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CULTURAL CROSSROADS.

by Olivier Reverdin.

Only a little more than a century ago, Switzerland did not have either a Government, or an Executive Power. There was nothing to limit the sovereignty of the Cantons, of which she was composed, except the obligations, of an essentially military character, pertaining to the Pact which united them.

This structure had become an anachronism. Each Canton possessed its own currency, its weights and measures and its Customs. The economic development of the country was hampered by this, just in the same way as is that of Europe, to-day. At a time when railway lines were already furrowing their way across the Continent, Switzerland only possessed one line, twenty-two kilometres in length, running between Zurich and Baden. As freedom to set up in business did not exist, industry experienced great difficulty in obtaining man power. Its development was hampered.

In short, in order to find a solution for the economic and social problems which were facing her, Switzerland was obliged, in 1848, to modify her institutions. A Parliament was created, formed of two Chambers, of which one represents the Cantons, to which each Canton sends two deputies irrespective of its size and the number of its population, whereas the other one, which represents the nation, is formed of one deputy per every 24,000 inhabitants. Switzerland also gave herself a Central Government, namely the Federal Council, which is composed of seven members. Indubitably, this is the most stable Government in the world. During the 105 years of its existence, it has not been overthrown once, and, up to the present, Switzerland has only had 67 Federal Councillors, which means that, on an average, each one of them has remained in office for eleven years.

In this way, Switzerland, after having remained for five and a half centuries a confederation of states, became, in 1848, a Federative State. The institutions which she established have produced a remarkable development of the country. It is, actually, the most prosperous State in Europe, and the one in which social peace would appear to be the most assured.

In the transformation which took place in 1848, Switzerland did not suppress the Cantons, nor destroy their autonomy. On the contrary, in so far as was possible, she has respected their sovereignty. This still remains absolute, in a number of domains, more particularly in that of culture and of education. Each Canton organises its schools as it pleases and arranges the educational programme to suit its tastes. Technical training is developed in accordance with its ideas. The universities also possess a purely Cantonal statute. They do not even receive any Federal subsidies. The Confederation only has the right to maintain one school, namely the Polytechnicum in Zurich. But, it is authorised to grant subsidies to the Swiss schools in Italy, Spain, Egypt, Greece and South America. These schools, which had been set up by the Swiss Colonies in these countries, had become too heavy a charge for certain among them.

Thus, as you will have gleaned, in principle it is solely from the Cantons and from private initiative that education depends in Switzerland, as does also scientific research and the cultural and artistic life of the country. This represents very big advantages. One may even say that it is a necessity in a land, the frontiers of which contain populations speaking three different languages, and which, through these languages are connected with three of the great civilisations of the Continent. Any centralized régime would be fatal.

During the last few years, however, it has proved necessary for the Confederation, or in other words the central power, to intervene in two spheres. For one thing, it has created a foundation for the encouragement of scientific research, which had grown to be too costly for the Cantons and private enterprise to be able to shoulder the entire burden of expenditure. Every precaution has been taken in order that this may not lead to any cultural centralisation. The Foundation is autonomous. Its task consists solely in providing financial aid to the universities and to research centres in order to enable them to procure the instruments required for their work and which their own resources, generally very modest, make it impossible for them to acquire.

The other domain in which the Confederation has been obliged to take an initiative, is that of cultural propaganda abroad. Most countries make very serious efforts in this particular field, and spend a considerable amount of money for this purpose. Until quite recently, Switzerland had not done anything in this direction. If she had abstained much longer, then more and more credence would have been given to the legend that Switzerland is merely a land of cowherds and yodlers, of hotel-keepers and watch-makers, where the arts and letters are quite unknown.

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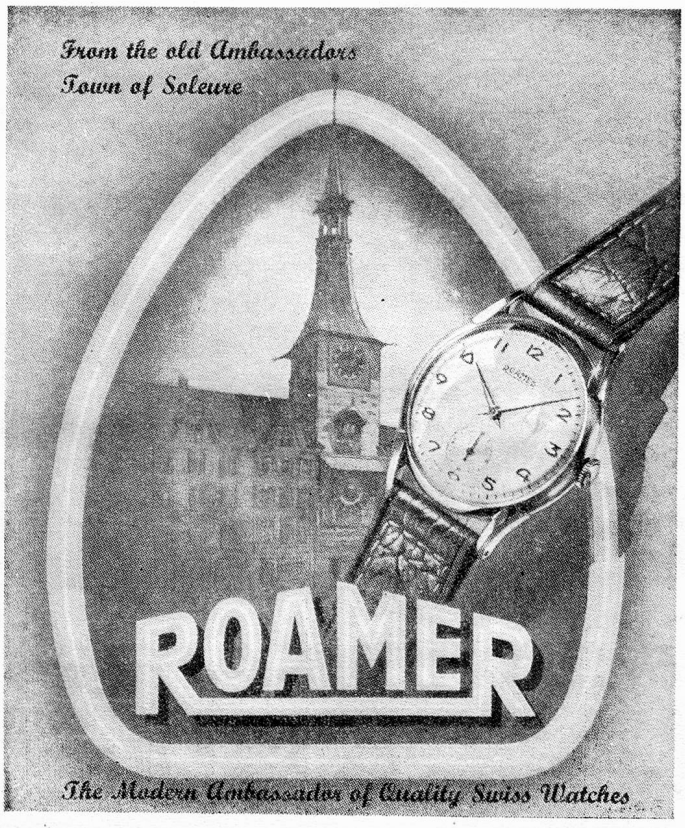
In order to combat this legend, a Foundation was created, under the name of Pro Helvetia, and charged with the task — with far too modest means at its disposal — of engaging in a certain amount of cultural propaganda abroad. Thus, during the last few years exhibitions of art, books, architecture and posters, have been organised in most of the big capitals. Up to the present, it is the exhibition of posters which have proved most successful. In this very special sphere of applied art, Switzerland has enjoyed some quite remarkable success. Her poster artists have a following throughout the world. A minor art, you may perhaps remark. But, if a poster, affixed to the walls of the towns and seen by thousands nay, by millions of persons, is a work of art, its design a thing of beauty and its colours both pleasing and striking, it can be one of the most valid expressions of the art of our times.

I only speak of the poster, as an example. In a great many other domains also, Switzerland is creating and working. She possesses artists of value, sulptors writers, composers of music, and architects whose works deserve to be known beyond her frontiers. Up to now, her federalist structure has hampered an organised intelectual and cultural radiation, as it is understood to-day. The other countries were engaged often in intense propaganda activities Switzerland did nothing. As a result, it was often concluded, quite wrongly, that she was not interested either in the arts, or letters, or science. Finally, she decided to take more active steps in regard to her cultural propaganda abroad, and this led to the creation of an organ having a national character, whereas, within her own frontiers, everything that is of a cultural nature is entirely dependent upon the Cantons.



VOTES FOR SWISS WOMEN.

When reporting in one of the recent issues of this paper on a function held by one of the Swiss Societies in London, I expressed the hope, that perhaps one day Swiss women would get the vote, adding "although most of them seem not to want it." This statement, I remarked, "may brood trouble for me."

It has, I have received a rather lengthy and somewhat rambling letter signed only with the initials B.L., no address was given, postmark London, W.1., and on top of this communication was written in block letters "NOT FOR PUBLICATION".

A letter not properly signed, nor an address given, comes pretty nearly into the category of an anonymous communication, which invariably goes straight into my "large" waste-paper basket.

This time, however, I feel tempted to reply to my correspondent B.L., in order to refute the accusation which she is making that I am "utterly incompetent to grasp the importance of the matter" and that my remark was "flippant and not according to facts."

Before I go any further, I should make it quite clear, that I am in favour of Swiss women getting the vote, as I consider that it would be beneficial not only to them, but also to our country.

The writer then goes on to ask, whether I have never read in Swiss newspapers, that the women of the cantons of Geneva and Basle have by a test poll voted with an overwhelming majority in favour of votes for women.

To this, I venture to say, that as far as I remember, the attendance at the poll in both cantons was remarkably small, and the majority equally so. Not having the exact figures before me, I will not challenge her statement that there was a majority, although not overwhelming.

I am further accused that my remark, that women in Switzerland do not want the vote is "malicious, and the least said stupid". In the above mentioned report, I wrote that "my statement was based on facts", and for the elucidation of my "polite" correspondent, who, I assume, is a lady, I might mention that for some years after the last war had ended, I discussed this matter, when on holiday in Switzerland, with many of my female compatriots in various parts of the country.

It is true, I did not tell them that I was connected with any news-paper, nor did I disclose that I personally was in favour of "Votes for Swiss women."

Now for the benefit of B.L. I will acquaint her with the result of my conversation with women in all walks of life, professional, office workers, servants, house-wives, peasants, etc., etc.

My notes made at the time show, that amongst the 31 women whom I interviewed over a period of three years, 14 were keen on getting the vote, 7 were not interested at all, 8 against it, and 2 had no personal opinion. Surveying these figures I came, not unreasonably, to the conclusion that there was no great enthusiasm amongst Swiss women to be put on the voting register.

In her closing lines B.L. invites me to give this question, which she declares is of "paramount importance to Swiss women" a second thought, "if my brain will allow it".

It is not for me to advertise the capacity of my