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The Situation of Youth in Switzerland Today

By Erwin Heimann

WHEN one is given the assignment, within a restricted compass, of presenting a true picture of Swiss youth, one runs the risk from the outset of coming up with gross generalisations. What ought I to take as my point of departure? What approach ought I to adopt?

I could very well point out, for example, that 40,000 young Swiss are Boy Scouts, the implication being that Swiss youth is in close touch with nature. Or, I could note that 25,000 are in the youth organisations of the Swiss Football and Athletic Association, meaning that Swiss youth is perhaps sports-minded. Or again 10,500 are members of the Y.M.C.A., implying that they are religiously inclined.

It would be easy enough to point out all these facts, but then again, it would be equally easy to counter them—with other sets of figures. There is no doubt whatever about one thing, however, and that is Swiss youth is a subject of controversy, hotly discussed and harshly judged, sometimes even despised and viewed with indignation, namely by the older generation.

This, however, does not automatically prove that these young people are in fact young at all. This is something, you know, that is not at all self-evident. We have ample evidence from the history of civilisation and nations of times when youth was never really young, when, as it were, it was only a watered-down version of the older generation, without any distinctive points of view, without any ideas of its own, following dutifully in the footsteps of its elders. This was approximately the situation—not to go back any further—of nearly all European youth before 1914. And those who were then young have not bequeathed to us an exactly joyous present. For this reason, I am convinced that controversial youth, which in many

respects stands in contradiction to the older generation, augurs well for the future of a nation.

In saying this I have already given myself away: I am on the side of young people. I am on their side on principle, and if for no other reason, because they are in fact the product of the older generation; and there is surely nothing more paltry than to repudiate one's own creation. However, I did not arrive blindly at my point of view.

What is it like, the Swiss youth of today?—It is in the first place, by and large, irreverent; "naturally irreverent," as a well-known educationist put it, and what he wanted to say was that Swiss youth is irreverent without actually being aware of its own irreverence. There is no denying the fact: It refuses to be awed, by public officials, or by teachers or by parents. Which was the first to disappear: the authority of parents or the respect of young people?—A prize question, on which an entire dissertation could be written. One thing is certain: our young people are searching for a genuine authority, and many excesses culminating in a form of teenage unruliness represent a quest for and a challenge to authority.

With this I have broached a question which is no doubt of universal interest: Do we have juvenile delinquents in Switzerland? My reply to this question is a resounding "No," qualified by only trivial exceptions. Swiss young people are very frank, even among themselves; they live according to a tempo and they have a style, which often appears strange to us, their elders. However, the provocation of middle-class mores is seldom carried so far that law and order are flouted. They are prevented from going so far by a sense and instinct for discipline, which they never repudiate and which is an inherent ingredient of the Swiss national character.