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ON COMMON GROUND.

By THÉO CHOPARD.

In German, the Swiss Confederation is designated under the word "Eidgenossenschaft", which means co-operation on the basis of an oath of allegiance, co-operation between autonomous communities possessing equal rights. The Swiss Confederation was born, in the Middle Ages, of the co-operation of various communities, Uri, Schwyz, Unterwalden, within which the inhabitants were already grouped into co-operatives which assured transport over the Alps and the exploitation in common of the Alpine pastures. With us, co-operative organisation goes back right to the origins of the Confederation. The Federative bond is a co-operative bond, and inversely; it binds together, without in any way absorbing them, the autonomous unities, which maintain their own characteristics. It conciliates the advantages of individual liberty with those of collective mutual-aid. Thus, it is in no way surprising that in Switzerland, co-operative organisation — which is a sort of federalisation of economy — has taken on such extensive development, while, at the same time, remaining compatible with the principle of freedom of industry and trade. Co-operative organisation extends to practically all the spheres of economic and social activity in Switzerland.

At the present time there exists more than 12,000 co-operatives of every kind, of which number 8,000 are agricultural: cheese and dairy co-operatives, cattle and horse breeding co-operatives, buying and selling co-operatives, co-operatives in respect of the adduction of water, co-operatives for the use of agricultural machinery, Raiffaisen Funds, etc. On the one hand, these co-operatives contribute towards the protection of the farmer against the arbitrary imposition of lower prices, and, on the other, they help to reduce production costs and to increase competitive power. Co-operatives in respect of purchasing facilities for the retail trade, for the building trade and for cafés and restaurants, play a similar rôle. House-owners, small artisans, women's associations and other groups have created co-operatives which will stand security for them. There are also some one thousand building and housing co-operatives in this country, which, during the last few years have contributed largely towards attenuating the effects of the housing shortage and regulating rent charges. As for production co-operatives which have been created and are managed by the workers themselves these do not as yet play an important rôle in Switzerland. On the other hand, the various co-operatives for consumer goods, of which the "Swiss Union of Co-operatives of Consumer Goods" is the most important, group together more than 600,000 members, that is to say about 50% of all the households in Switzerland. But that does not mean that they assure half of the entire distribution of goods.

The co-op. consumer maintains his entire liberty of choice and he only obtains a small part of his requirements at the Co-operative. This is shown by the fact that the share of the various Co-operatives in the total turn-over of retail undertakings amounts to only approximately 12%, as against 72% in respect of the small retailers and 5% in that of the large shops. In spite of the development which has occurred, non-agricultural co-operative undertakings only represent

1.3% of all the undertakings, while the persons in their employ only represent 2.5% of the number of persons employed in Swiss economy. It is therefore foolish to maintain, as has been done here and there, that co-operation is a menace to private economy. On the contrary, the very fact that it has no monopoly of the situation, makes of it a stimulant which is indispensable both for competition and for the regularisation of prices. In our country, the development of co-operatives in the most divers of spheres, shows that it has been realised that co-operative organisation is an excellent means for the achievement of mutual aid required by the individual and the reduction of intervention on the part of the State. As Federal Councillor Kobelt declared on the occasion of the 60th anniversary of the creation of the "Swiss Union of Co-operatives of consumer goods," if people group themselves into a co-operative organisation, this is in order to prevent intervention on the part of the State. Co-operation and State control are irreconcilable. Co-operatives can only develop in a free Democracy. State controlled co-operatives — one need only glance towards the countries of Eastern Europe — are no longer co-operatives. Within the collectivist economy of the East, co-operatives, like Trade Unions, are merely the instruments of the State and are incapable of defending the interests and the liberties of their members.



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