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ZURICH'S BAHNHOFSTRASSE — FROM FROGS TO FAME

By FRITZ HERDI

A local author once described Zurich's Bahnhofstrasse as the only place in Switzerland with any right to be described as metropolitan. Tourists praise it as one of the world's finest shopping streets, offering, practically without a break, a wealth of goods stylish and luxurious both in themselves and their presentation. Tourists also note that even the sober bank buildings carry on the continuity by means of show windows. In fact, visitors like everything they see in — to quote R. A. Langford — "the smartest shopping street . . . from the unlovely railway station to the lovely lake".

It comes naturally to think of the street as starting at the railway station and ending at the lake, but officially the reverse is the case. Bahnhofstrasse, with its generous proportions — carriageway nearly forty feet wide on the average and its two sidewalks, each nearly twenty feet wide — drives down from the Lake to the Station.

The street begins with open spaces on both sides, before the built-up section starts with No. 1, on the left comprising a picture gallery and travel bureau. Often known as "Zurich's Show Window", Bahnhofstrasse is just over 1,330 yards long, and finishes at No. 93, a stationer's, on the left, and at No. 110, a tobacconist's, on the right.

What lies in between is well worth a lengthy stroll, passing leisurely from window to window, each more stylish than the one before. At one time shop owners would change their windows only every ten or twenty years, merely giving the contents a dusting every morning. Nowadays they dress their windows anew every month — sometimes every week — anxious to show their wares to the most eye-catching effect.

One particularly happy aspect of the Bahnhofstrasse is that side by side with luxury and glamour you can find some of the simple, homely aspects of life. Take for example the flower seller. For years, he's been offering his flowers for sale from the same doorway, from nine o'clock in the morning until the evening. His bag of small change hangs on a door, and he keeps some of his flowers in tin cans and little plastic buckets.

Then you'll also find the lottery ticket seller, in her narrow little roofed-in hut made of wood and metal. Another well-known character is the newspaper seller who, whenever he has to leave his pitch, leaves a photograph of his family as a silent but eloquent appeal to the honesty of his customers. They help themselves, and throw the money into his box.

If you care to stop and stare in the Bahnhofstrasse — and in the summer months one of the pavement cafés is as good a place to do this as any — you can get hours of first-class entertainment. Watching the passers-by, you'll see all types, from the housewife laden with the day's shopping to the tourist slung about with cameras, from the little office girl who manages to dress attractively on her modest salary, to exotic-looking women from far-away lands, in their colourful garb.

Nearly all Zurich's leading banks are represented in the Bahnhofstrasse, and make a big contribution to the street's unique atmosphere. Incidentally, in some bank windows there are television sets which screen the latest stock exchange prices.

It's a pity, however, that visitors in the Bahnhofstrasse all too often forget to look upwards. If you do this, you will discover a number of charming and original details

incorporated by architects of past generations; alcoves, gable-end turrets, massive balconies supported by bizarre figures such as long bearded herculean males bent beneath their burden, or pillars carved in the likeness of maidens.

However, the observer will notice that building in the Bahnhofstrasse has for decades quite obviously been done according to a consistent policy. In fact it is subject to regulations limiting the height of buildings and laying down the various proportions and dimensions allowed. Not many buildings have more than five floors. The nameplates in the entrances of the buildings will make it clear that the Bahnhofstrasse is certainly no residential area. The upper floors house firms and businesses of many kinds, doctors and lawyers being especially numerous.

The Bahnhofstrasse was obviously not built in a day and, clearly, it is in the interest of all its businessfolk to maintain what took many years to achieve. So in October 1955, under the patronage of the Mayor of Zurich, Dr. Landolt, and of the Zurich Chamber of Commerce, the shops, department stores, banks and property owners of the Bahnhofstrasse formed an association with the object of keeping it one of the finest shopping streets in Europe.

A good many of the points which visitors admire about the Bahnhofstrasse — sometimes known abroad as the street with the most unpretentious name in the world — are due to the intensive efforts of this enterprising association.

This year the association's programme is a particularly busy one, because 1964 is the centenary of the Bahnhofstrasse. The anniversary will be celebrated from 29th August to 12th September, when the Bahnhofstrasse will, so to speak, be decked out in its most festive finery. The centenary will be the theme of a film and of an exhibition at the Helmhaus in Zurich, while a special guide will be published outlining the history and development of the street.

Visitors will note, incidentally, that the Bahnhofstrasse does not run arrowstraight from the station to the lake, but makes slight curves in two places. Not everyone favoured this arrangement, but it had at least one celebrated supporter, Gottfried Semper, who built the Federal Institute of Technology in Zurich. He once commented: "There's nothing more boring and tiring than a street so long and dead straight that you can always see where you will end up, but don't actually get there for half an hour or more."

The Bahnhofstrasse was built in stages. Nowadays it's hard to believe that not much more than a century ago, frogs were croaking on this site, in the marshy neglected moat of the city's ancient fortifications. After the moat had been filled in, the Bahnhofstrasse was built — in 1864 as far as Paradeplatz, and later to the Lake. Strange as it sounds, a photographer who was the first to have his own premises built in the street, was regarded as mad and accused of recklessly throwing his money down the drain.

Little did his critics know! Today, for instance, a square metre of site in the Bahnhofstrasse can change hands at 20,000 francs, or even more. To be fair in this jet age, however, it should be pointed out that the Bahnhofstrasse owes its present-day eminence to the coming of the railway, which also touched off the development of Zurich as the biggest commercial centre in the country. The Bahnhofplatz and Bahnhofstrasse began to attract the city's

businessmen and in the course of time the Bahnhofstrasse began to overshadow the old centre in the Rathaus district, evolving into an economically important business area and into Zurich's show window. The Air Terminus in the Main Station has since linked Zurich directly with the international airport at Kloten, while there are traffic projects which will eventually connect the city with the European motorway network.

(“Zürich”).

A CHANGE IN VIEWPOINT: BETTER MUTUAL UNDERSTANDING BETWEEN SWITZERLAND AND OTHER NATIONS

This is the theme of an article by Wolfgang Höpker in a recent issue of the German weekly, “Christ und Welt”:

“Cosmopolitan Switzerland”, he writes, “Europe's mediator by virtue of its geographic position at the hub of the continent, sees and feels itself to be a kind of model for the Europe of tomorrow — a land in which varied peoples have integrated into a single nation, in which these divergent groups settle their differences peacefully. With many ties to the rest of the world, confident in their own future, the Swiss restrain their own aggressiveness, turning inward instead to the isolation of a small neutral nation. In conservative insistence upon an historically-founded uniqueness, they strive more strongly than ever to maintain their Helvetian individuality in the face of our rapidly changing world. Engaged in constant self-analysis, Switzerland today seeks to come to terms with the tensions created by its international role on the one hand and its defensive position on the other; the suggestions which have been offered for the resolution of this problem run the gamut ‘from Seldwyla to Utopia’.”

Höpker then goes on to discuss Switzerland's international relations, and to clear up an old misconception: the stereotype of the self-satisfied Swiss who have remained insulated from the world, who have enriched themselves in the course of two world wars, and yet arrogate to themselves the role of “schoolmaster to the world”. The reality of the case is quite otherwise, and is perhaps most clearly portrayed by the current Swiss National Exhibition in Lausanne. The “EXPO” is well calculated to open the eyes of non-Swiss visitors to the fact that Switzerland, “today a highly industrialized and super-modern country, was constrained by the force of circumstances — by its glaring lack of natural resources — to develop the highest work-standards and to make a virtue of necessity. But even though Switzerland has become rich, extremely rich, by dint of industrialization and tourism, it still holds to a traditionally puritan way of life (which achieved its highest expression in the works of Zwingli and Calvin). This is particularly true in small matters, where great restraint is exercised. In larger matters, however — when it is a question of voluntary contribution to worthy causes, or international aid — Switzerland is capable of digging down deeply into its collective pockets”.

The writer then goes on to speak of the “malaise of the small nation”, which is the subject of so much discussion in Switzerland today: “It is the feeling that, in this era of huge power-blocs, a small country is in danger of being relegated to the fringes of history, of becoming nothing but a football caught up in the game of international power-politics. Precisely because Switzerland is small, it needs the outside world, the free world, and it

needs a substantial dose of ‘world citizenship’. This is the formula which will successfully alleviate the small nation's malaise. The extent to which Switzerland is open to the world from an economic point of view is illustrated by its per-capita export rate of more than 1,700 francs, which puts it in second place in the world, immediately behind Belgium. Switzerland's per-capita import rate, on the other hand, is the highest in the world. In addition, there is the nation's role of ‘banker to the world’; Zurich, Basle and Geneva are financial centres for transactions of world-wide scope. At least a third of the Swiss gross national product arises directly from economic relations with other nations . . . Of course, seen as a totality, the Swiss Federation displays many contradictions which are difficult to reconcile (particularly in matters pertaining to European integration). But the need Switzerland feels to re-assess its position in terms of the rapidly changing world does not in any way weaken or alter its policy of ‘perpetual neutrality’ (which does not imply a neutrality of opinion on matters of significance, but rather a strongly armed defensive neutrality). However, even in this sphere, the old formulas seem on the verge of losing some of their strength in the face of the realities of this last half of the twentieth century. Awareness of this, and proof of the fact that the allegedly so self-assured and self-satisfied Swiss are quite capable of self-criticism, is demonstrated by the current Swiss National Exhibition on the shores of Lake Geneva”. A similar conclusion was reached by the Munich newspaper, the “Süddeutsche Zeitung”, which commented: “True, Switzerland is and will remain the sole European nation which made the transition from the nineteenth to the twentieth century without a rupture, but, as to the concerns and problems which face them, Switzerland and the rest of Europe find themselves today at the same level of development”.

[O.S.E.C.]

ZUVERSICHT

Wer würde der Dornen wegen die Rose nicht pflücken
Wem könnte der Sorgen wegen das Leben nicht glücken
Wo die Sonne scheint, kommt der Schatten hin
Du siehst am Himmel Wolken ziehn
Folgt nicht dem lichten Tage die Nacht
Der ein neuer Tag entgegenlacht
Welkt nicht die Blume, um frisch zu erblühn
Kommt nicht das Glück nach Sorg und Mühn
Es ist der stete Wechsel auf Erden
Erkenne ihn und Du kannst glücklich werden

MIRJAM KRAUS.

SWITZERLAND, A COUNTRY WELL SUPPLIED WITH LIBRARIES

The Federal Statistics Bureau has just published a complete list of libraries in Switzerland, divided up by cantons and communes. The total amounts to 5,820.

They are particularly numerous in the big towns. Zurich has 442, Basle 207, Berne 259, Geneva 109 and Lausanne 107. This list gives a fairly accurate picture of cultural life in Switzerland.

[O.S.E.C.]