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Books

“LE GENERAL GUISAN FUT UN HOMME HEUREUX”

by ALFRED RENOU

A great many Swiss in this country were both surprised and delighted when, a few weeks back, they saw in the middle of a page of one of the leading Sunday newspapers the familiar photograph of General Henri Guisan. In a most interesting leading article on the present situation in Berlin, great compliments were paid to the attitude of Switzerland “which had to be vigilant to maintain her neutrality during the war” and a great tribute was paid to our General. It said:—

“Guisan’s story shows that neutrals, too, must make up their minds whose side they are on and fight for it if they wish to survive — by bluff and by stratagem and underground intrigue but always with the determination and devotion of a frontline combatant. Henri Guisan certainly showed all the determination in the world.”

The reason was a review of Mr. Kimche’s book, called “Spying for Peace”, which is creating a great interest in many circles and which I am sure many Swiss will want to read. It relates to many outstanding services which Henri Guisan rendered, not only to his country but also to the Free World, as acknowledged by Winston Churchill, and shows yet another side of this outstanding personality which has remained unknown to many. It was my privilege to visit the General at his H.Q. late in 1944 I was in fact the first “civilian” from Great Britain to do so and I shall never forget this interview which lasted nearly 3 precious hours.

It is therefore wonderful news that the official biography of our great leader should be available now in this country, both in French and German. It has been prepared under the supervision of Monsieur Paul Chaudet, our Defence Minister and a friend of the General and his family. It is a beautifully presented publication. The first part contains articles by MM. Max Petitpierre, Paul Chaudet, Bernard Barbey, Robert Frick and other well-known personalities who have known Henri Guisan quite well, who served under him or were associated with his many activities. It starts with his youth, written by his cousin, Louis Guisan, and the first line seems to open and sum up this book in one phrase:—

“Le Général Guisan fut un homme heureux.”

We see him as a child, a growing boy, a young man, a student. From the very first you can feel his love of the soil, his land, a love which was to guide him all through his life and make him act all along much more as a citizen with a great heart, a full sense of human responsibility, rather than just a soldier. We meet his sweetheart, she was 14 when they had their first dance at the “Fête du bois”, and she was to become the most wonderful wife any man could wish to have at his side; they celebrated their diamond wedding anniversary a few years ago.

We follow the man as he grows, his endeavours, how he learns Schwyzertdeutsch, goes abroad, his love for horses; we find him being more and more appreciated by his superior officers who want him to become a professional soldier, a temptation he rejects for many years because of his love for the land. He becomes, however, Commander of a Division, a German-speaking one, where he conquers

the hearts of his compatriots; soon an Army Corps is entrusted to him. On the horizon the war clouds gather and his great friend, Budesrat Minger, prepares him for the very great position he is to take, that of Commander-in-Chief.

The War years are, of course, a chapter in themselves. For the first time the public gets some of the inside story with the tragic decisions which have to be taken, the tremendous responsibility of one man who alone must decide, and who does so facing often timid Members of the Government. But he is a born *Chef*, what we call in French “un grand Patron”. He completely transforms the spirit of the Army, gives it that wonderful human touch, reminding all the officers that the men under their command are husbands, fathers, men with families, and therefore men of dignity, with problems.

To lead an army to war is not half as difficult as to keep an army for months and months in expectation. The frustration is immense; “What are we doing?” is what everyone feels at times, especially when away from home. But the General travels all over the country, meeting all the troops and lifting the morale not only of the army but of the whole nation. Wherever his car appears with his flag people rush to the main road to greet him. I remember him telling me “le peuple avait son Général... mais le Général avait son peuple”. The two were closely united and of the thousands of letters which Henri Guisan received from wives, children, magistrates, humble peasants who could not leave their farms, not one remained unanswered, and most of them were signed by him.

In this book you meet also the great men who came to see Guisan, including Churchill, whom the General met also at his house in London when he came here. You learn also of his love for and interest in the young people, his constant care for them to whom he was such a fine example.

Possibly the greatest test was to come when at the earliest opportunity he decided to demobilize the army so that everyone could return home. The job was done, well done. But it is so rare for a General — or for a politician — to have the greatness to think of the others only, to give up the great office especially when you have been a national idol. This he did in moving simplicity and this final day is one of the greatest chapters of this immensely fascinating book. And yet this fabulous popularity was to lose none of its strength all through the years after the War. Indeed, for fifteen years Henri Guisan remained the national figure who always drew the greatest applause whenever his name was mentioned, who commanded the highest respect in all circumstances; he was above all the best-loved man Switzerland has ever known, and his funeral saw a whole and united nation in mourning. Never before has every citizen of any class in any part of the country felt so deeply that he or she had lost someone very dearly loved, whom they will never forget.

This book will help you to understand and share this love, it will make you proud and grateful, and the wonderful 111 illustrations are memories which will thus be perpetuated for you and your children.