

Zeitschrift: The Swiss observer : the journal of the Federation of Swiss Societies in the UK
Herausgeber: Federation of Swiss Societies in the United Kingdom
Band: - (1960)
Heft: 1369

Artikel: The Swiss are different
Autor: Langford, R.A.
DOI: <https://doi.org/10.5169/seals-691336>

Nutzungsbedingungen

Die ETH-Bibliothek ist die Anbieterin der digitalisierten Zeitschriften auf E-Periodica. Sie besitzt keine Urheberrechte an den Zeitschriften und ist nicht verantwortlich für deren Inhalte. Die Rechte liegen in der Regel bei den Herausgebern beziehungsweise den externen Rechteinhabern. Das Veröffentlichen von Bildern in Print- und Online-Publikationen sowie auf Social Media-Kanälen oder Webseiten ist nur mit vorheriger Genehmigung der Rechteinhaber erlaubt. [Mehr erfahren](#)

Conditions d'utilisation

L'ETH Library est le fournisseur des revues numérisées. Elle ne détient aucun droit d'auteur sur les revues et n'est pas responsable de leur contenu. En règle générale, les droits sont détenus par les éditeurs ou les détenteurs de droits externes. La reproduction d'images dans des publications imprimées ou en ligne ainsi que sur des canaux de médias sociaux ou des sites web n'est autorisée qu'avec l'accord préalable des détenteurs des droits. [En savoir plus](#)

Terms of use

The ETH Library is the provider of the digitised journals. It does not own any copyrights to the journals and is not responsible for their content. The rights usually lie with the publishers or the external rights holders. Publishing images in print and online publications, as well as on social media channels or websites, is only permitted with the prior consent of the rights holders. [Find out more](#)

Download PDF: 05.01.2026

ETH-Bibliothek Zürich, E-Periodica, <https://www.e-periodica.ch>

THE SWISS ARE DIFFERENT

By R. A. LANGFORD

There is no country quite like Switzerland, and no people even remotely resembling the Swiss.

Flatten the mountains out with a giant rolling-pin, and the country would expand to three or four times its size. Crumpled as it is, altitudes vary from sea-level (at Locarno) to 15,215 feet, on the summit of the Dufourspitze (peak), the highest point in the Swiss Alps. In between, you can choose your climate, from mellow Mediterranean to frozen Arctic. Why, in the course of an afternoon you can travel backward, as it were, through the seasons — from summer back to spring and thence to eternal winter — by going for a ride on the steep mountain railroad that ascends the Jungfrau.

And the people who inhabit this country are just as varied. In the West they speak French and are Gallic in race, character and temperament. The conductor on the eastbound train from Geneva or Lausanne starts by saying "Tous les billets, s'il vous plaît!" when he asks for the tickets; by the time the train reaches Bern, the capital, he has switched over to German and calls "Alle Billette, bitte."

For we have meanwhile passed the language frontier and entered the region where German dialects are spoken — a different one in each region. The "frontier zone" is only a few miles wide, and it remains a mystery why, despite generations of federal government and intermarriage, there has been so little blending and merging between the two racial elements.

But that is another of the characteristic features of Switzerland. The twenty-five Cantons (or States) making up the Confederation enjoy an amazing amount of autonomy; and they are so jealous of their independence within the Swiss family that some of them still officially call themselves republics! Far from attempting to unify the population, the Federal Government takes pains to preserve the natural order and thus prevent the creation of discontented — and therefore troublesome — minorities.

Right across the country from east to west runs the Great Divide, the Alpine barrier culminating in the St. Gotthard massif; south of this, in the Ticino, we find the Italian-speaking Swiss. Strangely enough, the St. Gotthard, though traversed by only a single railroad tunnel and a single road, is far less effective as language barrier than the little stream that divides German-speaking from French-speaking Switzerland. The reason for this is mainly climatic: the Ticino is far sunnier and warmer than the regions north of the Alps. In springtime you may leave Zurich by train in cold fog or rain, run into snow as the train ascends towards Göschenen, the northern end of the nine-mile St. Gotthard tunnel, and emerge ten minutes later at

Airolo into a world of bright blue skies and warm, golden sunshine.

The urge towards the South is therefore quite natural. Having reached retirement age, thousands of Swiss from the North buy a plot of land in the sunny Ticino and build a house or cottage in which to spend the evening of their years. They take their language and their native habits with them, thus adulterating the true *Italianità* of the Ticino, where sunshine and lovely scenery are practically the only economic assets of the "natives."

Of late, too, wealthy Germans have been settling in the Ticino in ever-increasing numbers. Ever more "Building site for sale" and "House for sale in Ticino" advertisements have been appearing in German papers as the relatively poor Ticinesi cash in on their coveted though unproductive property. Taxes are comparatively low, the geographical location fairly safe in the event of another war. In some parishes in the Ticino to-day the German-speaking outnumber the Italian-speaking inhabitants.

Up in the mountainous Canton of Grisons, known the world over through names such as the Engadine, St. Moritz, Davos, Arosa, etc., we find another race of Swiss speaking a tongue called Romansh. As the name suggests, it was originally the Latin of Caesar, though greatly altered now. But it is one of the four officially acknowledged national languages of Switzerland, and you will find men who speak it running the best hotels, not only in their own country but all over the world.

All these various races live side by side in the one country. But it would be wrong to suppose that they live in perfect loving harmony; like every big family living under one roof they have their squabbles and conflicting interests. But when quarrels arise, they look for the common-sense solution. They talk it over, thrash it out, fight it out if necessary — and in the end either find a compromise or agree to differ. Coercion of any kind is taboo.

By the same token industrial strikes are practically unknown in Switzerland. The Socialist Party is numerically the strongest in the country, and the unions (associations, they call them here) are quite as powerful as elsewhere; but collective contracts in the different trades, under Government sponsorship, eliminate industrial disputes before ever they can come to a head. There has not been a major strike in Switzerland since just after the end of World War I!

This is all the more surprising in that, for years past, between three and four hundred thousand foreign workers — mainly surplus Italian labour — have been helping the Swiss get on with the job. This figure may not seem unduly large until it is remembered that the total population of Switzerland is a bare five million!

Though I may be accused of having gone native, I maintain that the Government of Switzerland is the



THERE'S VARIETY AND *Quality* IN

Panda RIBBONS

REGD

Everyone wants these wonderful ribbons manufactured by Selectus Limited. They are made in a host of traditional and fashion colours and in many qualities - plain and fancy, in Nylon, "Terylene" and Rayon. Ask for Panda and be sure of the best.

SELECTUS LIMITED • BIDDULPH, STOKE-ON-TRENT.



**WHOLESALE
AND SHIPPING**

Telephone—Biddulph 3316-7
Telegrams—Selectus, Stoke-on-Trent

only type of democracy capable of functioning efficiently. The country is administered rather than governed. At the peak of the pyramid is the Federal Council of seven-members, representing the major political parties in a permanent coalition. Virtually, they are elected for life, resigning — voluntarily but reluctantly — when old age sets in.

In the past twenty years only two Federal Councillors have been forced out of office by public opinion. The first (a French-Swiss) was deemed too weak a personality to stand up to Nazi arrogance during the last war; the second (a German-Swiss) was regarded as too irresolute to make a good Minister of Defence after the war was ended.

Each of the seven is head of a Department, or Ministry, and one is elected President — or rather Chairman of the Federal Council — for a year, meanwhile retaining his Department. Then he goes back to the end of the line and is succeeded by the Vice-President, who usually belongs to a different party. And so it goes on. There is no ballyhoo about the annual presidential elections, no TV cheesecake, no honeyed promises, for the result is a foregone conclusion. Half-way through the year the citizen has to think hard before he can remember the current President's name.

The Federal Council submits recommendations to the two chambers — the Council of States (representing the Cantons), and the National Council (representing the constituencies). These motions are tabled in Parliament as the collective findings of the Federal Council and seven members are jointly responsible. If Parliament turns one down, back it goes to the seven with the mute reproach: "Look, boys, you can do better than that if you put your heads together." And even when a bill is passed, a petition signed by 30,000 citizens can force the Government to have the issue submitted to the vote of the people.

The Swiss voter goes to the poll five or six times a year. Not only does he have a say in the election of his local and cantonal representatives, he also votes on such matters as roadbuilding and other public works, the appointment of schoolteachers and pastors, the spending of public funds, etc. That is why Switzerland has been so slow in introducing votes for women — the males think that many of the problems at issue would be too complicated for them to understand. But women's franchise is now on the way and will probably be an accomplished fact within the next decade. It will have very little effect in Switzerland, which is essentially a man's country.

Despite their differences in race, language and character, all Swiss have one thing in common: An urge towards perfectionism. They advertise their products without superlatives — merely as "Swiss made," which they say is a less crude way of claiming "the best quality and craftsmanship in the world".

It would be a mistake to suppose that they will live by milking cows and putting the milk into cans, cheese or chocolate. Nowadays these products, as well as half the nation's food, are imported. Switzerland has become an industrial country, with chemicals, machines, apparatus textiles, watches and everything technical that calls for technical skill and precision as her staple products. The tourist trade (roughly ten million visitors every year) and worldwide insurance and commercial interests add the invisible exports which have raised the nation's standard of living to the

highest in Europe. Industry is decentralised. There are few large plants and thus no dense concentrations of labour or city slums. Healthy contact between town and country has never broken off — few Swiss are more than a few generations removed from the soil. At one end of Zurich's smartest shopping street, in front of the windows of the dignified Swiss National Bank building — whose vaults are rumoured to store the other half of the world's gold — the peasants of the surrounding countryside still hold their vegetable, fruit and flower market twice weekly. Nobody finds it incongruous.

When the Lord had created the first Swiss, he looked kindly upon him and spoke: "How wouldst thou like to live? I will grant thee three wishes."

"Then let me have high mountains, that I may live nearer Heaven," answered the Swiss piously.

Pleased at having created such a paragon of virtue in human form, the Lord said: "They first wish is granted. What else wouldst thou like?"

"Lush pastures and fine cattle that give an abundance of milk."

This wish, too, was granted and the Swiss set about tilling his fields and milking his cows.

"Is the milk good?" asked the Lord.

"It is indeed. Here, try this mugful Thyself."

The Lord quaffed from the mug, found it good and said: "Now, what is thy third wish?"

"One franc twenty, please!"

1st OF AUGUST IN THE WEST OF ENGLAND

Swiss from Bristol, Bath and Warminster celebrated their national day at 2 Sussex Place Bath, hostess and host, Mrs. Frieda Maddox-Mueller and Mr. A. Wepf. Mr. Wepf was lucky enough to record the talk of our "Bundespräsident" Mr. Petitpierre, which he played back from his tape-recorder.

We had the opportunity to speak French and Italian, amongst much "Schwyzerdütsch"; to begin with, the atmosphere was a little strange, but a good cup of tea and a delicious Swiss-Torte soon put everyone at ease.

The afternoon sun encouraged us to go for a short walk to Beechencliff, from where we enjoyed a lovely view of Bath.

Returning through a field in which cows were grazing, we felt really and truly at home!

On our return we sat down to a Spaghetti-napolitaine dish, followed by lettuce and Swiss-dressing; a macedoine of fresh fruit was the dessert.

Red and white wines were served; all eatables were contributed by those present, in a truly Swiss spirit.

During the meal we enjoyed Swiss folk-music, "Chum Bueb" and "lueg dis Ländli a" amongst other popular tunes.

We ended the meal with café and home-made Opfelchueche.

After the meal we entertained each other with our own voices, singing Swiss-songs in three languages; all the performances were tape-recorded and played back. This caused great mirth.

Time passed quickly; we were amazed to realize we had spent six happy hours together.

The evening was concluded by the playing of the national hymn on a melodean by Mr. A. J. Maddox, and it was time to part with a hearty "au revoir".