

What other people think of us

Objekttyp: **Group**

Zeitschrift: **The Swiss observer : the journal of the Federation of Swiss Societies in the UK**

Band (Jahr): - **(1951)**

Heft 1158

PDF erstellt am: **29.04.2024**

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WHAT OTHER PEOPLE THINK OF US.

(The following article under the heading "Swiss Progress To Contentment" by ERIC ASHMORE, who holds a Kemsley Travelling Fellowship, has appeared in the "Sheffield Telegraph" on April 25th, 1951.)

Somebody once said that Europe had been ravaged by wars for centuries but had attained a high standard of culture; Switzerland, on the other hand, had enjoyed peace for more than 200 years and had produced the cuckoo clock.

However, to travel from Germany into Switzerland nowadays is to pass into a new world, which has not been violated by strife and man's inhumanity to man.

In this land-locked country there is a prosperity, a high standard of living, a contentment, and all the signs of material advantage lacking in other parts of Europe.

The Swiss are devoted to freedom and a placid, elegant way of living which the other peoples in Europe have missed. It is true that the cost of living is very high, but wages correspond. There is little or no poverty, and, as the Swiss proudly tell you, it is no coincidence that the Communist Party is negligible as a force in their country; the working classes cannot afford Communism. There appears to be a mutual idea of duty between capital and labour. If one asks the average Swiss to account for the material benefits which his country enjoys, he will almost invariably attribute them to two causes: the diligence and conscientious work of all members of the community, in other words private enterprise at its best, and the country's neutrality in the two world wars, which have nullified all efforts elsewhere in Europe during the first half century to achieve a high standard of living for the people.

This view is surprisingly uniform in Switzerland. Hence it follows that the foreign policy of the country is practically unanimous — to live at peace with the world without entering into any political entanglement which might endanger the present happy state of affairs.

In their own country they strive with all their might to respect minorities. For instance, the people who speak the Rhaeto-Romanic language are only a small percentage of the population, yet they have become the favourite child of the Government.

Swiss neutrality is not maintained without sacrifice. One of the most surprising facts about a tour of Switzerland is the number of troops one meets and the number of military units engaged on manœuvres.

Of all the countries of Europe, Switzerland has proportionately the largest army, since all men between the ages of 20 and 60 are trained soldiers, making a total of over a million, nearly a quarter of the population. Almost every Swiss has a certificate hanging in his house, thanking him for defending the frontiers, 1939-45.

After a period of compulsory basic training every soldier does an annual refresher course lasting three weeks. This is the sacrifice which the country demands of its sons, and it is shared equally. It is undertaken

with a cheerful spirit of resignation and regarded as an evil necessity.

In the same way, part of the national income is appropriated every year for national defence; it is a steady effort rather than a sudden arms race which tends to upset the economy of a country.

The officers with whom we talked said that should an enemy come they were certain they could hold him. In the mountains their position would be impregnable. Mountains and lakes have been co-ordinated into the master-plan. They have built complete underground cities in the Alps, equipped with arsenals, supplies and hospitals. Their pilots can go zooming in and out of the rocky passes.

Every Swiss regards the rest of Europe as a mad-house whose inmates tear each other to pieces at regular intervals. The Swiss are kind and considerate hosts and, as with other public servants, all of whom seem determined that the visitor shall have a good opinion of their country.

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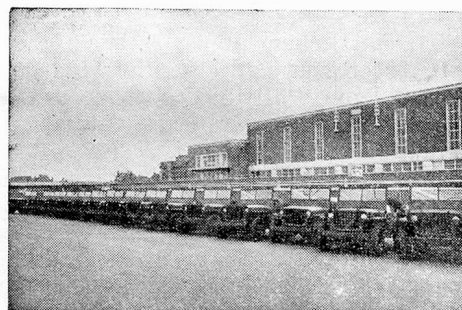
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