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# NOUVELLE SOCIETE HELVETIQUE.

An interesting talk by Dr. A. R. Lindt,  
Press Councillor at the Swiss Legation in London.

At the Meeting of the N.S.H., held on Tuesday, December 2nd, 1947, at the Vienna Café, Berkeley Arcade, W.1, Monsieur A. R. Lindt, Press Councillor to the Swiss Legation, opened the series of three lectures: "Introduction to Swiss Constitution, History and Culture," before a large gathering, which was honoured by the presence of the Swiss Minister, Monsieur Paul Ruegger.

The subject in hand was considered from the angle of what has made Switzerland the land she is to-day and what distinguishes her from other countries.

In contradiction to prevailing theories Switzerland became a nation despite the fact that she has no continuous natural frontier, no common language, no common race, no common religion. All the different language groups and creeds were and are united by an identical political outlook — communal autonomy.

From the beginning the dominant feature of Swiss democracy was the commune, the smallest political unit. The small mountain villages and the mediæval towns in the lowland did not suffer the fate of those of the rest of Europe which were swallowed up by feudal States. In order to defend their own freedom the Swiss communes co-operated in a common struggle against the tyranny of neighbouring feudal lords.

All through the ages political life was extremely active in the communes. As each villager is entitled to take part in the communal assembly, every citizen is on the level of village politics a virtual M.P.; things get discussed, not in an abstract way but in full knowledge of what is going on. The executive is composed of elected citizens so that bureaucracy never took hold of the communes.

The social as well as the political life in the commune asks for the development of *tolerance and moderation*. Both strongly influenced the whole history and all the political institutions of Switzerland. Tolerance was necessary so that the different language groups could live side by side without the danger, e.g. of the Romantsch element of 1% being dominated by the German of 72%. Moderation was indispensable so that the tensions between strong and weaker cantons could be relieved by compromise.

The exercise of moderation made a difficult and continuously changing balance possible between things which might contradict one another as is shown in:

## (a) *Relations between the individual and the State.*

At certain times there were suggestions from outside that the State should be omnipotent, but in the Constitution the importance of the individual was stressed and his rights safeguarded by allowing him to have a last say in the most important political decisions, i.e., the Referendum. Thus if a law is passed by both Houses, 30,000 citizens may ask for it to be put before the Electorate. The rejection by the people is definite. Not only does the individual have a negatory power,

he also has the power of initiative, though, limited to the revision of the Constitution. If 50,000 of the population wish the Constitution to be revised, the amendment has to be put to the vote.

## (b) *Tension between canton and Confederation.*

There is at all times a struggle in Switzerland between centralism and federalism and the equilibrium between the two is shifting almost daily, sometimes in favour of the one, sometimes of the other, but the Constitution, a work of moderation and tolerance, has already set certain limits to this fight. The rights of the cantons are safeguarded, e.g., in the institution of the Upper House, the Council of States and in the fact that in votes on a national level a majority of the cantons as well as a majority of the electorate is required. These rights are independent of the size of the cantons, e.g., Appenzell a.Rh. with 13,000 inhabitants has the same rights as Berne with 730,000.

## (c) *Foreign policy and internal necessity.*

At one time Switzerland was in process of becoming the most dominant military power in Europe, as her cantonal armies had obtained striking successes against the biggest military powers of the time. Then those armies were defeated at Mariano in 1515. Switzerland might have become revengeful and demanded a centralised government, powerful enough to transform the cantons into one military State. The Swiss, however, had the rare gift of learning from history. They did not want to give up internal freedom or the autonomy of the commune. They realised that they could not remain a military aggressive power but had to become *neutral*. Moderation caused them to renounce the ambitions of military expansion and to accept the narrowness of their position as eternal.

The Swiss in consequence love the small unit, not only in the political field but in all ways of life. They didn't instinctively fall into the trap of big industry and huge towns; they stuck to decentralisation, leaving each small canton its cultural life and its own importance. Preference for the small unit, however, which each individual citizen can understand, entails also certain disadvantages — narrowness of outlook and a danger of pettiness. The Swiss love of stability and security goes together with a hatred of adventure and a distrust of great men whose intellectual size might disrupt the balance of the commune. The history of Switzerland is marked by the tendency not to let big men gain ascendancy; many men tried therefore to appear less great in order to render their influence more tolerable.

Let us consider a few great Swiss: Niklaus von Flüe, Pestalozzi, General Dufour, Dunant, General Guisan. All have one thing in common — none was a dictator; none imposed his will against a majority. Tolerant and moderate they were able to symbolize the will of the people.

During the war several young Swiss crossed over to Germany. They said that they felt attracted to National Socialism and totalitarianism because of the narrowness of life in Switzerland and of the country's

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policy of compromise. They felt it difficult to understand why in Switzerland spectacular political successes are lacking and why political reform is bound to be slow. As a matter of fact Swiss political leadership does not ask for dashing heroism but for quiet persistence.

The revision of the Constitution introducing the Referendum was rejected the first time. Only persistence could have enabled it to be accepted a few years later. The same was true of the law introducing National Insurance. First rejected on a national level, it had to prove its worth in some of the cantons in order to show that it could work within the bigger frame of the Confederation. Thus the canton is the testing-ground of Swiss Democracy just as the commune is its training-ground.

This persistence which has always been a national characteristic of the Swiss could be called pig-headedness. A strong spirit of opposition was needed to withstand political influences incompatible with the Swiss way of life:—

- (a) Whereas all Europe was feudalistic, Switzerland remained a democracy.
- (b) Whereas elsewhere liberalism exaggerated the rights of the individual, in Switzerland the individual remained aware of his duties as well as his rights.
- (c) In 1940 in the midst of a Continent united by force, Switzerland by sheer pig-headedness had the courage to be different and thus to remain a symbol of free European Democracy.

This pig-headedness alone would not have saved Switzerland. A weapon was necessary. From early times civil rights were accompanied by the duty to defend the commune. Throughout Swiss history there has been a strong correlation between political right and military duty. Switzerland is the only country where the Commander-in-Chief is not appointed, but elected by both Houses of Parliament, for the Swiss maintain that the Commander-in-Chief must have the full confidence of the political representatives of the people.

M. Lindt concluded his lecture with a quotation from Edgar Bonjour, stating that neutrality does not mean a cold decided no to aggression but also a warm-hearted yes concerning collaboration and the will to help on the internal and international fields.

\* \* \*

Dr. Egli then called on the Minister. M. Ruegger congratulated the N.S.H. in London on their new and

excellent initiative. He also expressed the hope that this introductory talk would be followed by closer study and contact with the history and various aspects of the public life of Switzerland by the younger generation in the London Colony.

A lively discussion then followed.

A foreign-born wife commented on the seeming dullness of political life in Switzerland thereby raising the vital problem of the valuable and interesting men going abroad. It was pointed out that Switzerland has always adopted a liberal policy towards emigration and immigration, because citizens even if abroad can profit the Homeland by *e.g.* the commercial contacts which they may establish and foreigners who come to Switzerland can very well be assimilated by the commune. Such a small land as Switzerland can gain much from external contacts.

As for the dullness of political life in Switzerland; consider a young Swiss lad of 20 in a small village compared with his corresponding English companion: the former has more civil rights; he can vote, help to elect Cantonal Councils and National Councillors and frequently express his opinion on local measures such as schools or sanitation, whereas the English lad starts to vote only at 21 and then can only elect local councils every three years or vote at the yearly election for one-third of the local council. Moreover only every four or five years can he participate in a national election.

The very topical problem of the woman's right to vote was inevitably raised and discussed with much fervour. The reason for the women not having this right yet in Switzerland is not so much due to the opposition or apathy of the men as to the fact that, apart from the women in big towns who have taken up professions, the majority of Swiss women in small villages and towns are not so keen on having the right to vote (which explains the absence of a strong suffragette movement), because — as was suggested — Swiss women have attained without the vote what British women struggled to achieve for years, *e.g.*, good schools and hospitals. Provided that there is sufficient prosperity and few social difficulties there is not a very great urge on the part of the women to possess the vote. Some attempt is now being made to give women the vote in affairs which concern them most — the church and social matters. If and when the woman's right to vote comes into Switzerland it will be introduced first in one canton and then in another; upon its success in this smaller field of the canton will depend its introduction into the entire

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Confederation. Thus the movement for the woman's vote will spread from the bottom to the top.

The interesting and vital problem of how to keep the Swiss abroad in contact with the Homeland was also brought up. It was agreed that more should be done in this connection than has hitherto been done, which is one of the tasks that the N.S.H. has set before itself. When the matter was discussed at the "Journée des Suisses à l'Etranger," last summer, a small hope of some participation in the political life of Switzerland was given, one suggestion being that eventually Swiss abroad might be able to vote on an issue in Switzerland without being on the spot and paying taxes. Although the hope given was small, it showed that at least a beginning is being made in strengthening the ties between the Swiss abroad and their Homeland.

The very successful Meeting came to an end and we now look forward in the near future to M. Lindt's next lecture in the series which will deal with Swiss History.

### A SOCIAL CENTRE FOR THE YOUNG SWISS IN LONDON.

#### Urgent Appeal for Furniture.

The endeavours, to which the Council of the Nouvelle Société Helvétique, London Group, has lately devoted its attention, to provide the young Swiss in England, of whom several thousand have arrived since the war, with some sort of social *pied-à-terre* in the metropolis, are about to materialise at least on a provisional basis. A suggestion, submitted to Monsieur Escher, Chargé d'affaires in the absence of the Minister, that a suitable room might possibly be spared for the purpose in the Grosvenor Square building of the Legation, has met with his instant agreement, recognising as he does, the importance and the urgency of the problem.

A big and beautiful room is thus available in the Legation building at *Grosvenor Square* (entrance 28, Duke Street) for use as a sort of social club for the young Swiss in London. It is hoped to effect all the necessary arrangements within a matter of days, in order to make use of this magnificent opportunity, so readily granted, at the earliest possible moment. For this, however, the full co-operation of the Colony is required immediately.

First, the *furniture*. A large table and some 20 chairs are being lent by the Swiss Tourist Office. But more chairs, some club-chairs and settees, another table or two, a book case, a piano, a wireless-set and some floor rugs are needed, as well as a pair of chandeliers or globes for two ceiling lights. Any offers of such articles on loan will be gratefully received by Mrs. Egli on the telephone: HAMpstead 2051, or by letter to 3, Chesterford Gardens, N.W.3.

Second, the *organisation*. A responsible Committee of Management must be formed to make the neces-

sary arrangements, assist in the running of the place and supervise its proper use. Three lady-volunteers are required for this task, requiring sympathy and understanding for the young, imagination and tactful firmness. It is a wonderful opportunity for rendering our country as well as our young compatriots invaluable and interesting service. Volunteers are invited to communicate immediately with Mrs. Egli as above.

A meeting of those interested in the social welfare of our young compatriots, including representatives of the churches and the various societies, as well as the volunteers above mentioned will be held to discuss the scheme, how and by whom it should be handled, and how to co-ordinate it with the existing facilities. It is thought that the Social Centre might most usefully be made available on the evenings when no other facility is provided.

Thousands of young Swiss are lonely in London and thus exposed to all sorts of hazards as well as unhappiness. Please help to remedy this situation by responding to the above appeal for furniture and active help and possibly for financial assistance.

*Helveticus.*

### A DIRECTORY OF OUR COLONY

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#### Welcome to New Arrivals from Switzerland.

A most interesting suggestion for issuing a booklet of welcome to the new arrivals from Switzerland, containing detailed information about all Swiss societies in the United Kingdom, the Legation, Consulates, Churches, etc., as well as the Swiss publications here and a list of Swiss owned or managed firms, has been submitted to all concerned by the Council of the N.S.H. We reproduce the proposal herewith, coupled with the request, that any society or group or firm not directly approached by the N.S.H. should kindly assist this worthy initiative by communicating with the Hon. Secretary of the N.S.H., 18, Montague Place, W.1.

#### Proposals for a booklet of welcome to new arrivals in the Colony, representing a complete guide to our Colony, submitted by the Council of the N.S.H., London Group.

Several thousands of young Swiss have arrived in this country since the end of the war, thus bringing the possibility of rejuvenation of the Colony, the need for which has so often been expressed on all sides.

Very few of these new arrivals have, however, found their way into our societies. We are losing their potential support. They are missing the help, friendly advice, etc., and the social background of our Colony which might be useful to them in more than one way.

The N.S.H. suggests that a booklet of Welcome and information on our Colony should be issued to all new arrivals and anyone interested in our Colony. The Minister, Monsieur Paul Ruegger, has agreed to write a covering message of greeting for this booklet and to help in reaching the new arrivals.

The contents of the booklet of 24 small size pages should, in our opinion, be as follows:

- page 1: Welcome by the Minister.
- 2: Welcome by the Colony.
- 3: Swiss Legation and Consulates, names, addresses, etc.
- 4: Swiss Churches, details of services, ré-unions, etc.
- 5 — say 13: Swiss societies, their history,

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