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“Landsgemeinde” of Swiss Clubs Bradford, Leeds & Manchester

ON SUNDAY, JUNE 20th, 1954,

AT HARDCastle CRAGS, (YORKSHIRE).

It had always been my wish to attend one day, as a spectator, one of the famous Open Air Parliaments, which are known as “Landsgemeinde” and are still held in some of the Swiss cantons. This wish was nearly satisfied, when some five years ago, I arrived in Appenzell only to be told, that this event was held the previous week. (I am a Bernese!)

Having thus missed this unique opportunity, I am however delighted to say, that another chance has come my way to visit a “Landsgemeinde”, but this time not in our homeland, but in Yorkshire where the members of the Swiss Clubs Bradford, Leeds and Manchester hold their annual reunion, which, as it takes place in the open air, is appropriately called a “Landsgemeinde”.

This rally was started some five years ago, and has become very popular amongst our compatriots up north. For this opportunity I and my wife are indebted in the first place to Professor J. Inebnit, the popular President of the Swiss Club Leeds and the Swiss Clubs of Bradford and Manchester; true enough they have made previous attempts to “lure” me to this gathering in Yorkshire, but for various reasons I had been prevented from making this journey.

Whilst this gathering has somewhat different features from those which are held at home, where processions headed by bands wind their way, amidst the ringing of church bells, and the thunder of guns through the gaily decorated streets to their respective meeting places, it was every bit as impressive, and I would not have missed it for worlds.

True enough there were absent those sturdy men adorned with patriarchal long beards carrying swords, nor did I see any beedles (Bundesweibel) dressed in their becoming red and white mantles carrying their wand of office, who usually precede the representatives of the Federal Government, who, on this occasion, are the special guests.

No, this Yorkshire “Landsgemeinde” was a much simpler affair, and yet it had its great moments, to which I shall presently refer, and I am convinced that all those who attended this happy rally were imbued with the same spirit of patriotism as those at home.

* * *

On the Saturday previous to the re-union we were met at the station by Professor Inebnit, President of the Swiss Club Leeds, and after a short walk through the streets of this industrial centre, and tea at one of the famous Hagenbach cafés (a compatriot of ours) were conducted over the impressive University building by Professor Inebnit, who is a senior French lecturer at this seat of learning, followed by a visit to his attractive home in one of the pleasant suburbs of Leeds, where we enjoyed typical Yorkshire hospitality from his family.

The next morning soon after 9 a.m. we met the Leeds contingent at the Central station for the journey to Hebden Bridge, a very jolly crowd indeed mostly consisting of young people of both sexes,

carrying rucksacks and little Swiss flags; although a dull day with plenty of heavy clouds prevented the sun from making its appearance, everybody seemed to be in a festive mood, full of pleasant anticipation of what was to come.

During the journey small groups from Bradford and Halifax joined the train singing and waving flags. On the arrival at Hebden Bridge, we were joined by the Manchester contingent, so that by now the company numbered about 140. Amongst them I had the pleasure of meeting some old friends whom I had met on former occasions at various official functions of the Swiss Club, Manchester. After many handshakes and greetings the company started on their journey to Hardcastle Crags in the lovely wooded Hebden Valley.

By now the sun had consented to appear and spread its golden rays over the fine Yorkshire moors; in spite of a rather rough path leading up the valley, with rocky bluffs and a long sweep of pines ahead, not unlike Swiss scenery, the “mountaineers” made fair headway, encouraged by the lusty singing of the youngster, who like chamois led the way to Cosy Corner Café where we arrived after an hour and a half.

Here and there nature’s stillness was broken by shrill “Juchzer” or a hearty “Yodel” which brought back many a pleasant memory of times when we, as youngsters, climbed some of the peaks “back home”.

A picnic luncheon, which unfortunately was somewhat marred by a sharp shower of rain, was taken, either in the open or at the little café and after it had ceased everyone wended their way higher up to one of the beauty spots affording a lovely view. Hill upon hill, wood upon wood, moor upon moor intercepted by small rivers and the grey stone villages spread before our eyes.

When people are happy amongst the beauties of nature they give vent to their feelings by singing, and soon the valley echoed with some of our many folk songs sang in “Schwyzerdütsch”, French and Italian. I was particularly impressed by a song “Sur la montagne” rendered by a group of charming lassies hailing from the French speaking part of our country.

After a last glance around, the company, now in high spirits, descended to a place close to Hebden stepping stone, between Midgehole and Gibson Mill, which our friends call the “Rütli” and rightly so, as indeed it has some similar features with the sacred meadow on the “Vierwaldstättersee”, where in 1291 those sturdy men from Uri, Schwyz and Unterwalden took the solemn oath to stand together in peace and war, in life and death to defend our country’s independence, if need be, with the last drop of their blood.

Then the “Landsgemeinde” started, and like a good omen the sun pierced the threatening clouds and shed its rays over the assembly, which was, either

seated or standing in a large circle. Small girls and boys carrying Swiss flags or cantonal emblems, and wearing "Mätscherchäppli" sat cross-legged inside the ring.

Professor Inebnit, accompanied by two pretty girls, one dressed in the Appenzeller, and the other in Bernese costume, opened the proceedings.

Amidst solemn silence, only broken here and there by the sound of a church bell in the distance, the speaker referred in moving terms to the significance of the day. "We are here," he said, "assembled like our own folk at home to discuss weighty matters relating to our status as Swiss abroad."

He invited the audience to make any suggestions or recommendations which could be submitted to the delegates from Great Britain, who are going to the "Journée des Suisse de l'Etranger" taking place in Geneva on August 27th, 28th and 29th. Although there was no general discussion, many members of the assembly afterwards privately voiced their opinions to Professor Inebnit, who is going to join the delegation at the above mentioned meeting, and I am sure no better man could have been chosen to safeguard our interests.

With deep patriotic feelings he alluded to the approaching 1st of August National Day, its lesson to a world full of turmoil and evil forebodings, exhorting everyone to act and live in the spirit of our forefathers, who by their sacrifices and tenacity had guaranteed after much strife our independence and freed us from foreign invasion.

Mr. Inebnit's fine oration, which left a deep impression on its hearers was loudly acclaimed. He then introduced the only guests attending this year's assembly, namely Mr. and Mrs. A. Stauffer, Editor of the "Swiss Observer", London, who he said have for the first time come to this gathering, and thanked them for having come along.

I then thanked in a few words him and the company for having given my wife and I such a cordial reception, and then delivered the message given me previously by the Swiss Minister, Monsieur Henry de Torrenté, this message being greeted with much applause.

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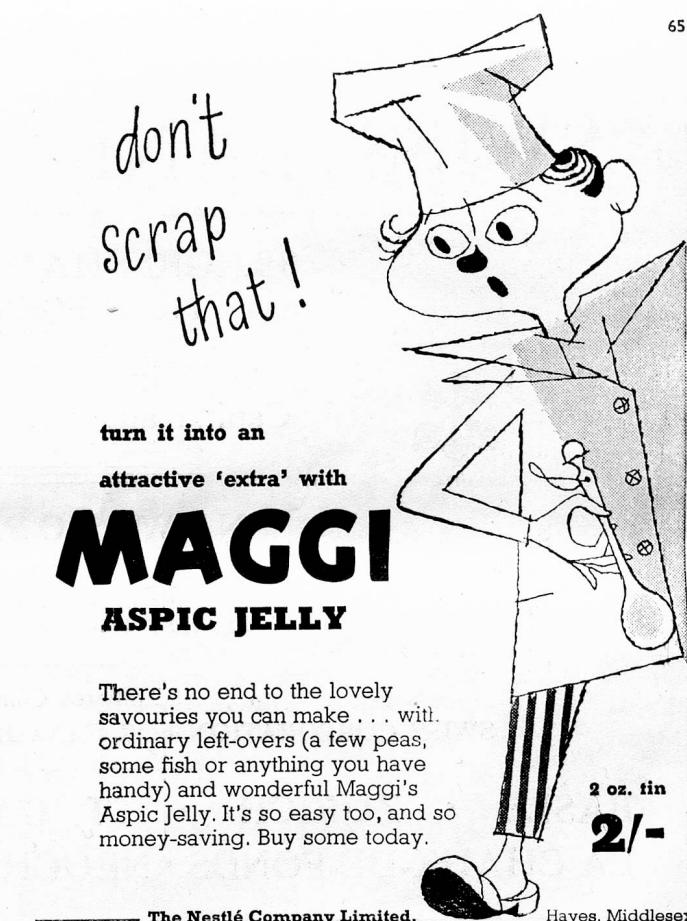
Then came the famous "roll-call", one of the principal features of the "Landsgemeinde". Members of each canton, according to the entry into the Confederation of their respective canton, were called forward to form an inner ring. At each roll-call Professor Inebnit gave a short historical survey of each canton, starting of course, with the "Ur Kantone". Loud cheers greeted each contingent which stepped forward, especially warmly greeted were the minority cantons (French, Italian and Romansch speaking), thus showing, as it is at home, that minorities have a particularly warm corner in our hearts. To liven up the proceedings some of the members of the cantonal contingents sang their popular melodies. Eighteen of the twenty-two cantons were represented.

When the last canton to enter into the Confederation, namely Geneva was called, the inner circle was complete. The Swiss National Anthem was then sung, and as a compliment to the country which is giving us such generous hospitality, the assembly sang, no less fervently the first verse of "God Save The Queen", this *beau geste* was greatly appreciated by a number of English spectators who had followed the proceedings with great interest.

Thus the 6th "Landsgemeinde" of its kind, of our brethren up north came to its conclusion, an event which will be greatly treasured by all those who attended; in its simplicity it left a deep impression on everyone.

Time had now come for the return to Hebden Bridge, a short halt was made half-way, where games were played by the children, whilst the rest indulged

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in more community singing. At about 5 p.m. the revellers arrived at the White Horse Inn, this time by a different route, where a really sumptuous Yorkshire High Tea was served.

It is often said, and not without reason, that the Swiss in London talk too much, and too long, whenever they meet at some official function, well, without meaning to be unkind, I must admit that our compatriots in the Provinces seem to be equally proficient in the art of speech-making. No sooner had we finished tea, than the Chairman, this time Mr. C. F. Illi, the President of the Swiss Club Bradford, started the ball rolling by extending a hearty welcome to the guests and the company. He was followed by Professor Inebnit, who addressed the company this time in French. Space unfortunately does not allow me to give excerpts of what was said, but I would like to emphasize that all speakers reached a high level in their orations. Further addresses were given by the Editor of the "Swiss Observer", and Mr. E. Berner, the President of the Swiss Club, Manchester.

And so came to the end a perfect day, a day which will leave behind nothing but happy memories. It was a striking demonstration of the deep attachment our compatriots in Lancashire and Yorkshire have for our country. They have proved it time after time, and we are proud of them.

Thanks are due to the efficient organisers of this unforgettable event, not only to Professor Inebnit and his charming daughter, but also to Mr. H. Monney the untiring Hon. Secretary of the Swiss Club, Manchester.

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