults are rumoured to store the other half of the world's gold—the peasants of the surrounding countryside still hold their vegetable, fruit and flower market twice weekly. Nobody finds it incongruous.

When the Lord had created the first Swiss, He looked kindly upon him and spoke: "How wouldst thou like to live? I will grant thee three wishes."

"Then let me have high mountains, that I may live nearer Heaven," answered the Swiss piously.

Pleased at having created such a paragon of virtue in human form, the Lord said: "Thy first wish is granted. What else wouldst thou like?"

"Lush pastures and fine cattle that give an abundance of milk."

This wish, too, was granted and the Swiss set about tilling his fields and milking his cows.

"Is the milk good?" asked the Lord.

"It is indeed. Here, try this mugful Thyself."

The Lord quaffed from the mug, found it good and said: "Now, what is thy third wish?"

"One franc twenty, please!"

NEWS OF THE COLONY

NEW SWISS CLUB IN CHRISTCHURCH

We proudly announce the formation of a new Swiss Club in Christchurch. The executive of the Swiss Society wish to congratulate and warmly welcome this Club into our family of the Swiss Society.

Our thanks go to all who helped in any way to bring this achievement to fruition.

The committee of the new club is:

President, Mr Peter Muller,
7 A Whareora Terrace, Cashmere,
Christchurch.

Vice-President, Mr Fritz Wangler,
180 Cashmere Road, Christchurch.

Secretary, Mrs Erica Grantham,
156 Aldwins Road, Christchurch.

Treasurer, Miss Hilda Wangler,
180 Cashmere Road, Christchurch.

AUCKLAND SWISS CLUB

For the September social evening of the Auckland Swiss Club a very successful and happy meeting was organised by our Vice-President, Mr Binder. Besides the screening of a full length movie, a short coloured film entitled "Lakes of Switzerland" was also included. After supper, some people danced to the tune of good