

Geneva : a republic

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Features

Geneva – a Republic

Pierre Bertrand

He hails from Carouge (Geneva) and was born in 1909. He studied at the Collège Calvin, afterwards at the universities of Geneva and Berne. In 1935, he graduated with a doctorate in economic history. He is a journalist, contributor in historical questions to the «Tribune de Genève», Professor of history and art at the «Ecole des Beaux-Arts», and he lectures on European civilisation at Geneva University. He has given lectures in England, Scotland, Federal Republic of Germany and Italy. He has produced many eye-witness accounts on European countries. He is President of the «Cercle d'histoire de l'Institut national genevois» and has had some 50 history books and essays published, mainly on Geneva and its cantonal Communes.

Every old town in our ancient European continent has a distinctive face, a special history, a soul of its own which opens up to those who know how to observe and to know how to be sympathetic. The most favoured amongst these towns are even marked by a stamp of fate, which still has its effect, even though the factors which contributed to their greatness and founded their fame belong to the past.

Which has been the fate that has marked Geneva, a town which gives itself the rank of a capital without actually having it? Some writer once maintained that Geneva was the largest amongst the small towns and the smallest amongst the big ones. These marks are fairly accurate if one wants to relate its expanse to its influence. With fewer than 300 000 inhabitants, but with a past as rich as is desirable, and with a relationship to all important events which shook Europe to good and evil, the town of Geneva sees its name mentioned and printed in all spheres of international news. The name raises hopes and expectations which often disappoint but are renewed again and again.

Why is the name Geneva surrounded with all these laurels?

Surely not because Julius Caesar, in the year 58 B.C., halted the tribes of the Helvetians in front of the citadel of the Allobrogers of Geneva and thus started the conquest and Romanising of Gaul territory. Perhaps rather because the Reformer Jean Calvin raised the town, at that time with only a few more than 10 000 inhabitants, to a centre of a religious idea and severity of faith in the 16th century, a doctrine which found not only a great deal of sympathy, but also made him many enemies. But even more certainly because Jean-Jacques Rousseau, citizen of Geneva, brought nature back into favour and put his confidence and basic trust in mankind in his writings in the 18th century, a philosophy which spread right to America. And also because yet another Genevese, Henri Dunant, followed the call and by personal and brave effort on the battlefield of Solferino in 1859, created the basis for the Organisation of the Red Cross, to whom many countries owe support in times of horrible wars and catastrophes.

The memory of these men, Calvin, Rousseau, Dunant, decided the then President of the United States, Woodrow Wilson, to propose Geneva – free city in a neutral country – as seat of the League of Nations in 1920.

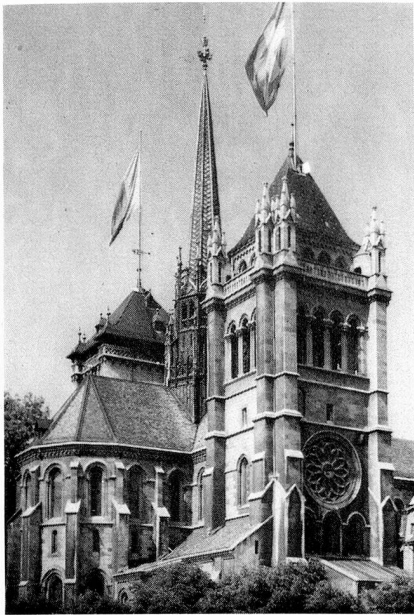
Yet these facts so decisive in the destiny of Geneva express nothing yet about its soul and what has at all times distinguished it from other towns, in other words: what is its personality. If one tries to get to the root of the matter, one discovers that Geneva is essentially a medieval community which, towards the end of the 13th century was raised to an urban commune like so many other towns in Flanders, Northern Italy, France and Germany. Geneva had a General Council of citizens as legislative authority, mayors as executive organs and a freedom charter, which was recognised by one of the prince-bishops of the town, and which gave a juridical basis to the rights of the citizens.

Since then, the Commune, relying on this charter, has consolidated and expanded all the time and that

Geneva waterspout and the Salève hill in the background (photo A. Frey).



Features



The cathedral of Saint-Pierre (photo A. Frey).



The Mont-Blanc bridge and the isle of Jean-Jacques Rousseau (ONST)

inspite of a row of permanent and temporary opponents: the Counts and later Dukes of Savoy as well as some of their faithful bishops. It did not take long before the Commune administered its property independently, had its own jurisdiction and concluded agreements with the towns of the Confederation. In the course of the troubled and martial times of the Reformation (1535/36), Geneva acquired its full independence and became a republic.

This state formed by one united township to which a few small villages belonged as enclaves in foreign territory, could preserve its independence inspite of Savoyan, French and Spanish ill-will. Geneva escaped a particular noctur-

nal assault on its walls in 1602 and finally extorted respect from its enemies.

In the 18th century, after having educated theologians in its academy for some time already, Geneva produced a large number of eminent intellectuals and scientists, whilst its trade and commerce turned towards complicated fields such as watch making and banking. In this epoch, though, there were such grave differences of opinion between the oligarchy which held the power, and the citizens and descendants of immigrants that the Republic of Geneva sank in the floods of the French Revolution at the time of the Directory and thus shared the fate with Venice and many Prin-

icipalities, Provinces and Free Towns.

Soon after the overthrow of Napoleon, Geneva experienced its rebirth as Republic and realised that the best guarantee of its independence would lie in a voluntary alliance with the Cantons of the Confederation. It is within this helvetic framework that the Republic has remained and consolidated its interests.

A visitor from outside – even if he spends only a few hours in Geneva – recognises very quickly the special character of the town, provided he parts from the splendour of the lakeside promenades and the parks along the lake and does not linger too long in the large business streets. He will discover the old quarters on the hill where already the old Gaul settlement was situated. With its narrow alleyways, its small squares where fountains splatter, the upper town offers a diverse, yet harmonic picture of houses dating back to the time of the early Renaissance, with richly ornamented window frames, simple yet impressive buildings in the Italian/French style of the 17th century, and rich patrician resi-

A few figures

Surface area:	284 km ² whose 38 km ² are on the lake of Geneva
Population:	343 000 inhabitants for 45 communes (160 000 in the town of Geneva; 170 000 in the satellite-cities and 13 000 in the last 17 rural-communes)
Division of the inhabitants:	1/3 Geneva-citizens; 1/3 Confederate people; 1/3 Foreigners
Denomination:	126 000 Protestants; 177 000 Roman Catholics
Language:	French (foreign inhabitants not counted)
Tourism:	13 500 beds; 2 130 180 whole nights in 1974

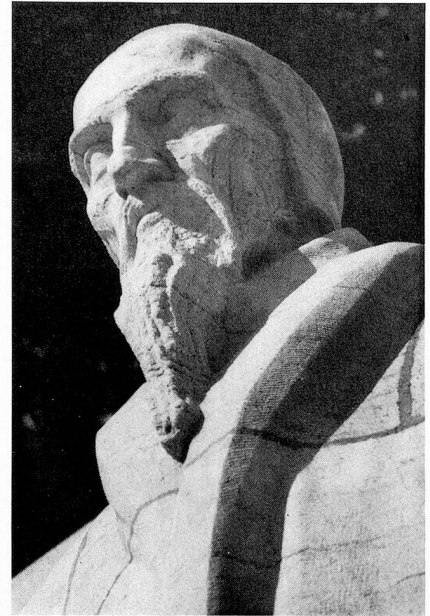
Features

Organizations whose headquarters are in Geneva

European Free Trade Association (EFTA)
International Bureau of Education (IBE)
International Labour Organization (ILO)
European Organization for Nuclear Research (CERN)
International Committee of the Red Cross (ICRC)
International Committee of Scientific Organization (ICSO)
World Meteorological Organization (WMO)
World Health Organization (WHO)
Several other United Nations Organizations (UNO) with European Headquarters
Inter-Parliamentary Union (IPU)
International Telecommunications Union (ITU)

dences with courts of honour and gardens modelled on those in French towns. The Council Hall with its «Tour Baudet» fits beautifully into the picture, the building in which the Geneva Government has had its seat for more than 500 years. In a low hall with frescoes from the 15th century, one finds such admirable things as the silver sceptres, emblems of mayoral dignity, the table on which for generations one of the Secretaries of State records year after year the date of the first chestnut tree leaf – a sign of the coming of spring, an open bible on a high desk, upon which the newly accepted citizens of the Republic swear allegiance. In the old quarters, several churches testify to the religious and civic past of the city: the Cathedral in which the Citizen's General Council often assembled,

the Auditorium where Calvin taught, Saint-Germain where a relief dating to Constantinian times is proof that Geneva became Christian already in the 4th century. Every step takes the visitor into a rich history. Numerous memorial plaques remind onlookers of the stay in Geneva of most of the great personalities in European history in the field of faith, of politics, of literature, of science and of art and music. In this one recognises just how much Geneva's European fate is based on firm foundation. And it is in these old quarters of the town when flags flutter on a festive day, the Republic's soul is bared of its own accord, and one understands that this city has developed entirely out of the civic sense of its inhabitants. This is where the «miracle of Geneva»



Jean Calvin (Reformers' wall) (photo Bergholz).

becomes apparent. For in the course of centuries, after every religious and political upheaval shaking one of another corner of Europe, these old families who cling to their soil were joined by refugees who appreciated Geneva as haven of freedom. Their descendants became integrated with the hereditary population after a few generations and have since pledged themselves equally fervently to defend the civic rights of freedom and the independence of the Republic which has become one of the worthiest amongst the Swiss Cantons.

The Parliament of Nations (photo Chiffelle).



Headquarters of the International Committee of Red Cross.

