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Berne — the City in the Country

(Continued from last month)

The close and natural relationship of the citizen of Berne to his rural background and his somewhat feudal attitude have their roots in history. Up to the time of Napoleon and even up to the middle of last century the city-state of Berne was ruled over by a handful of patrician families installed "by the grace of God," by big landowners and country squires who resided in summer on their estates and in their castles and only returned to their town houses in winter. The territory of Berne was, by Swiss standards, a huge domain, for the present Cantons of Aargau and Vaud were also subject to the old republic, in addition to the Canton of Berne itself. Berne was in fact the most powerful city-state in the old Confederation.

The castles and country seats of the patrician families were erected in the finest and most commanding situations, many of them being built in a rural Baroque or Neo-Classical style inspired by French models. Their owners had everything they needed for a pleasant life. Culinary pleasures, the joys of the chase and country parties were part of the life of the gentlefolk of the time. They possessed conservatories and orangeries, and their drawingrooms were adjoined by music-rooms and libraries. Farming was no doubt an important activity for these seigneurs, but it is tempting to suppose that sober utilitarianism was unobtrusively integrated in an Epicurean way of life. The privileged lower classes gradually found their place somewhere between this aristocracy and the class of the peasant farmers. It is an aristocratic style moderated by the outlook of the countryman and farmer that still characterizes the typical Bernese today.

BERNE — THE FEDERAL CAPITAL

These digressions into country matters are necessary because the city of Berne can only be rightly understood against its rural background. Yet while the sense of the country is everywhere present in Berne, the stone setting of the capital of the Swiss Confederation is nonetheless urban, and even dictatorially so.

The layout of the place gives Berne the character of a tightly enclosed, introverted town. I am thinking here, of course, of the old, mediaeval part. But this has remained to this day the town proper: Berne's old town is still the heart of the modern Federal capital, its centre both of business and of communications. The new additions, the extensions made in the industrial nineteenth century, are not of any particular significance. And the rest of this city of about a quarter of a million inhabitants consists only of residential quarters. Compared with capitals such as Paris or London (not to mention New York), Berne is of course a un-dimensional city. It does not stand for the world, but only for its own world, a very finite and limited magnitude which also happens to belong mostly to the past. Berne has, strictly speaking, less a present than a history, it mirrors what it always was, it preserves and survives.

Paul Nizon in S.A. Gaz.