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LETTERS FROM SWITZERLAND

BY GOTTFRIED KELLER

Although it is grotesque and difficult to believe, the men of Appenzell Ausserrhoden — some 5,000 who attended the traditional "Landesgemeinde" — have once again decided to refuse the women the right to vote in cantonal and borough matters. "This vote", said the presiding magistrate, "is exclusively our affair and we do not need any outside influence or persuasion."

And when it came to the vote, an estimated two-thirds of the men present stuck to their old fashioned conviction that their womenfolk were good enough to look after their children, kitchens and households, but should nevertheless not have a say in public affairs. The decision caused some laughter and whistling, but — and this is even more difficult to believe — quite a few of the women who stood on the fringe as spectators applauded it.

If I called this situation grotesque, it is because in federal matters, concerning the whole country, all women of voting age, including those of Appenzell Ausserrhoden, are entitled to their own opinion and to vote — but when it comes to voting on problems nearer their home they are still considered to be on the same level as children, or for that matter, cranks or convicted criminals. Tradition, as one can see, dies a very slow death in some of the more remote corners of our country.

* * *

DEATH OF THE CORNER SHOP?

The following (official) figure, which has recently been published, about small retail shops which have been forced by big "discounters", shopping centres and self-service shops to close down, is, in my opinion, quite alarming. Way back in 1965 there were around 20,000 small retail shops in Switzerland — and today there are around 12,000 left. The "discounters" self-service shops and huge shopping centres buy in such enormous quantities from the producers that the latter can afford to quote prices which they cannot allow to the small village shop of "Auntie Frieda". Buying more cheaply enables the discount organisations to sell at considerably reduced prices. Many young families prefer these discount centres not only on account of their being cheaper, but also because most of them provide ample parking space for the motorised public, and some such amenities as nurseries and corners

for babies in addition, where the youngsters are competently looked after free of charge. Very many young people also like to do their shopping perhaps once a week, or even once a fortnight, and to deposit meat, vegetables, eggs and all kinds of groceries in the deep-freezer until they are needed. Deep-freezers are nowadays as commonplace as are ordinary Frigidaires and the affluent society makes ample use of them. Of course the tendency to buy in a big shopping centre is understandable — but it is also to be regretted. Usually "Aunt Frieda" in the small local shop is not only a respected, but very often also a quite lovable character and purveyor of a little local gossip. But there is even more to all this, especially in rural districts. It is there where the closing down and disappearance of small local village shops can and does create problems for the elderly and not so well-heeled villagers. Often the nearest larger agglomeration is some kilometres away, necessitating a bus or train ride to reach it. Moreover being part of a milling crowd in a big shopping centre is not exactly everybody's pleasure. Probably a majority of the population does not give a great deal of thought to the problem which has arisen for the elderly and not so healthy and wealthy people in quite a number of fringe-regions, especially in the mountains. At any rate: with every small local shop which disappears, an era of local history and a folkloristic bit of village life also comes to an end. And this is a sad sign of the times.

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ARMS EXPORTS CAN CAUSE PROBLEMS

It will, I feel sure, be of interest to the many friends he has in the Swiss Colony in Britain, that Ambassador Dr. Jürg Iselin — who is now in an important position in the Federal Political Department (Foreign Office) in Berne, recently came to Zürich to give a talk about the problems of Swiss exports of war material. He was the guest of the Zürich "Study Group for Economic Politics", which is chaired by another former London-Swiss: Dr. Walter Günthart of the "Neue Zürcher Zeitung".

While it is totally impossible for me to do justice to the lecturer by giving an adequate résumé of his extremely thorough talk, I would nevertheless like to mention a few points which are

probably realised by few people. The exportation of war material from a neutral country in times of war is not against international law — provided always that private firms are the exporters, and not the state as such, and provided furthermore that if the neutral state wants to prohibit or restrict such exports, such measures are extended evenly to all belligerents. Swiss armament exports are anyway mainly restricted to defensive weapons. Switzerland, as a permanently neutral state, can only expect respect for its neutrality if it can adequately defend itself and this, in turn, necessitates the existence of an armaments industry. If such an industry did not exist, our country would totally depend, for its own defence, on imports from abroad. The confederation covers its needs to around 70 per cent from factories at home, while on the other hand it must be stressed that no Swiss enterprise can or does live on the armaments business alone. The total of persons employed in Swiss armament factories — owned by the state or private — can be estimated at about 12,000 and the percentage total of war material amongst Swiss exports during the last ten years comes to about one per cent. The principles concerning the exportation of war material are laid down both in the federal law and a federal order, but their interpretation often leads to practical problems, which ultimately in cases of doubt are decided by the highest executive level: the Federal Council. These, I repeat, are but a few of the many interesting and important points Ambassador Iselin made. The liveliness of the discussion which followed showed how much the audience had appreciated Ambassador Iselin's lecture and how closely this had been followed.

BROYE VALLEY RAILWAY CENTENARY

One hundred years ago — on 12th June, 1876 to be precise — the first train ran on the Lyss—Murten line and on 24th August, 1876 the Murten—Palézieux line was also opened. As well as the official celebrations on 8th and 9th May, steam train trips will be run between Murten and Lyss, for which the public can obtain special tickets. In addition, the locomotive Re 6/6 11639 "Murten" will be displayed and historic railway documentation will be on view in special window displays in the medieval town of Murten.