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THE "MATZE"

In some Valais villages, you may come upon a road sign from which a twisted face grins at you. Now don't imagine that this mask, carved into the top of the pole, intends to guide you to some dubious place. For once, it does not represent one of the malefic spirits which are still believed to haunt the Valais. You are facing a "matze", a historical symbol which someone had the good idea of preventing from sinking into oblivion.

At the entrance of Sion, a whole new building block is called "La Matze", including a hotel and a restaurant with dance hall, where the town's youth rallies for amusements. But the distinctive sign of the "Matze" does not adorn the place, leaving strangers to wonder what the queer name means.

Farther up the Rhone valley, one finds a "Matze" under the porch of the church of Glis, next to its portal. Here it is a curious stone mask whose bulging eyes, curly hair, protruding lips above a pointed beard strangely resemble an Egyptian sculpture. It is believed to be the work of the Valaisan Ulrich Ruffiner, who built the porch of this church in 1519.

In the 15th and 16th centuries, the noblemen of the Valais were almost constantly at war, either against each other, unless they banded together to overthrow their lord and master, the Prince-Bishop, or to prevent the Dukes of Savoy to conquer the valley. In the 16th century, they were divided into two factions, one siding with Cardinal Schiner who supported the cause of the Holy Germanic-Roman Empire, while the other was for his arch-enemy Supersaxo, who sympathised with the King of France.

For all these wars, the noblemen drafted their exploited, half-starving subjects, whose villages and crops were often destroyed, and whom their ambitious masters taxed mercilessly to finance their enterprises. When the bitter cup overflowed, the subjects rebelled.

It was probably in the 15th century that a "Matze" was first used to rally the rebels. Then it was a mere tree trunk set up near the fountain in a village square or on a bridge. All who meant to join in the rebellion against their lord, publicly engaged themselves by planting a nail into the trunk. In the course of time, this symbol received a face carved into the top of the trunk, on which sawed-off branches stand for wild hair.

Although the "Matze" is now used as an original road sign and has lost its ancient significance, it remains an apt reminder of the Valais' troubled history. Furthermore, it draws attention to the canton's wood carvers who, for centuries, have sculptured the altars, statues and stalls of the cathedrals, churches and chapels and whose descendants still keep up the tradition. Incidentally, some also create the famous carnival mask.

I see yet another use for the "Matze". What if we all had a personal one to give vent to our anger when taxes and prices increase; when the neighbour buys a flashy new car while we can't afford to exchange our jalopy; when the sun shines while we are at work, but rain spoils our week-ends and vacations? Wouldn't our "Matze" be an excellent safety valve for the benefit of our sweet disposition?

LEE EUGSTER.

(By courtesy of "Treize Etoiles", Sion.)

THE AMERICAN CHALLENGE AND SWITZERLAND

Concerning the United States' lead in industrial matters, Professor A. P. Speiser, director of research at the Brown, Boveri & Co. engineering works at Baden, has stated that the American technological lead should be viewed with more reserve than is usually the case. To establish a comparison, Professor Speiser distinguishes four sectors of industrial development: that of space technology, electronic brains and aviation, in which American superiority is undisputed; then that of integrated circuits and systems of communication, in which the United States' lead is still considerable; in the third sector, that of automobiles, household appliances, radios, television sets, etc., the position is beginning to even out in Europe's favour. In the last sector, finally, that of watchmaking, chemical and pharmaceutical products, railways and shipbuilding, America comes after certain European countries or Japan. The position of Europe — and of Switzerland in particular — is not as desperate as has been suggested. In fact, all the big Swiss export industries are in the fourth sector referred to above. This is a sign of stability that will enable Switzerland better than many other European countries to face up to the inevitable restructurisation necessitated by the world economic evolution. Having no ambitions as regards supremacy, Switzerland has no need to launch out into certain costly research programmes in order to be in the forefront of progress. It is sufficient that her industries, like watchmaking, are quickly able to find suitable applications for scientific discoveries. In this way, Switzerland will preserve her position on the world markets and, instead of passively accepting technical progress, will play an active part in it herself and derive considerable benefit from it.

FOR THE INDOOR PLANT LOVER

A Swiss manufacturer is launching a patented flower pot, which greatly simplifies the care of indoor plants and is consequently very popular with householders as well as proprietors of public establishments. The "Floribel" patented hard plastic flower pot, which comes in three different sizes and five attractive colours, contains a second pot provided with openings ensuring proper ventilation of the roots. An ingenious device keeps the earth at the most favourable degree of humidity, without any danger of the roots rotting, while a special patented pipe makes it possible to supply the potted plant with the required quantity of water without risk of overflowing or stains. Owing to the reserve supply of water, the plant can continue to thrive for one to three weeks, depending on circumstances, without the addition of any water — a considerable advantage when it comes to holiday time. Perfectly designed from the biological point of view and thoroughly tested by competent horticulturalists, the "Floribel" pot solves several difficulties involved in the growing of indoor plants. Let us add that the manufacturer also makes standardised flower stands for linear or corner arrangements, each holding from three to seven "Floribel" pots to the best advantage.

[O.S.E.C.]