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HOME AFFAIRS.

by Dr. Max Nef.

At the present time, petroleum is being sought for in Switzerland. Private undertakings are engaged in this work in the Cantons of Lucerne and of Fribourg. Boring, which has been conducted with the technical help of foreign experts, has already attained a depth of 1,000 meters. No results that are worth mentioning have been achieved so far.

It is the intention of the interested parties to systematically explore the molasse, *i.e.* sandstone, territory lying between the Lake of Constance and the Lake of Geneva, as according to scientific theory petroleum might be found in these mineral strata. In the adjoining molasse region in South Germany, traces of petroleum have been found.

Similar attempts have already been made previously in Switzerland. The resulting disappointments, especially those of a financial nature, have led to a certain reserve being maintained, this time also, by those economic and financial circles which are interested in the exploitation of the treasures of the earth. Nevertheless, it is apparent that considerable public interest has been aroused in this matter. This has perhaps also been fanned by the knowledge that foreign oil companies are also interested in this venture.

There is of course no fear that there will now ensue a wild rush after Swiss petroleum. For one thing, a concession is required both for prospecting and for boring, and this is not easy to obtain. In accordance with age-long tradition, all mining prerogatives, to which the presence of oil in the ground belongs, are the rights of the Cantons. This alone creates somewhat complicated legal conditions, should traces of oil be found which extend into the territory of several Cantons.

The Cantons which might come into question have therefore been approached and conversations have taken place, which have not only touched upon technical problems, but also those connected with the legal side of this matter. Certain of the Cantons have already granted concessions. Others show a great reserve. The Confederation was also represented at these conferences. It is anxious to obtain all possible information from the Cantons regarding the permits for prospecting which have been granted by them. It will then proceed to elaborate a normal form of concession and place it at the disposal of the Cantons in order that there should be a certain degree of uniformity in this respect.

It is recalled on the part of the Government that during the last war, co-ordination was also striven for, on the grounds of the plenary powers then existing, in respect of an analogous matter, namely the exploitation of coal and other ores. Up to the present, some ten private firms have shown interest in the concessions. It is quite understandable that they are against any exercise of influence or participation on the part of the State. They stress the fact that in this matter what is of paramount necessity is a spirit of enterprise and an eagerness to run risks, which is more often encountered in private enterprise than it is in administrations.

To this, the Confederation rejoins that the higher interests of general economy and of public opinion are

here at stake and that these justify the collaboration of the State. It is therefore agreed upon that, should any oil be found, the entire territory concerned will be exploited as a whole, which would in all probability lead to a more economic way of managing things. The ground and the countryside adjoining the oilfields would then have to be protected from speculation.

Last, but not least, there are the external political effects of such possible discoveries of oil in Switzerland, to be carefully weighed. We know that for a great many countries, which find themselves in the very centre of international difference, the presence of oil might take on a tragic aspect. It is here that the problem of national defense comes in, for, as everyone knows, the Great Powers are far more interested in countries which possess some riches than they are in poor countries, whether this poverty consists in lack of natural wealth, or in that of material or economic riches. Such higher interests of the State itself could, if such things really did come to pass in Switzerland, justify the Confederation, under certain circumstances, to take over to itself the rights now held in this particular domain, by the Cantons, should the interests of the country as a whole be better safeguarded by so doing.

However, all these questions will remain in the air, until traces of oil of any importance have been discovered in Switzerland. And, for the present, these are still to be found.



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