

Switzerland and the modern crisis

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SWITZERLAND AND THE MODERN CRISIS.

Reflections on August 1.

By PETER DÜRRENMATT.

For thirteen years, i.e., since the end of the Second World War, Switzerland has been involved in a radical and obvious transition. The changes that are taking place are simple proof, in the first instance, that we have remained a truly living nation; when things are no longer capable of changing they have either become petrified or they are already dead. However, there is more than a mere change involved. There are changes which testify to superficiality and frivolity and which lead eventually to complete dissolution. A nation and a state are subject to a destiny which is similar to that governing individuals caught up in the struggle for existence. They must do more than merely flounder in the ocean of historical developments; they must be able to plot a course in full awareness of the enormity of the problems facing them. What is the situation of Switzerland at the present time in this respect?

Before we reply to this question, we shall attempt to characterize very briefly the essential features of the above-mentioned transformations. They are related to three different phenomena, which are closely interrelated and interdependent, namely, the effects of the continuous economic boom of the last ten years, the consequences of modern technology and the upheavals attendant upon the unleashing of nuclear energy and the atomic bomb. All three affect our country, mainly because they create new dimensions of existence. Such developments have always made us uncomfortable in Helvetia. Switzerland is a small state, and furthermore, a small federal state, in which in addition to the sovereignty of the Confederation there also exists the sovereignty of the individual cantons. Five million people — including the numerous foreigners working among us — live in the same small area in which, one hundred years ago, half that number found it much less easy to gain their livelihood. Is it possible for such a small nation to remain confident in an age when we must think

in terms of huge continental masses and when the remotest parts of the earth have been drawn so close to one another?

The confidence of a nation is dependent upon what opportunities are presented to it in the struggle for existence. This struggle for existence, however, takes place simultaneously on three levels: the cultural, the material-economic and the moral. In the contest among nations a people is judged in accordance with its cultural achievements. In a material contest the same applies, but we should not overlook the fact that there is in this case also a cultural motive involved. After all, the fund of ideas and the creative power of a nation are prerequisites for success in the material struggle for existence. However, as regards moral qualities, the question is, whether we Swiss are not oppressed by the thought that for the defence of our traditional freedoms we have at our disposal such limited material power.

To begin with, let us examine the consequences of the economic boom. The changes it has wrought, and is still bringing about, are impressive. Our population is becoming more and more concentrated in urban and industrial centres; our immemorial way of life is changing in accordance. We Swiss have become a highly motorized people and the proverbial joy in work as an end in itself (regarded by foreigners as excessive) is at the present time undergoing some modification, in that the opinion is gaining ground that it is high time for us also to adopt the 44-hour, 5-day week. No, we are no longer a nation of herdsmen! Neither are we any longer a nation which deprives itself of anything, seeing that, in comparison with former times, we part with our money too easily. We also pay great homage to that modern idol: Standard of Living.

Those are, in brief, a few symptoms of the economic boom. They are causing feelings of alarm in many people, feelings which can be summed up under the slogan "Mass Culture". On the other hand, it is just as undeniable that the Swiss economy, taken as a whole, has over the last few years achieved remarkable results. In the exacting international struggle for existence the Swiss have held their own; indeed, one of our leading spokesmen in the international sphere was able to state the other day that as far as its economic and financial importance is concerned the Swiss Confederation should no longer be classed as a small nation. Switzerland in effect has become a medium-sized power.

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This means, however, nothing more than this, namely, that in an age in which the main orientation is toward world-encompassing dimensions and the formation of large-scale political organizations and spheres, the prevailing opinion being that only large geographical areas guarantee feasible and rational economic operation, tiny Switzerland has to a certain extent furnished proof to the contrary. Our small scale enables us to operate in certain respects more profitably and rationally than many a larger economy. This factor must be borne in mind whenever the Swiss reserve with regard to such endeavours as the Common Market of six European States is subjected to criticism. The main argument of the champions of that idea, namely, that the real task is to create a more rational economic condition by means of a large customs area can in many respects be refuted by the actual practice of the Swiss.

These observations from the field of economics have their counterpart in the cultural sphere. To be sure, certain crises arising in modern culture have impinged upon our people just as much as upon other nations. As far as they are connected with the question of mass culture, it may be affirmed that differences of opinion embrace more social groups than is the case abroad. Where, for instance, is the problem of television seriously discussed? In our country it occasioned a federal and (in Basle-City) a cantonal vote. The same applies to the various problems connected with the film industry.

Also other consequences of modern technology are being thrashed out in public discussion. The construction of highways, the building of modern airports, the exploitation of the last remaining water power locked up in the Alps and its consequences for conservation often give rise to vehement controversies. All this is proof that the Swiss are not a people to rush into the future heedlessly.

Critics refer to this as rustic backwardness or simply regard it as the fear of the little man in the face of an unpleasant and inevitable development. There may be a certain anxiety involved here, whereby we must immediately proceed to inquire whether fear of the consequences of technological civilization is an entirely unknown phenomenon among other nations. The basic motivation underlying our discussions on the relationships between special Swiss conditions and technological progress is not fear, but rather a determination not to be swept along helplessly in the tide of events.

We come at this juncture to the last point, namely, the question concerning the power of moral resistance of the Swiss, caught up as they are in the tumultuous rush of developments. On this point many Swiss and foreign observers entertain both open and tacit doubts. The Swiss are on occasion depicted as cheerless, despondent, and all too anxious about their material security. Any reply to this question as to who in the long run will be proved right, the optimists or the pessimists, can only be of theoretical value. A nation can only prove its worth when the exacting test has become reality.

In spite of this reservation we should like to point out one thing: the way in which the allegedly sluggish Swiss reacted to the uprising in Hungary and to its bloody suppression reveals, in an entirely unexpected manner and with astonishing spontaneity, the fact that in the hearts of thousands the fundamental values on which our culture is based are very much alive. The excitement of that time was not artificial, but elementary. It proved that in our country a vigorous minority exists which has retained its awareness. Has it, however, ever been any different throughout our long history? What we fervently hope on this 1st of August, and have good reason to hope, is that this staunch core of our nation, which is what really matters, will resist all the influences of modern decadence, so that a new generation will preserve Switzerland and in the future keep it free, receptive to new impulses and vigorous.

PERSONAL.

We regret to announce the passing away of Mr. J. G. Bachmann, of 53, Cranley Road, Westcliff-on-Sea. The deceased was a Honorary Member of the City Swiss Club, having been a member for over fifty years.

We extend heartiest congratulations to Mr. & Mrs. F. Zogg, of 58, Hightrees House, Nightingale Lane, S.W.12, who will celebrate their golden wedding anniversary on Tuesday, August 26th, 1958.

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