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Autor: Thalmann-Antennen, H.
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The Social Position of the Swiss Woman

by Dr H. Thalmann-Antennen

THE Swiss woman has won questionable fame as the only woman in Europe today not to enjoy the same civic rights as the man. This undeniable fact might well lead foreign observers to misjudge her social position if the reasons of such discrimination are not duly considered in the light of the very special political situation found in Switzerland. If we speak of the woman's social position we do not mean her political rights only. There are other factors to be taken into account such as her status in general as determined by her training, both intellectual and vocational, by the part she plays in economic life, by her position in the family and by the regard paid her as human being. The legal status of the woman, as reflected by her political rights, need not necessarily tally with her social position as such. Legislation often is late in catching up with social facts, and this is particularly true of a direct democracy where the legislative apparatus is slow-gearred and intricate. This, actually, is the case in Switzerland where equal political rights for the woman are concerned.

The origins of the Swiss democracy date back to the assemblies of free and valiant peasants, centuries ago. Throughout its history and despite steady evolution and modification it never gave up the principle of direct appeal to the people. It is built up from below: the base is formed independent communities where matters are settled in the communal assemblies; next come the Cantons, sovereign states, some of which still abide by the so-called "Lands-gemeinde", the assembly of the citizens for elections and votes held in the open. The overall organization which unites the twenty-five autonomous Cantons is the Confederation in which the people have also decisive word to say in the promulgation of laws, their acceptance or rejection being subject to popular vote. This state organization, evolved out of the traditions of a freedom loving people, calls for a policy which must respect the will of the individual citizen. It is this system which until today has prevented the Swiss women from attaining equality of status. While a bill on the introduction of woman's suffrage has obtained a strong parliamentary majority in some Cantons as well as in the Confederation, the ultimate decisions lies with the voters and these—the men—have so far not seen fit to pass a majority vote on the question of equal political rights for women.

It must be pointed out that these so-called political rights of the Swiss citizen go much farther than in most other countries. Besides electoral franchise and eligibility in the communities, the Cantons and the Confederation, they include the right to vote on amendments of the constitution and on the passing of bills. In the Cantons, such matters must always be brought before the people

(compulsory referendum) whereas in the Confederation the optional referendum applies when 30,000 signatures have been obtained. Furthermore, every Swiss citizen has the right to sign an initiative demanding an amendment of the constitution or drafting of cantonal bills and amendments of same. Due to these far-reaching political rights, exercised on communal, cantonal and federal level, the calls upon the Swiss citizen to perform his civic duties are many and often involve very important and difficult questions of legislation.

Lacking equality of status, however, does not mean that the Swiss woman has nothing at all to say in politics. In the course of the last decades women have in fact won equal political rights in three Cantons (Geneva, Vaud and Neuchatel). In many other Cantons they have access to communal bodies and the judicature. The battle for women's rights has indeed been long drawn out and tedious, due to the unique structure of Swiss legislation. Yet it has not been in vain, for the Swiss woman has matured in the political field and won an ability of discernment which women in other countries where they were given full political rights almost over night must yet acquire. Though not formally recognized, the Swiss woman, through her organizations, takes a very active part in legislative and political decisions. She is called upon to serve as expert on preparatory committees, and there is hardly a law of any importance which would not first be submitted for discussion also to the women's organizations. The Swiss woman has thus indirectly stepped into public life and assumed considerable responsibilities, gaining an influence which should not be underestimated.

Furthermore, the country can only profit from the good and valuable work accomplished by women in their own organizations or as members of mixed bodies. They help to solve social problems, in fact important social institutions which have become indispensable today were originally devised and started by women. Thus the Swiss woman is doing a job of greatest political importance without making much fuss about it. This work so far has not won her full recognition in the form of political rights, but it is bound to come and probably not so far off.

The Swiss woman has been able to do this valuable preparatory work in the political field because of her excellent education and training. Women enjoy exactly the same facilities in school and occupational training as the men. Switzerland actually was the first country to admit women to university studies. Yet, there still are many hindrances obstructing a women's professional activity. The law bars women from relatively very few professions, judicature, for instance, which in the Confederation and in the majority of the Cantons requires full political rights. Certain difficulties are further encountered by the woman official and

teacher when she marries. Labour shortage however, has done wonders in this respect. Yet one should not cherish the illusion that economic setbacks would not change this situation. Switzerland today counts 756,500 women engaged in a profession or 30.1 per cent of the wage-earning population.

The most difficult question for the woman of today still is that of advancement and equal pay. This we find not only in Switzerland, for the whole problem is closely linked with human nature and the woman's specific position and duty as a mother.

To complete the picture of the woman's social status we must consider her position in the family, as provided by the Swiss Civil Code of 1912. This code is based on equality of the sexes. However, the Swiss people, originally peasants, still uphold strong patriarchal traditions resulting in repeated violation of this principle. In financial matters, a married woman is particularly and very largely dependent upon her husband who, by law, manages and enjoys the assets brought into marriage by her. He further, before the law, is the sole owner of property acquired during marriage for which he need not account to his wife. On the other hand, in case of breach of duties on the part of the husband, far-reaching legal protection is provided for the wife and in practice the law is applied very strictly. Guardianship of the children is conferred on both parents equally though where differences of opinion arise the ultimate decision lies with the father, the authorities having certain controls in case of abuse. The developments of the last few years tend to do away with these remnants of patriarchal conceptions. A committee is now engaged upon studying the matter and preparing amendments which in family law should give the woman equality of status and thus comply with the needs of our time.

In international comparison the social position of a people or of a certain group within his people should not be viewed in the light of some one difference or discriminatory policy, the picture should always be seen as a whole. The Swiss woman who as yet does not enjoy equality of status has nevertheless been called upon to cooperate in public affairs on a very large scale. She answers all preconditions as to training, energy of intention, social and political understanding and thus is able to assume responsibility and guarantee a fruitful cooperation in the interest of the country.

(Pro Helvetia Foundation)



Two new first-class hotels opened in Zurich during August, to increase that city's available hotel bed-space by some 300 beds. The Hotel Florida is situated just off the lakeside promenade, and the Motel Jolie Ville Motor Inn is located at the western access to Highway N3, which leads toward Austria.