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EXPO 1964

MY EXPO EXPERIENCE

I have been to the Swiss National Exhibition, and it has been an unforgettable event. When I read the Exhibition's Charter for the first time a couple of years ago, I thought they were fine words, but how could a national manifestation of this kind possibly be a critical stock-taking? I had also heard criticism (mostly from people who had not even seen the EXPO) that it was a graphic artist's show, that it was ultra-modern, only fit for the young, that the initial failure of the mesoscaphe showed that the French-speaking Swiss were not very good at organising an exhibition of this kind, that it was too expensive (which most people found untrue), and above all that it was not a patch on the "Landi" of 1939. No doubt, the "Landi" with its appeal to national unity just before the outbreak of the war was right in building on the glorious past, on notable achievements by great Swiss citizens and by the nation as a whole.

The great thing about the EXPO is that it did not even try to imitate the success of the "Landi", but boldly conceived something new. Whilst not ignoring the past, it gives a realistic picture of the present and stresses the importance of Switzerland's future. It has evaded a blatant demonstration of present affluence and succeeded in giving a factual picture of what Switzerland is capable in the economic, cultural and artistic fields, and above all, the visitor is continually asked searching questions about himself and his place in the nation and in the world. It is a courageously conceived and beautifully executed show, and if every Swiss visitor has earnestly studied the "Path of Switzerland", the EXPO will have achieved its aims.

I am not attempting to describe everything which impressed me. My visit was tied up with the Assembly of the Swiss Abroad and the colourful Federal Costume Festival. As a prelude to the first day at the EXPO proper, I visited the Palais de Beaulieu. There I saw three exhibitions, two of which were a rare treat. The 350 masterpieces from Swiss collections from Manet to Picasso form a remarkable exhibition of European painting and sculpture. The number and quality of the works exhibited, together with the high standard of the presentation (under the patronage of the Federal Council) make this show an artistic event of outstanding importance.

The second exhibition in the Pavilion of Honour at Beaulieu was the school children's work, the six or eight hundred best entries in a competition "my country". The love and devotion with which the school classes compiled their entries clearly showed from the exhibits. The imaginative planning, the skill, the attention to detail made this special display both instructive and exciting.

Perhaps this was the reason why the third exhibition at Beaulieu "Bijoux et Montres" was a disappointment. There I found signs of the time — jewelry and watches of a rather ostentatious type. Beautiful materials indeed, most skilfully worked, but far too showy and pretentious.

Nevertheless, the afternoon was a great success, and next day with my expectations of the EXPO proper further stimulated, we descended to Ouchy by bus. From there we travelled by aerial cableway high above the harbour to the East entrance. Following the advice by a seasoned EXPO visitor, we at once set out on the monorail and made the full double circuit of the exhibition. This gave

us an excellent idea of the whole layout. The trains passed through all the eight sectors, over bridges, through tunnels, inside exhibition halls, above lawns and flower beds, along pools and streams, even above the Lac Léman itself. And then we started out on the actual visiting which we spread over all the remaining time at our disposal in Lausanne.

We saw a great deal indeed, and most of it was impressive and good. For twelve months before the opening of the EXPO and ever since I have written about it in every issue of the "Swiss Observer", and this is not the time to repeat any of it. I shall do no more than put on record a few of the most lasting impressions.

The whole of the EXPO was meant to be a "prise de conscience", and it compels the visitor to think. Perhaps nowhere more urgently than in the "Path of Switzerland". It is at once an introduction to the National Exhibition and its conclusion, says the official guide. The Country and its People, the People and their Liberties, Liberties bring Obligations — the Future has already begun — What are we making of it? "A Day in Switzerland" with its Gulliver's Journey and the questionnaire it takes the visitor twenty minutes to fill in and only a matter of seconds afterwards to receive his portrait as a Swiss, worked out from the answers by means of an electronic computer. Five separate three-minute films shown continuously in five separate halls offer an objective demonstration of facts, and without being given any conclusion, we are compelled to subject a statement "All is well in Switzerland" to critical examination. A "Look into the Future", and the visitor leaves the zig-zag way with its unpolished wooden pyramid halls which remind one of ancient chapels, and he comes to the Esplanade of the cantonal and communal flags looking out onto the lake.

"Art of Living" and the "Joy of Living": I recall the Health section where only the passages and the exhibits are illuminated, the rest is in darkness. It includes preparation for an open-heart operation. "Gesundheit ist Gabe und Aufgabe —" There were father and son trying their hands at the national sport of rifle shooting in the Sport and Physical Training hall. I remember an inscription "La Croix Rouge — une idée suisse — la seule grande idée an nom de laquelle on n'ait jamais tué".

Leisure time — what for? we are asked. "It is important to know how to chose and not just to submit". The large square has a group of stone columns with posters on them: "Wir leisten uns viel — was leisten wir für die Gemeinschaft?" The stone pavement made of a kind of oblong octagonals locked like a jig-saw puzzle — solid and firm, and then the hot asphalt with millions of stiletto heel imprints.

The way down to the Fashion Pavilion leads through a dark spiral shaft, cleverly lit and showing figures and cloth representing "Yearning" for adornment, for expression, for individual distinction — "To Play with the Appearance is a Mirror of the Personality". Sunshine and shade, a hundred thousand visitors and yet so many peaceful corners.

"Education, Creation, Information and Knowledge" — the wish to spend a week alone in this sector of the EXPO, not to mention that "Land and Forest", "Communications and Transport" and the "Valley of Youth" had to be left out of the programme for lack of time. The tour of "Industry and Handicrafts" was easy and quick — you walk along a wide circular gallery from which you have a general look down into each individual section, and the lucky ones with masses of time on their hands can descend for detailed and close inspection. To me, the least satisfying sector was the "Exchange of Goods and Ser-

vices", with the exception perhaps of the Globovision show illustrating the problems of Swiss activity in the world and the great successes that have been achieved by it.

The symbolic stone porcupine of "Vigilant Switzerland" guarded by three concrete gun barrels, giant and slender, pointing up to a peaceful evening sky, impressed me almost more than the military display itself, more even than the excellent film on Switzerland's defence.

I recall our Sunday lunch in one of the many harbour restaurants where we enjoyed a well-seasoned succulent steak and a bottle of the best, sitting next to a mighty steel rope holding up a sail cloth roof creaking in the breeze.

I was greatly impressed by the excellent use made of material, wood rough and unpolished, silver and gold painting on brick, pebbles, crystal and minerals, rush matting and cast iron motifs and figures, stone blocks to sit on and tables built of crude bricks. There were the gilt sculptures in the Court of the Arts, six and a half feet high, giving a strong impression of unity, harmony and beauty, though they were created by Swiss artists of different schools and periods and some of the statues positively ugly individually. Architecture and construction are unconventional but fit in harmoniously into the whole Exhibition area, with its acres claimed from the lake, with its lawns, flowers and trees — not one of them had been felled, every one was fitted into the layout, and neither amusement fair, entertainment halls, circus, pavilions or stadium were allowed to interfere with their existence.

Do-it-yourself was encouraged in many places. But never must our activity result in nothing — I remember the queer monument made of dozens of machines and hundreds of wheels all turning furiously — working, hurrying, rushing, with no creative result whatsoever.

At one moment we escaped the heat of the afternoon and ascended the wide stairs leading up to the Chapel lobby. Copper lettering on dark stained wood, iron girders, pale wooden murals in relief recalling the compelling words of the Sermon on the Mount. Peace inside the Chapel, white walls, rush-seated stools, a brilliant glass pane, a shaft of light streaming in from an opening high above in the roof illuminating the ancient Bible in the centre of the Church. Side by side, the essentials for Roman Catholic, Old Catholic and Protestant services. A centre of ecumenical community — with no door to lock out the World.

"Wahren und Wehren, Wählen und Wagen, Wissen und Wirken" I read somewhere in the Exhibition. Yes, "with our heart for Switzerland, our mind for Europe and our vision for the world".

The Charter of the EXPO 1964 — meticulously carried out by the makers — what are we going to make of it?

"TO PRESENT ON LAND AND LAKE
A TRUE PICTURE OF OUR NATION
TO UNITE TWENTY-FIVE SOVEREIGN
REGIONS IN JOINT ENTERPRISE
TO REMIND EACH MAN
OF HIS TRUE AIM IN LIFE
TO SEEK IN THE PRESENT
THE PATTERN OF THE FUTURE
TO FORGE NEW LINKS
WITH THE NEW EUROPE
TO STRIVE TOWARD
WORLD SOLIDARITY
TO SPUR SWITZERLAND ON
TO NEW FAITH
AND ENDEAVOUR."

Mariann.

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