

**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:** - (1973)  
**Heft:** 1671

**Artikel:** Switzerland in Europe  
**Autor:** Keller, Paul  
**DOI:** <https://doi.org/10.5169/seals-690997>

### **Nutzungsbedingungen**

Die ETH-Bibliothek ist die Anbieterin der digitalisierten Zeitschriften auf E-Periodica. Sie besitzt keine Urheberrechte an den Zeitschriften und ist nicht verantwortlich für deren Inhalte. Die Rechte liegen in der Regel bei den Herausgebern beziehungsweise den externen Rechteinhabern. Das Veröffentlichen von Bildern in Print- und Online-Publikationen sowie auf Social Media-Kanälen oder Webseiten ist nur mit vorheriger Genehmigung der Rechteinhaber erlaubt. [Mehr erfahren](#)

### **Conditions d'utilisation**

L'ETH Library est le fournisseur des revues numérisées. Elle ne détient aucun droit d'auteur sur les revues et n'est pas responsable de leur contenu. En règle générale, les droits sont détenus par les éditeurs ou les détenteurs de droits externes. La reproduction d'images dans des publications imprimées ou en ligne ainsi que sur des canaux de médias sociaux ou des sites web n'est autorisée qu'avec l'accord préalable des détenteurs des droits. [En savoir plus](#)

### **Terms of use**

The ETH Library is the provider of the digitised journals. It does not own any copyrights to the journals and is not responsible for their content. The rights usually lie with the publishers or the external rights holders. Publishing images in print and online publications, as well as on social media channels or websites, is only permitted with the prior consent of the rights holders. [Find out more](#)

**Download PDF:** 31.07.2025

**ETH-Bibliothek Zürich, E-Periodica, <https://www.e-periodica.ch>**

# Switzerland in Europe

## Two thousand years of "integration"

*by Paul Keller, journalist*

On 3rd December, 1972, the Swiss people supported by a comfortable majority the Free Trade Agreement concluded five months before between their Government and the European Communities. The first tariff reductions provided for in this treaty, like those of the other EFTA countries which did not apply for membership of the Communities, were made on 1st April, 1973, at the same time as the first tariff cuts occurred within the enlarged Community.

For Switzerland, the new free trade area is in line with her ancient aim of free access to the markets of other countries. This is no ideological matter; it is a necessity for a country lacking raw materials, access to the sea and an agriculture capable of feeding its population. Only trade with the outside world permits Switzerland to create with the labour of her people the added value on which she must live.

Well before the arrival of the European Free Trade Association in 1960, Switzerland had known periods of free trade with certain of her neighbours. The "perpetual peace", signed with France in 1516, stipulated in articles 5 and 9 that the Swiss merchants in France should not be interfered with by the authorities and should not suffer any aggravation of fiscal or tariff charges. The merchants in question did not hesitate for an instant to interpret these clauses as a pure and simple exemption from import duties. Astonishing though it may seem, this exemption – which was attached to the nationality of the merchant and not to the origin of his goods – remained in force until 1781; in fact, for 265 years it established a great free trade area between France and the Swiss cantons.

The first "free trade" was an already modern answer for an economy which was farther than any other from self-sufficiency. But the first manifestations of what we now call "integration" are as old as the appearance of a Helvetic unit in history.

Apparently, from the 4th century B.C., Etruscan and Greek merchants went all through Switzerland by the two branches of the "tin road" by which tin from the mines of Cornwall arrived in Etruria and Greece and which also joined the merchants of Etruria to south Germany and the Danube. It was only in 1954 that the French archaeologist, René Joffroy, was able to trace the route of this great artery of commerce, which is blazed with objects whose origin permits Mr. Joffroy to say that the tin road crossed the pass of the Great St. Bernard, took off across the Swiss plateau towards

Berne, crossed the Jura and at Viz, near the present town of Châtillon-sur-Seine, joined the waterway to Le Havre which led across the Channel to Cornwall. The second branch passed through the Tessin, the passes of the Grisons and arrived at the upper reaches of the Rhine, which it followed as far as Lake Constance and thereafter reached the banks of the Danube.

Switzerland was therefore linked to world trade both on the east and on the west. It seems that relative prosperity prevailed at that time in the Helvetic region. It was integrated with the world economy and by this means participated in strong currents of trade.

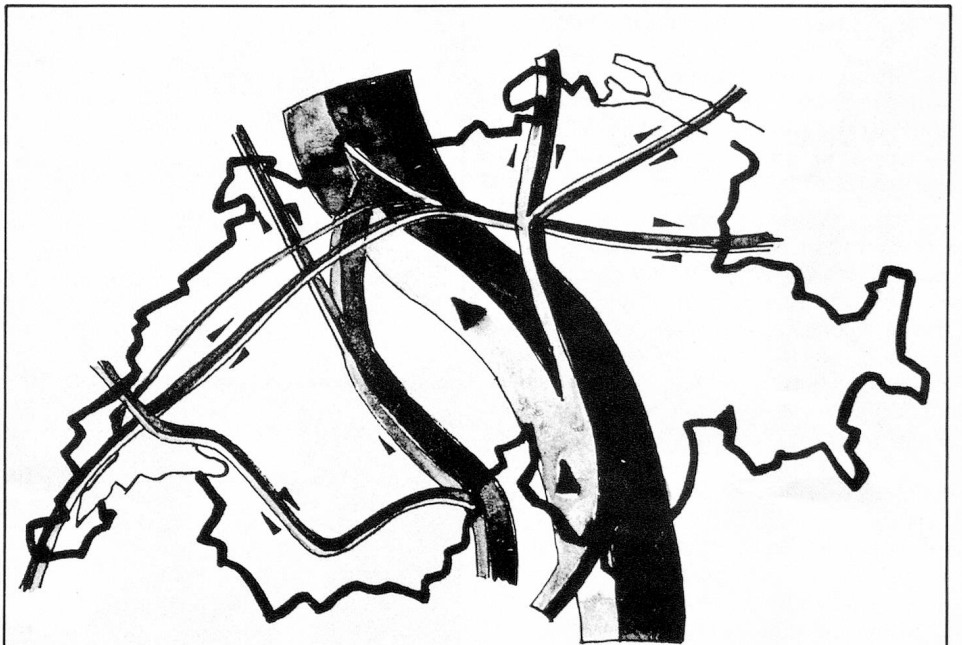
This prosperity was brutally cut off by the arrival of Roman power as far as Provence and by the decline of the Greek empire in the Mediterranean. In that epoch, Switzerland encountered grave economic difficulties.

In 107 B.C. the people of one of the four Helvetic regions decided to emigrate to the south-west of France. They pushed on as far as the present town of Agen, where they won an important victory over the Roman legions. However, that was the end of the exodus. The women found the trials of the voyage too hard and persuaded the men to return to their homes.

During the EFTA Ministerial meeting in Stockholm in March 1967, Mr. Hans Schaffner, then the Minister of Public Economy of Switzerland, cautioned those of his partners who were anxious to substitute for the little EFTA a free trade area embracing all of Western Europe. He asked them not to burn their boats, as did the Swiss of olden times. Wishing to leave a poor country for good – and to avoid succumbing to the temptation to return which could emerge in their ranks while on the way – they had burnt their houses and their fields.

The episode referred to by Mr. Schaffner occurred about 61 B.C. A second exodus was tried, this time by the four regions comprising, according to Julius Caesar, a dozen towns and some 400 villages. The plan was to conquer the more fertile country of the present Saintonge in Charente. The exodus was carefully prepared by legislative measures. For two years the cereal crops were increased to the limit, abundant means of transport were made and the voyage well organised.

On 28th March of the year 58 B.C., the Helvetii assembled on the banks of Lake Geneva for their great exodus, under the leadership of the old chief Divico, who, 50 years before, had already led the Tigurini as far as Agen. Of their



*The St. Gotthard Pass, linking the northern and southern parts of the European Community. Today, there is no need to prove the importance of this route which was opened in about 1240. The thickness of the lines shows the relative density of rail traffic. On the St. Gotthard line 200 to 300 trains pass daily. Since saturation point has been reached a new tunnel is being built.*

total of 368,000, a quarter were warriors. Caesar, who hastened from Rome to Geneva by forced marches, prevented them from crossing the Rhone and obliged them to take the rocky and difficult route along the right bank. Downstream from Geneva, Caesar succeeded in pushing them northwards. In the first engagement, Caesar wiped out one of the tribes, the Tigurini, as they were crossing the Saône. The decisive battle took place at Bibracte. Blood flowed in torrents; Divico was killed. At the end of that day, of 368,000 emigrants, only 110,000 could be counted by the Romans. The survivors had to make their way back to the scorched earth of Helvetia, Caesar's legions at their heels.

In retrospect, the disaster of Bibracte does not seem entirely negative, since it marked the dawn of a new prosperity. In fact, the Romans in their turn began to use the eastern and western Alpine passes for commercial purposes. They established a trading system, equipped the country with a road network on which moved not only men and arms, but also a new culture and the Roman law.

Switzerland was finally born in 1291 by the joining together of the valleys and communes of Uri, Schwytz and Unterwald. In fact, if William Tell and his crossbow are doubtful history, it is undeniable that the oath of allegiance taken in 1291 followed the opening up of a highway for vehicles through the St. Gotthard. Until then, the north-south currents of inter-European trade went by way of the Grisons passes to the east or the Great St. Bernard to the west. The bridge of Schöllenen, on the south slope of the St. Gotthard, built about 1240, made possible the shortening by several days of the link between Germany and Italy. It is striking to note, moreover, that the direct administration of the St. Gotthard route by bailiffs installed all along its length was not established by Austria until after this great route was open to traffic.

It was against this direct administration that the first Swiss joined together in August 1291. Their rebellion was only the final act in a whole network of agreements and treaties on the technical level which had been previously concluded between them. In fact, the inhabitants of the valleys were far from being ignorant peasants, hiding at the foot of their mountains. Numbers of them were traders, dealing in exterior markets in Frankfurt, Geneva, Lyons, Milan... We know that one of them, Attinghausen, had made a commercial agreement with the town of Como in 1270 which already carried a kind of most-favoured-nation clause. These ancestors of Switzerland knew perfectly well the importance which the St. Gotthard highway would hold for their own economy and that of Europe. The powers of the time, the Hapsburgs in the forefront, also realised this and it was from that source that sprang the collision

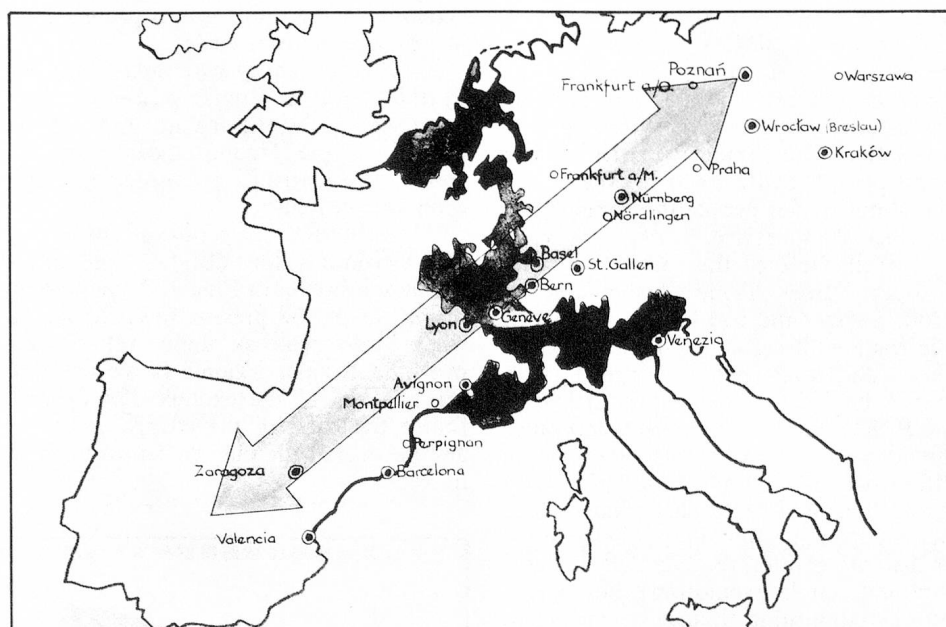
of interests and ambitions which found their outlet in the wars of independence and the battles of Morgarten and Sempach.

It may perhaps suffice to recall the importance attached to the St. Gotthard pass by the present European Communities, for whom it represents the principal north-south communications route, to understand the major economic importance and consequently political importance, which this route still has for Switzerland.

As for the opening of the east-west route, it was at the centre of policy in the second half of the 15th century. The ambition of Charles the Bold was the rebuilding of the Lotharingian empire from the North Sea to the Mediterranean, the realisation of which would have reduced Switzerland to the level of a buffer state between the powers and moreover, would have practically denied her access to the markets of the West, that is to say of France and of

Spain – which was to open up towards America. It was the interminable trade wars between the Confederate States and the Burgundy of Charles the Bold which finally led the Swiss to take up arms. Their war against Burgundy was infinitely more decisive than those conducted by the King of France and the Emperor of Germany against the same enemy because their war was vital; 40 years after the victory over Charles the Bold and his Lotharingian ambitions came the perpetual peace with the King of France and that forbear of the free trade area of which mention was made earlier in this article.

The search for integration and trade, it is true, do not constitute all of Switzerland's history. But to the extent that this search is closely related to the constant economic factor in her existence, the need to use her only natural resource – the labour of her people – is a dominant principle.



One of the major commercial groups of the 15th century, the Swiss company Diesbach-Watt, established agencies (marked ⊙) across Europe. The exceptional animosity displayed at this time by the Swiss towards Charles the Bold, Duke of Burgundy, was largely based on economic reasons. The Swiss wanted, and needed, to break through to the west but the route was blocked by Burgundy which threatened to stifle their economic life. Charles was beaten by the Swiss at Grandson in March, 1447 and again three months later at Morat. He died in the battle of Nancy in 1477. (shaded = Burgundy and its allies).



Ambassador Paul Jolles and Federal Councillor Ernst Brugger at Brussels negotiations.