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"D U T T I"

(The following article by Kees von Hoeck, which appeared in the "Times Pictorial" Dublin, on May 26th 1953, is herewith reproduced by courtesy of the Editor).

The Swiss have the reputation of being a sturdy, level-headed people. The exception which proves the rule, the one subject on which they allow themselves an excess of emotion, is Gottlieb Duttweiler. His old-fashioned Christian name means "Beloved by God," but everybody reduces the sonorous surname to a much more manageable "Dutti." As Dutti he is the perennial stand-by of the cartoonists and the cabarettists of a nation which has an instinctive national distrust of anybody great, loud or out-of-the ordinary among themselves. Dutti qualifies on every one of these three counts.

The Swiss, who have turned neutrality into a fetish, if not into a faith, are decidedly not neutral on the subject of Duttweiler. They will tell you either that he wears a halo or conceals a cloven hoof. To one part of the nation he is a hero, to the other a poltroon. They think of him either as a statesman or a Don Quixote. They admire him whole-heartedly or dislike him intensely.

He hails from a people who can trace their Zürich ancestry back over some five hundred years. Not that this means that he was born with a golden spoon in his mouth — even your Swiss cobbler may well be entitled to a coat of arms. Dutti's father was manager of one of the first co-operatives in Switzerland. The son had only little schooling. The country made up for it later by a well-merited honorary degree.

Life was his teacher. As a boy of twelve, he raised rabbits for quick profit. At fourteen, he augmented his pocket money by taking class photographs in school. He was sixteen when he became apprentice in a wholesale grocery business, of which he was the principal partner within ten years.

The firm went bankrupt from the sudden 1919 war-into-peacetime contraction of prices. The creditors voted Duttweiler as their liquidator, and the very small percentage which they lost he made up out of his own pocket later.

Meanwhile Duttweiler had gone to Santos in Brazil to grow coffee and sugar. He loved the life of a *hazendeiro*, but his wife (they are a devoted couple and close collaborators) felt homesick; so they returned to his native city, in 1924. That's when the fire works began.

There and then he realised that the grocer who sold the housewife her pound of coffee earned more money by passing it over the counter than the hard-worked coffee planter in Brazil with all his risks. It seemed absurd; obviously there was excessive profit and great waste somewhere in between! To shorten the distance from producer to consumer, Duttweiler founded "Migros," the name denoting a half-way station between wholesale and retail.

Migros revolutionised the Swiss retail trade by bringing foodstuffs from the factory right into the kitchen. As he had not the capital to open shops, he bought some second-hand Ford vans, equipped them as mobile shops and went half way to meet his customers. If they cared to buy the best flour, rice, lard, soap, coffee and sugar at scheduled van-stops

and pay cash, prices could be fully a third less than shops charged.

That's how Migros began over a quarter of a century ago. To-day 80 shops on wheels and 250 ordinary shops, carry an annual turnover in the neighbourhood of £25,000,000 sterling. In 1941 Duttweiler made the entire concern over to his customers. Since then he only gets £3,000 a year for running Migros with all its many ramifications.

In between lies a most tumultuous business history. The capitalists, the shopkeepers and the socialist co-operatives alike went up in arms. Chuckles Dutti: "In the old days they would have chopped the head off anybody not conforming to standard type. Nowadays they try to cut your throat by lies and legislation."

When his first shop-on-wheels appeared in Basle, it was seized by the police. In Berne the drivers were arrested. Every city and canton had to be conquered in a tough campaign. He would drop leaflets by plane, explaining what was happening and why. In one town his fine was spontaneously paid by customers, each contributing a few centimes.

A vicious campaign started against anybody supplying Migros, as well as against all those buying from it. Buying at Migros could even cost a customer his job, or the renewal of his lease. Children were sent shopping when mothers could not afford to be seen in a Migros shop. In the beginning, the big firms tried to break Migros (which only added 8 per cent. to production cost, and yet prospered) by price



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cutting. Fortunately, the Migros supporters realised that prices would sky rocket again once Migros were wiped off the map. For the duration of that cut-throat-competition customers stood firm, paying a little more until the ruse was abandoned.

No man alive has spent so much time in litigation — and enjoyed it in the bargain. He fought over a hundred lawsuits and still has half a dozen a year. Monopolies are a red flag to Dutti. When he heard that the price of a popular toilet soap was to be raised from 1s. 5d. to 1s. 8d. he bought 3,000 cases of that self-same soap in New York and sold them at 11d. a cake, covering transport, customs duty and Migros profit, and that despite the fact that American wages are higher than Swiss. Here was blatant proof that under international cartel agreements prices were kept at an unnecessarily high level.

Dutti has fought his adversaries all the way, all his life. When they refused to sell him goods for retail, he bought factories and manufactured them himself; the Migros chocolate factory is now the third largest in Switzerland. When many newspapers refused to take his advertisements, he founded his own daily, "Die Tat," of which the high journalistic standing secured it a nation-wide circulation. When the politicians refused to listen to him, he created (in 1935) his own party, the "Landesring."

Some years ago he topped the poll and broke all election records, winning one of the two Zurich seats in the Federal Senate by 90,000 votes. Shortly before he had lost a libel action brought by some oil trust and his election was the man in the streets's popular

verdict "on appeal." Duttwiler was since returned to the Nationalrat, the Swiss "Dail" where he represents the capital city of Berne.

His flair for business is akin to genius. He conceived the Hotel Plan which, at reduced all-in charges, gives the small man the chance of a proper holiday and fills hotels badly hit by foreign currency restrictions abroad. He bought wagon-loads of flowers from the Italian Riviera and thus satisfied the housewife's craving for flowers in winter at a tenth of the price which the fashionable florists had to charge for hothouse blooms. When the uneconomical Monte Generoso funicular in Lugano was to be sold for scrap, he bought it and made it pay at lower fares. His Cultural Centres teach languages in evening classes. He bought a fine building on the best site in the heart of the city as a Migros Club.

When domestic servants were scarce he arranged for thousands of Italian girls to come. He financed films like "The Last Chance"; collected millions of Swiss francs for the hungry children of Europe, and publishes books at half the normal price, yet as excellently produced.

Up till some years ago, taxis were most expensive in Switzerland, had to be because they were all the latest models of the best makes, so that often one needed a telescope to see the driver from the back seat. Duttwiler bought a fleet of small cars, which he defiantly painted yellow. Even before they were all on the road, the taxi proprietors banded together with a fleet of small "blue" taxis at a much reduced rate.

One of his most recent enterprises is the Migros Market in Zürich, where one can buy anything from a needle to an anchor for one's boat. So real is the faith of the average housewife in competitive Migros prices that they even come from far suburbs — and that although the Zürich trams charge a minimum fare of 8d.

He has been called a typical American go-getter. He does not like the word because he does not think much of American business methods, which he considers complicated, and top-heavy with extravagant ballast. His business philosophy has nothing against shops, charging higher prices because they carry a large variety of stock.

Duttwiler is out to give the housewife with the restricted purse the best quality at the cheapest possible price — not only her daily necessities, but equally her chance of a share in the good things of



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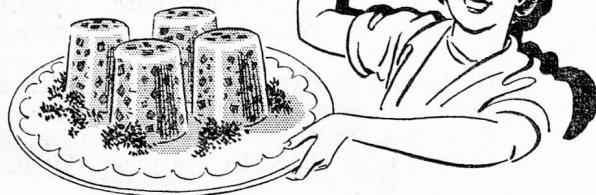
The Swiss buccaneer with no seas to sail, who sent out motor vans instead of galleons and then gave his doubloons away, has become a legend in his own time. To meet him is an exhilarating experience. A big-boned, heavily-built man, he looks younger than his middle sixties. His combed-back, longish, iron-grey hair reveals a round, friendly, tanned face, with impish hazel eyes behind gold-rimmed spectacles.

He laughs readily, and told me that he never appoints a man who hasn't a sense of humour, and one would need it in Dutti's service. He spends a long working day, which begins at seven, in a small, nearly comfortless room. On the narrow desk stands a telephone with 22 stops, direct lines to all his undertakings. His ashtray is filled with the stumps of those tiny cigars of which he is a chain smoker. Indifferent to dress, his only car is a small Topolino. He travels third class, and turned his big house on lake shore into a Migros Club.

It is impossible not to like him at sight. Yet this bear-like, big-hearted, good-natured man is a ruthlessly competent and coldly astute business tycoon. But business is to him only the means towards humanitarian ends. He has a genuine love of his fellow-men, combined with a schoolboyish mischief to frighten the wits out of his adversaries. He is difficult to pin down, especially as to the policy of his own party. He has temperamental squalls (which may be part of his technique for self-advertisement).

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He sees himself as a Robin Hood robbing the rich to help the ordinary man. He is a cross between the business genius of the late William Dwyer of Cork (Dutti once swam out, wearing a huge green straw hat, to a lake steamer bringing a business delegation) and the temperamental political unorthodoxy of a James Dillon, with an extra dash of exuberance to shake the stolid Swiss out of their self-complacency.

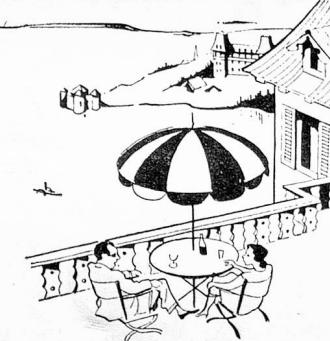
The Swiss do not mind so much, not even that he once threw a stone through a window of Parliament to get proper attention from the reporters — though they drew the line at his messianic interpretation of such self-advertisement that God told him to do so. Withal, part of his strength is his real and practical Christian faith.

He describes himself as a conservative and is feared like a revolutionary. A champion of private enterprise, he tries to save capitalism in spite of itself, as he puts it. He holds that the capitalists have been greedy, shortsighted and stubborn, have not made the necessary concessions when there was still time; so that nowadays organised labour can hold a country to ransom.

He upbraids co-operatives for its army of officials, fiddling with ha'pennies. He sees himself as the bridge-builder between producer and consumer, between capital and labour. He writes himself the outspoken, original and homely leading article in his Migros Weekly, "We Bridge-Builders."

Even the multitudes 'who dislike him as intensely as others revere him' at least agree that Gottlieb Duttweiler is by far and wide the most colourful, if not the most outstanding, Swiss burger of our time."

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