

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:	- (1966)
Heft:	1509
Artikel:	The life of Swiss countrywoman
Autor:	Meier, Mariann
DOI:	https://doi.org/10.5169/seals-696516

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The Life of the Swiss Countrywoman

by Mariann Meier

The following article is reprinted by courtesy of "The Countrywoman", official organ of the Associated Country Women of the World, an international organisation of rural women, on which Switzerland has been represented by the writer for nearly 30 years. The photos are by courtesy of the Swiss National Tourist Office and the "Schweizerischer Landfrauenverband", and the blocks have kindly been loaned by A.C.W.W.

To describe the Swiss countrywoman correctly, a series of separate pictures would have to be painted, for the farmwoman in one part of the country leads a vastly different life from that in another. The wife of the mountain farmer in the Grisons, whose small holding consists of a few goats, grass patches and vegetable plots on difficult slopes, and whose home is snowed up for much of a long winter, leads a different life from the one whose husband is engaged in viniculture in the milder climate of Western Switzerland. The fruit growing population of the Valais has a different existence from that enjoyed by the dairy farming communities of the fertile Emmental in the Midlands or the Appenzell. Nevertheless, there are some aspects which are much the same all over the country.

About 80% of all Swiss agricultural undertakings can be classified as "small farm holdings". Half of them have less than twelve acres; only one-quarter comprise over twenty-four acres, and a mere one per hundred deserves the description of large-scale farming, i.e. over seventy-five acres of arable land.

Approximately one-third of cultivable land is in the mountain regions of the Grisons, Appenzell, the Bernese Oberland and the Valais, usually in very small plots.



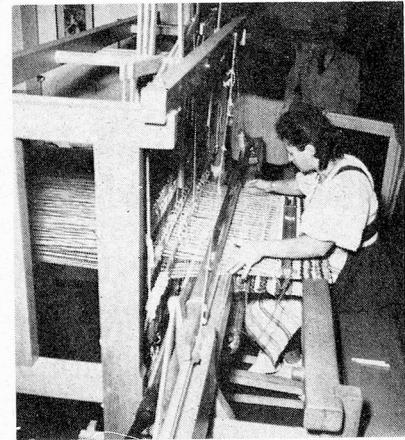
Haymaking: Many hands make light work

Swiss agriculture can therefore be described as mainly "family farming". The economic state of the individual farm depends not only on the owner's efficiency or the number in the family, but it is largely due to the wife and mother whether the farm is a thriving concern or a struggling unit eventually doomed to failure. She not only looks after the house, but she tends the vegetable and flower gardens, including the colourful window boxes, an attraction of so many villages. Generally, she is also responsible for poultry and rabbits, and often she minds the pigs as well, and possibly takes an interest in bee-keeping on top of it. She thus plays a considerable part in the self-supporting effort of the homestead, marketing and consequently in the food position of the whole country.



An Appenzell woman
embroidering

The rural woman in Switzerland is reputed to be a hard worker, and this claim is well sustained. Even at normal times, she is "at it" for a long day. When it comes to haymaking and harvest time, potato and fruit picking, heavy demands are made on her time and her physical strength. In spite of improved labour saving and technical devices, the burden has increased, mainly due to migration and lack of paid help. The farmwoman is a workmate of her husband; she cooks large meals for a big family, often comprising two or even three generations and, where help is kept, including farm labourers who eat with the family. The children come home from school at midday, and though large families mean more helping hands, it also involves much extra work for the mother by way of cooking, baking and washing. Most important, she is a mother and homemaker and knows how valuable it is to sing with her children and to read to them and tell stories.



Rural industry:
Handweaving

Alas, such activities often go short, for real leisure is a scarce commodity for Swiss countrywomen. This was discovered when an investigation was made at the suggestion of a working group of the European Organisation of Agriculture on leisure and its use (published in 1963). She may have some free time in the evening, but that is often taken up with mending and sewing, drying fruit and vegetables. Many women have spare time on Sundays only, and, as often as not, that may be a bare hour.

Church going is still very important, in fact over half of the Swiss farmwomen who answered the questionnaire go to church with their families. Four-fifths like to go for

walks on Sundays, if only to inspect the grounds. There are the odd excursions by car or coach to a place of special interest or an exhibition. Holidays are very rare, and only a small percentage of rural women in Switzerland have a chance of a regular rest away from home. The Country-women's organisations arrange holidays every year, and increasing numbers are able to enjoy these. The CWA also provide home helps, and a darning and mending service. There is a "Voluntary Land Service" which sends young boys and girls to help harassed farmers for a few weeks at a time.

From the above-mentioned survey it was learnt that newspapers are read in every Swiss farm house, and a good two-thirds of rural women subscribe to a weekly, a Church or agricultural paper. A radio is kept in most families, but television is a very rare thing in the Swiss farm house. It must be said here that TV. in Switzerland generally is not yet as widespread as in many other countries. In many rural homes one or more musical instruments are played, mainly piano, a wind or brass instrument and the accordion. Children favour the recorder more and more.

The Swiss countrywoman shows a great interest in radio plays, and the number of those reading good books is surprisingly high. But here, too, lack of time prevents her from indulging in reading as in other hobbies such as needlework and embroidery, as well as from taking a more lively interest in public life and welfare work.



Rural industry: Basket plaiting in the Ticino

But even so, she manages somehow to take part in local activities. With the exception of Eastern Switzerland, the large majority of family farming establishments are in rural Communes of below 2,000 inhabitants. This means that the life of the farmwoman is conditioned by a close-knit village community. Countrywomen sit on education, Church and welfare committees; they sing in the local choirs and support the "National Costume Movement". They visit rural theatre performances and local concerts whenever there is a chance — and time permits. Cinema visits are very rare, though due to Switzerland's density of population, the countrywoman, generally, is not very far from a small or even larger town.

Another very important fact is that Swiss villages are hardly ever purely agricultural. Switzerland, highly industrialised, has her industries spread out all over the country. Farming very small holdings is combined with some form of industrial work, often carried out at home. Tourism, too, has its influence, and some women do part-time work in hotels during the busy tourist seasons.

Some of the activities of the Swiss countrywomen's organisation have already been mentioned. The "Schweizerischer Landfrauenverband" was founded in 1932 and has about 36,000 members in seventeen largely autonomous cantonal bodies. Their corporate aim and greatest achievement in recent years is the vocational training of the farmwoman. This starts with classes and courses for young girls, partly in agricultural domestic training colleges. Stiff exams provide the future farmer's wife with a status of a woman who has attained a position and is not "only" a farmwoman. Many farmers' wives later pass the "master test" which in turn entitles them to train young girls. The CWA also instruct formwomen in improved housekeeping methods and arrange classes for gardening, poultry and rabbit keeping, weaving, etc. It is in no small measure due to this thorough training and the general efficiency of many Swiss countrywomen that, in spite of migration, production has gone up by about 30% in ten years. Every year, some 5,000 acres of the best arable land are lost to building houses and flats, schools, road construction, sports grounds and airfields. More and more machinery is used — every fifth farm has a milking machine. The farms without cattle become ever more numerous, though there are still about 850,000 head of cattle in the country, and annually about 14,000 tons of cheese are exported.



Young Country-women attending a gardening course



Haymaking above the Lake of Aegeri in Central Switzerland

The farmers also club together to purchase expensive machinery such as combine harvesters, silos, tractors, manure pumps, etc. The women, too, share in the communal use of washing machines and deep-freeze stores.

On the whole, Swiss farming is as individualistic as many other things in Switzerland. Unlike the Danes who began co-operative farming as early as 1750, Swiss agri-

culture has so far not moved appreciably in that direction. If European integration comes to pass, the Swiss farmers will have to reconsider their position. This will, no doubt, also affect the rural woman. Whatever the outward changes, however, her main task will remain that of wife, mother and homemaker. She may become less of an active farmworker and be relieved of some of the manual work. It is hoped that she will put the much needed increased leisure to good use. On the whole, she is not dissatisfied with her hard lot, but more time for spiritual recreation, for cultivating reading and the arts is desirable and will enhance her position in the centre of the rural family. With smaller economic worries, she may be able to face the challenge ahead of her successfully. She will have to choose what is good in rural tradition and discard much that has been wrongly accepted as rustic conventionality. If she can adapt herself to the altered conditions, she will create a new life which will benefit herself, her family and ultimately the whole nation.

A REMARKABLE WOODWORKING AID

The "Krallix" process for assembling, reinforcing and repairing pieces of wood, seems destined to a fine future among all craftsmen working with wood as well as "do it yourself" enthusiasts, especially in poorly equipped countries where skilled labour and specialised workshops are rare. It was in fact while looking for a simple method capable of being used in the developing countries that a Swiss engineer devised this new process. Without requiring any special knowledge or tools and in a minimum of time, "Krallix" makes it possible to manufacture a quantity of simple wooden objects such as packing-cases, struts, small pieces of furniture, crates, transport containers and frames of all sorts, and to strengthen planks, shelves, coffering, and banisters as well as to repair damaged wooden objects. The "Krallix" technique consists in the use of a steel U-shaped profile whose edges are formed by sharp teeth forced into the wooden parts to be assembled, strengthened or repaired, in such a way that they can no longer be separated. The extremely strong fixture thus obtained is due to the fact that the teeth are slightly curved, alternately inwards and outwards, so that when the band is forced into the wood, some spread further apart while others are brought closer together. The "Krallix" band, patented in almost all countries, is available in various widths, in galvanised steel, covered with a plastic coating or given a brass finish. There are special executions for fixing planks at right angles as well as double bands with teeth on both sides for fixing planks or pieces of wood one against the other. The "Krallix" band is available in about twenty different types and its use is extremely simple. The 13,200 sq. ft. permanent display in the promotion centre at Cortaillod, near Neuchâtel, allows all those interested to see for themselves the many possibilities of the "Krallix" process.

[O.S.E.C.]

GREAT ST. BERNARD HOSPICE

In spite of the Great St. Bernard Tunnel, providing an all the year round road link through the Alps between Switzerland and Italy, the *Hospiz* on the top of the Pass is still permanently occupied by the monks who breed the world-famous St. Bernard dogs. Visitors can reach "Chenalette", a view-point offering a grand view of the Mont Blanc and the Valais Alps, by chair-lift in ten minutes from the Pass.

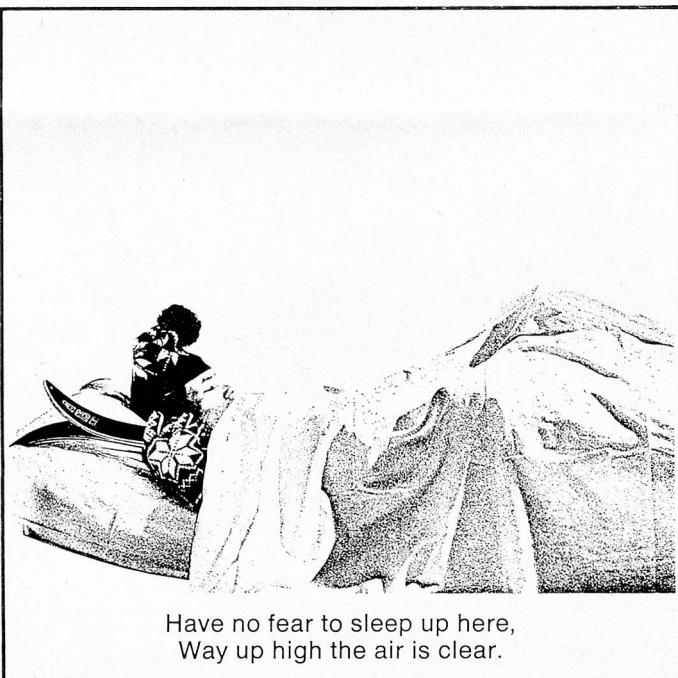
[S.N.T.O.]

HOMAGE TO SWISS PUBLISHING

Some sixty volumes of art history, among the finest works to appear since the turn of the century, have recently been put on show in the "Hall Mark" gallery in New York. They trace the career of the great Swiss publisher Albert Skira. The exhibition itself, entitled "Skira, the man and his work", is being presented in the same form that brought it exceptional success in Moscow last year. Among the works that can be admired in New York are two of the rarest books in the world — the "Métamorphoses d'Ovide", illustrated by Picasso, of which Skira brought a limited edition of 125 copies in 1931, and the "Poèmes de Stéphane Mallarmé", illustrated by Henri Matisse, which appeared a few years later.

[O.S.E.C.]

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Switzerland

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