

# Profile of the Valais

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## Passports

Do not wait until the eve of your holiday before applying for your Swiss passport to be renewed ... it may not be possible to return it to you in time.

## Profile of the Valais

### Maurice Chappaz

#### Biographical and bibliographical notes

Born at Martigny on 21st December 1916  
Family of landowners and lawyers

Uncle on his mother's side: Councillor of State Maurice Troillet. Studies: matriculation at the «Gymnase l'Abbaye» at St. Maurice, 2 years of law studies at the University of Lausanne

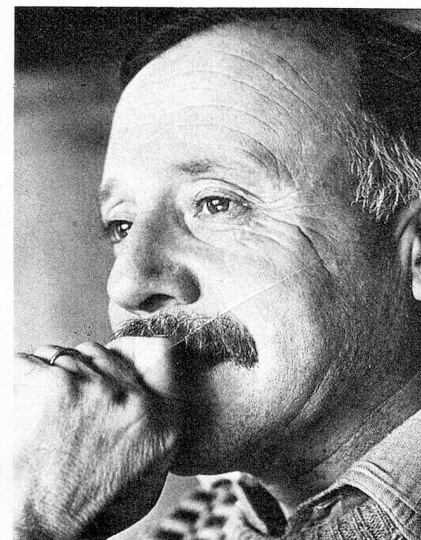
From 1939 to 1945 lieutenant at smaller frontier posts

The inclination to write came after two spells of working: A stay at the Grande Dixence (1955–1957) as assistant surveyor and caring for a vineyard estate, including the whole gamut of growing vines (1950–1955). This was followed by looking after some small vines of Pinot and Fendant at Veyras above Sierre, where he had a house built.

In the meantime he met Corinna Bille in 1942, married and had three children – engineer, psychologist and student (girl) of literature.

Apart from 15 books we mention translations from Vergil (**Les Géorgiques**) and from Theocritus (**Idylles**), poems «**Verdures de la Nuit**», «**Testament du Haut-Rhône**» (poem in prose), «**Valais au gosier de grive**», «**Chant de la Grande Dixence**», «**Portrait des Valaisans**», «**Match Valais-Judée**».

The last two works are tales of tender or wild anecdotes in the form of lampoons



or fables, in which the **Vieux Pays** and the modern world are united.

Two absences from the Valais should be mentioned, one near the wilderness of Lapland and the other towards the Himalayas, both to approach his homeland anew.

And the last book: «**La Haute Route**», a kind of poetry in prose, which describes the long journey on skis across the glaciers of Saas to Verbier in spring. M.C.

*The Swiss and his changing Homeland  
An old and yet a young country:  
the Valais*

The Swiss who have left their country, citizens of «Fifth Switzerland» – for abroad one does not speak of German-Swiss, French-Swiss, Ticinesi or folks from the Grisons, but simply of *Swiss*; in doing so all our different characteristics flow into one single similarity, nothing to do with passports, but with our common heritage of mountains and rivers, blue lakes unique in Europe and rural-technical aspect of our individuality and all it implies in tradition and restrained adventure – our Swiss then who left their homeland and look back on their childhood from afar.

But once they come into contact once again with their country of

origin after having been away for a long time, possibly full of memories and their parents' dreams, it is by no means certain that they recognize it.

To talk of the Valais: Someone who was born here, say, in 1920 and has been bound to the soil ever since, has undertaken a journey on the spot, one which, in its length, compares to emigration to the States. Everything has undergone changes: manners, customs, landscape. The resident Valaisan could rise within his limits to a notable conqueror (according to the picture which we may have, perhaps somewhat naively, of you, the Swiss abroad): he has become the owner of a hotel, chief engineer of a barrage construction, head of a new hospital. Conqueror or vanquished within an inner exile. I am also thinking of the

# Features

former farmer who, after all his land has been sold off, becomes an employee working on the aerial cableway in a fashionable tourist resort.

The Valais is complex.

I am thinking of the boundless expansion and disorderly urbanisation.

Switzerland and the Valais have been seized by the turmoil of progress, faith in the future, worry about welfare and inflation with tremendous force.

## *Peasantry becomes extinct, agriculture on the move.*

There is no lack of contrasts: The percentage of cattle breeders has declined by three-quarters; yet the vine-growing area has doubled. The grape harvest of well-tended vineyards, soon covering some 4,500 hectares, may surpass the production of the rest of Switzerland. In good years, no fewer than 60 million litres are laid down in cellars. The vine-growers of the Valais with their organisations and technical know-how and above all the quality of their wines as it is, would not have to fear anything from the Common Market, on the contrary.

The slopes of the Valais have lost their pine groves, orchards and glades shadowed by walnut-trees – vineyards extend from Martigny to Leuk.

The Rhone plain has given up its bulrushes, its islands, its heath-like embankments, in order to transform itself into a blooming fruit and vegetable garden. That is where one can find apricot trees, apple and pear trees... and from it the famous liquor distilled from the Williams pear, the only true and genuine one from the banks of the Rhone. Year after year, trains and sometimes aircraft transport hundreds of million kilos of that luscious and juicy substance which the fertile loess soil produces so generously. Here one has to face problems of ecology,

subsoil level and motorway construction.

For the blemish of pollution, sin of modern times, does not leave alone the paradise newly created by man out of swamps.

## *From rustic wooden settlement to hotel town*

The erstwhile villages of 50 or 100 inhabitants, presenting their white-washed churches and larchwood chalets, have burst! For there are resorts where 20–30,000 people enjoy themselves during winter holidays. Innkeepers, bankers, shrewd businessmen, ski-aces and versatile, sun-tanned skiing instructors in red anaraks take care of the multitudes. A choice of several skiing districts with 100 kilometers of *pistes* is at one's disposal. Valaiski, well-known Valais firm, sells every season 20,000 pairs of longdistance skis and 10,000 pairs of downhill skis. On the skiing slopes, the sun is hotter than at the seaside.

On the one hand the verdict is justified that the Valais has been gripped unhampered by touristic and industrial interests. On the other, I am anxious to stress a number of tremendous efforts and the significance of certain undertakings which turned out as if it had meant to create new



Farm wife in the Hérens Valley.

boundaries in the interior of a rugged mountain country.

Let us examine the new types of men who have come up in the course of 30 years, held their own and disappeared again from the scene. Let us try and recognize the true men of the future which is beginning today.

## *Breed of men or heroes of transition*

I shall present insignificant, modest heroes.

The former post-war Federal President Rubattel was the author of a commemorative document on the position of the workman/

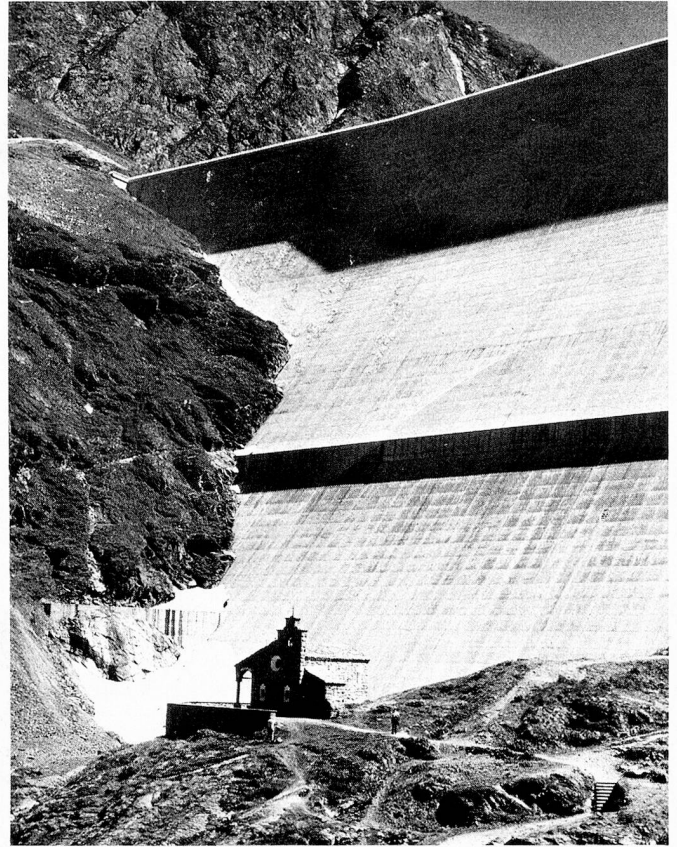
View of Sion's castle hilltops. To the right: the fortress-like St. Catherine's Church in Romanesque-early Gothic style on Valeria hill. To the left: ruins of the former episcopal castle of Tourbillon.



# Features



The lower Rhone Valley and the region where the river flows into the lake of Geneva.



The imposing 281 m high dam «Grande Dixence» in the Val des Dix. Photos SNT0

farmer of the Valais. The men worked 8 hours a day in the factory, early mornings or at night (12 hours, 2 out of 3 Sundays); the men of the Lonza Company or aluminium works of Visp or Chippis came from far and wide from villages and mountain slopes (2 hours on foot and subsequent coach trip), and they cut their sleeping hours in order to look after the garden, vinyard or livestock. One must know how much the small mountain farmer tried to get away from poverty which was a different kind of exile for him. Unfortunately, he had to give up his job and not infrequently also his piece of land.

The brother of the workman/farmer was the worker tunnelling on the high barrage walls. He was admirable in his sense of fraternity and stoic dignity. Between 1930 and 1970, the Valais was the scene of epic heroism. The Valais people were wont to say:

*Let us erect a wall at the bottom of every valley and let us master the waters, so that they be our servants and golden light come forth.*

Grande Dixence, Moiry, Cleuson, Mauvoisin, Aletsch, Emosson and Mattmark, where the glacier broke off and buried nearly a hundred bodies. The invisible tragedy of silicosis has carried off thousands of barrage workers. For all that, a quarter of all electric energy produced in Switzerland comes from the Valais.

The water-power of the Valais is enormous. Let figures speak for themselves. The famous Assuam Dam on the Nile, constructed with Soviet aid, could produce some 11mrd kWh; but since only four out of eleven generators are operational, Assuam produces only half of the total potential, in other words less than the Valais which produces 7mrd kWh. The Grande Dixence alone reaches 1.6mrd,

compared to approximately 30mrd which is the total hydraulic production of the whole of Switzerland.

In addition, there is thermic energy: Chevalon in Lower Valais, producing 1½mrd.

Yes, the Valais has indeed made a big jump forward.

A host of nameless heroes, builders of every success, are the *true* witnesses of a lively homeland on the Upper Rhone, truer than the initiators, the soil speculators, the wealthy upstarts under inflation. The Valais has its drudgery and its hallmark.

## *Youth and future*

Who will relieve this army of strong, muscular workers?

The statistics teach us that the Valais which has no university, no technical college, sends the third-largest number of students to universities, *per capita* of the population.

# Features

The inhabitants of the old country turned university graduates. I saw Evolène citizens tend the vines in spring – the standard with the 13 stars was fluttering above the rocky cone in which it stuck, and a small band of fifes and drums encouraged busy use of secateurs and hoe. «Who are you?» I asked the president. I had recognized some old vintner friends, also the innkeeper and the postal coach driver. «Do you know what occupations they have?» he answered, pointing to the young people in their blue smocks. «One is a geologist, one a physicist, one a student of literature, another one a lawyer and one a final-year medical student.»

There you are – the new wave. One should add that, inspite of scholarships, grants and free tuition, children from non-middle-class families still rarely go to university. The old and the modern Valais in its inexhaustible rural vigour has burst this reserve. And that, surely, is the best card it has to play out.

## *Artistic expression*

In the field of art, too, the Valais (whose folkloristic art used to be so extraordinarily rich) has emerged from the shadows. Authors and painters demonstrate it with the same strength and accuracy as the greatest artists of former times.

Near the early 16th century church at Raron in the Rhone Valley is the grave of the poet Rainer Maria Rilke (1875–1926).

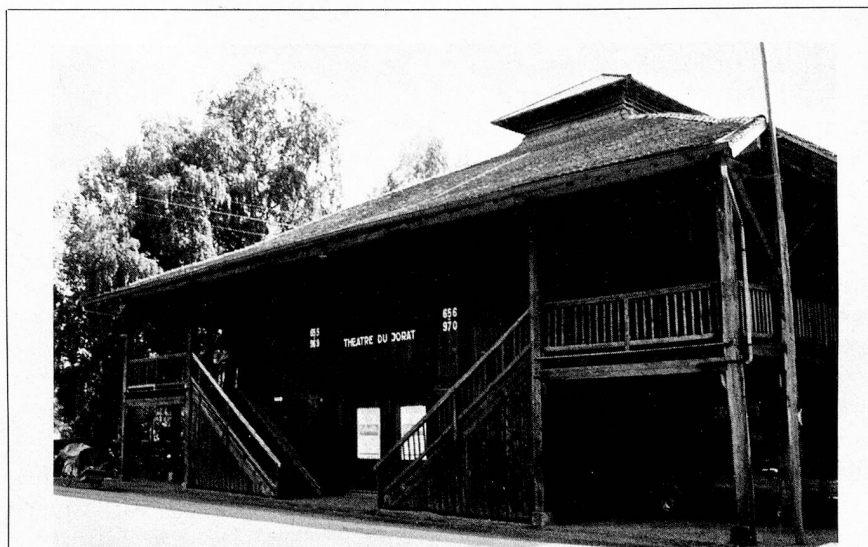


Thus in the renewal of religious art – especially glass-painting – the Valais has conquered Western Switzerland. In literature, Ramuz has left a deep impression. Geniality, too, has begun to show itself and will continue. But that would be a new chapter as yet unknown. Economic life whose impulses and strength I have tried to show, means the basis as well as contradiction for art. But whoever wants to be part of one of these two worlds, will have to open up to the other accordingly, whatever the reservations and however great the resistance.

Maurice Chappaz



Raclette, a cheese-speciality of the Valais region. Photo SNT0



The «**Théâtre du Jorat**» at Mézières, the large rural theatre whose fame is known well outside Swiss boundaries, announced the famous reproduction of «*La servante d'Evolène*» by René Morax. The première of 1975 will take place on 31st May.

One of the best works by Gustave Doret was first performed at the «*Théâtre du Jorat*» on 29th May 1937. «*La Servante d'Evolène*» with the beautiful scenery and décor by Jean Morax and Aloys Hugonnet, caused great enthusiasm with the inhabitants. After the success at Mézières, René Morax's favourite work was successfully accepted in Paris where it was performed in the presence of the President of the Republic in July of the same year.

The new performance of 1975 will be produced by Paul Pasquier, and the choirs will be conducted by Robert Mermoud. With the exception of Madame Annie Gaillard, all parts are played by Swiss.

May we add that for nearly every première at the «*Théâtre du Jorat*», the Federal Council goes to Mézières (Vaud).