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LETTERS FROM SWITZERLAND

By Gottfried Keller

ELECTION EXPENSES EXAMINED

According to an investigation made by the Swiss Telegraph Agency the various political parties spent a sum between eight and ten million francs for their electioneering propaganda last October. This sum, which seems enormous, does not include any personal expenses of the various candidates, which have most probably reached a few more millions all in all.

Political parties as well as individuals are completely free in Switzerland to spend as much as they can afford and like on electioneering publicity and propaganda of one kind and another. If the sum of eight to ten million francs as having been spent by the parties is correct, this means that each parliamentary mandate in the Federal Assembly in Berne has cost 40,000 francs.

Spending a great deal of money on propaganda — TV spots, press advertisements, circular letters to potential electors and so on — did, as is now established, not mean a guarantee for success. Thus one particular party succeeded in getting four of its candidates into the National Council for 100,000 francs, whereas another party was only able to have one of its candidates elected for the same sum. Getting solid information about these expenses from the party headquarters was apparently quite a difficult task: some of them not yet having received all their statements

and others being reluctant to divulge what they consider confidential news.

Not only the so-called capitalist parties, above all the "Freisinnige" (Liberal Democrats), but also the Social Democrats — the latter with a gain of nine seats in the 200 persons National Council — entered the race with considerable sums at stake: the Social Democratic Party spent roughly 1½ million francs on posters, adverts in the press and on car stickers. It made its biggest effort in the cantons of Berne, Zürich, Solothurn, Basle, Geneva, Neuchâtel and Lucerne.

Whereas in some countries a ceiling for election expenses is fixed by law and expenditure is subject to public scrutiny, this is not the case at all in Switzerland. In quite a few cases I think that too much propaganda has had a counter-productive effect. Most electors make their mind up in any case long before, and there is reason to believe that in Switzerland the so called floating population, which decides at the last moment, is very small indeed.

UNO ONE DAY? NOT JUST YET?

Switzerland, together with the Vatican State and, I believe one more country, is one of the very, very few states still outside the United Nations. According to the "Swiss Society for the United Nations Organisation" (UNO) Switzerland is today the only country which has not joined UNO — although she is a member of many non-political specialised agencies and is at the same time host to UNO's European

Headquarters in Geneva — out of her own free will.

This is, in a way, an anomaly, but the reasons are manifold. The main one is, of course, Switzerland's policy of neutrality. While it was possible in 1920 for Switzerland to become a full member of the then existing League of Nations, because her neutrality was specifically recognised in the so called London Declaration, to obtain such a special status would hardly seem possible today. Much less would it seem to be possible to obtain exemption from the duty to participate in economic sanctions, as Switzerland did when such sanctions were decided on against Italy after Mussolini's aggression against Ethiopia.

However, in 1969 the Federal Council decided on a "policy of further rapprochement between Switzerland and UNO", adding in a memorandum of 1971, that those provisions in the UNO charter which demanded military sanctions were a dead letter anyway. The population of Switzerland should, it was further added, mentally prepare itself for a nationwide plebiscite as to whether the country should join UNO or not, this vote to take place "in the not too distant future".

It is no secret that some, but not all, of the Federal Councillors would advocate an early Swiss membership application, but it is also known that even the most ardent supporters of the idea realise that the moment has not come as yet, because almost certainly the population would reject such a plan outright. With the advent of so many newly formed states inside UNO and the formation of a block of Afro-Asian nations many people in Switzerland — and I feel sure they would be a majority — think there is no place for our country inside such a body. Nor have recent developments in New York's UNO building helped those in Switzerland who may still be in favour of UNO membership: the anti-Israel resolution which has been adopted by the General Assembly on the one side and the reception given, a little while ago, to Yassir Arafat as Head of the PLO (Palestine Liberation Organisation).

Although Switzerland is represented by a permanent observer accredited to UNO, it certainly looks as though the Federal Council could not risk a nationwide vote on the desirability of Swiss membership for some years to come.

YUS, GUV! WOHN?

Zürich has a new attraction. It consists of three genuine London taxicabs of the Austin 2.5 litre diesel type with right-hand steering and drivers who are supposed to be capable of speaking English and other foreign languages. In May last year a Swiss electronics engineer went to Britain to collect the first of his three cabs, which he had ordered after a weekend visit to London, during which he had become favourably impressed by

the roominess and manoeuvrability of the typical British taxi. Adjustments had then to be made because, according to Swiss regulations, the doors of taxis have to open towards the rear, which involved shifting the hinges towards the front. The first cab soon became such a success, with many people telephoning the Taxi Centre and specifically asking for the London cab, that its proprietor ordered two more and started a radio taxi circuit of his own. This is now known as the "LT London Taxi AG" (AG standing for the equivalent of Limited Company) and seems to be doing excellent business.

Many of the foreign passengers who are driven around in these cabs, automatically address the drivers in English, according to the owner of this little fleet, but one recently asked the chauffeur whether he was able to speak German too! To see and hear the original diesel clatter of a London taxi in "downtown" Zürich's very dense traffic is apt to give one quite a thrill.

LIFE OR LIBERTY?

The wearing of safety-belts on the two front seats in private cars has now been compulsory since 1st January and while some people still grumble about loss of their individual freedom, on the whole the motoring population seems to have responded.

There are, however, some illogicalities in the regulations which nobody can understand. For example:

why are taxi drivers exempted and why are people in cars built before 1971 exempted as well? Are they not exposed

to the same risks and dangers as people are in private cars built from 1971 onwards?

The Swiss are the biggest savers

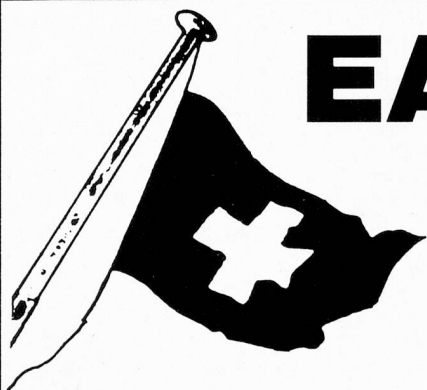
With average savings of Sw.Fr. 12,318 per head of the population, Switzerland comes first among the 26 countries included in a statistical survey carried out by the International Savings Bank Institute.

This represents an increase of about 3% over the figure for 1973, when the average per capita savings in Switzerland amounted to 11,953 francs. The USA comes second with savings deposits valued at US \$3,570 per head of the population compared with US \$3,248 in 1973. Sweden takes third place with US \$2,634, followed by Belgium (US \$2,592), Japan (US \$2,480) and Australia (US \$2,050).

The Institute, which represents savings banks in 52 countries totalling savings deposits valued at US \$400 billion, points out that for the comparison to be valid a number of factors that are not always easy to translate into figures should be taken into consideration. In Switzerland, for example, income tax is not as a general rule deducted at source, so that the Swiss

tend to put aside certain savings each year for the express purpose of paying their taxes. In the USA, Great Britain and Sweden, the number of people owning their own homes is larger than in other countries, which means that a by no means negligible part of people's savings is held in the form of real estate. The International Savings Bank Institute also points out that savings deposits have increased in each of the countries for which statistics are available, in spite of the inflation and recession experienced by many of these countries.

Thus the flow of private savings into the banks has increased to an extraordinary extent in Switzerland during 1975. Between the end of 1974 and the end of July 1975, in fact, the volume of bank savings (savings deposits, savings books of all kinds and bank bonds) recorded by the 72 banks publishing a monthly report (i.e. 28 cantonal banks, the 5 big banks, 39 regional and savings banks) increased by 9.6 billion francs.



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