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COMMENT

THE PLIGHT OF THE SMALL INVENTOR

The Brussels Inventors Fair is one of the strangest exhibitions that takes place regularly. It is packed with things that turn round, others that move without noise, mysterious machines that flick intriguing lights, tin boxes that rumble fearfully. There are atomic airships for multitudes of passengers, automatic tooth brushes, pumps, electronic gadgets, remote control dusting machines, flying bedsteads and a host of other marvellous things springing from the inventive genius of the scores of lean and unknown inventors who try their luck at this great jamboree of invention. The Swiss were present in force, both in numbers and quality, at this year's Inventors Fair. Two hundred out of 1,200 exhibitors were Swiss.

The strong presence of Swiss inventors at Brussels only reflected the fact that the Swiss population has the highest density of inventors in its midst and that more patents are registered in Switzerland per unit of population than anywhere else in the world. La Chaux de Fonds is said to be the birthplace of the greatest number of patents in comparison with population. It is followed by neighbouring Le Locle and by Milwaukee, USA. The reason for this is the watch industry. It has created a demand and a climate for invention. The early watch-makers constantly needed to improve their products with new gadgets and ingenious devices. Incidentally, Switzerland not only beats the rest of the world in patenting, but also in the "density" of its Nobel Prize winners.

The modern ideal of a "treasure hunt" is to invent a new machine and make an easy million out of it. Many a small inventor leaves for Brussels with this idea. But the great majority remain disappointed and return home with their treasured box of steel without having attracted the interest of any businessman. In fact, the chances of the small inventor are very slight indeed. Of the hundreds of thousands of inventions and processes patented every year, less than 5 per cent actually make their way. This fraction englobes the results of all the efforts accomplished in the large laboratories of big corporations, which obviously leave very small room for the private inventor. Large corporations not only have the technical facilities to develop new products and processes, they also have the means of conducting market surveys and thereby of knowing what is commercialisable and what is not. The lonely inventor can only do a crude market survey. He can only rely on his experience and on his "hunch" in his quest for a new gadget in the right direction. But most of the time it will be a stroke of good luck when he meets an industrialist ready to make

him an interesting offer. This is something he cannot predict.

Another element militating against the success of the small inventor is the industrial pressure which can stop an invention from bearing fruit. A powerful corporation can usually find the means, legal and otherwise, to infringe on a new patent and stifle its realisation if it is in its interest. The most dramatic instance of this possibility was the plight of Professor Edwin Armstrong, inventor of the superheterodyne and frequency modulation, whose life-long and vain struggle to defend his rights against the infringement of the Radio Corporation of America ended in suicide.

The small inventor has also to compete with organised inventors' offices. There are big organisations which carry out development under contract from industry and who manage to "spin off" a remarkable number of patents and processes. The most important example of such an organisation is the Battelle Memorial Institute, which has a centre in Geneva. But a successful inventor full of ideas may set up his own "inventing office" and have a staff of technicians under him to work on his ideas. The engineers are better placed by their own expertise to succeed in the invention market. On the other hand, a specialised lawyer will also tend to discourage the small inventor because his fees are high enough to make a private inventor hesitate before he goes through all the formalities which ensure that his invention appears in the official patents publication.

There are inventors agencies, similar in function to literary agencies, which take it upon themselves to market the inventions submitted to them by small inventors. These agencies appear less pessimistic over the prospects of these individual inventions than consulting patent engineers. They often find that private inventors come up with ideas which have a spark and novelty often absent from the laborious developments of large laboratories. To quote Edison, "invention is 5 per cent inspiration and 95 per cent transpiration". While money will pay for "transpiration", it is not absolutely necessary for inspiration, which leaves a chance for the small inventor.

Inventors agencies and offices help to uphold the status of the inventor and protect him from the current imagery, which often takes him for a crank. The thousands who stroll in the Brussels exhibition do so in the hope of finding some "amusing" gadgets. This attitude of the public is painful to promoters of the exhibition and to the many anonymous inventors who linger in front of their creations, waiting in vain for the providential buyer. But inventors exhibitions which are also held in London and Nuremberg and in Geneva in 1972, have gained the growing interest of industrialists. There is a category of firms not large enough to carry out

large scale developments on their own, which find the greatest potential interest in the exhibits presented at such exhibitions.

Licences for 12 million francs were sold at last year's Brussels Inventors Exhibition. This amounted to a little less than a thousand francs per exhibit. Most of the transactions naturally, were benefitted to a handful of useful inventions. One example of such an invention was a new automatic pruner invented by a Swiss. The machine creeps up a tree trunk and automatically prunes off all the unwanted twigs. This "gem" exhibited among many hundreds of other inventions at the Brussels exhibition a few years ago is now in use everywhere.

The small inventor has still got a chance of hitting the jackpot, but it is not a treasure hunt anymore.

(PMB)

SWISS NEWS

HILTON IN GENEVA

Rumours have been spreading that the Hilton may build a 500-room hotel in Geneva. It would be sited either on the Quai Seujet, on a plot belonging to the City of Geneva, or at Grand Socanex, near to the Intercontinental Hotel.

Having set foot at Kloten, Hilton is now ready to exploit the vast potentialities of Geneva. "Holiday Inns" have brought a site in the Balexart area and are also ready to invest in Geneva's international reputation. Geneva's present hotel accommodation is hardly sufficient to cope with the affluence of the peak season and the situation can only deteriorate. This is made worse by an acute and chronic shortage of labour. Hotels in Geneva are almost entirely run by foreign staff and if the international hotel groups should undertake to supply the 2,000 extra hotel rooms urgently needed by the town, then they will also have to find 3,000 new hands, which will not be easy.

The small hotel owners of Geneva see this new development with apprehension. The large hotel groups can absorb off-season losses with more ease and are in a position to offer better jobs and upgraded wages, all of which will have the inevitable consequence of raising the cost of a hotel room. Geneva's hotellery has remained traditionally in local hands and has constituted a relatively protected market. Hotel prices are lower than elsewhere. An average first class room costs 80 francs in Zurich, 90 francs in Hamburg and 100 francs in Paris. It costs a mere 75 francs in Geneva. There is therefore some margin left for raising prices, but the hotel owners of Geneva fear the scramble for labour which the creation