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LETTERS FROM SWITZERLAND

By Gottfried Keller

This time my letter from Switzerland will consist of a number of short items, all of which may be of some interest and all of which are under discussion and active consideration on various levels. For some time the question has been publicly discussed whether those who use the Swiss motorways – the network is growing steadily, but in view of the many geological difficulties in some parts slowly – should be made to pay a special fee, similar to the fees paid in some other countries. Various forms of imposing such a levy have, it seems, been considered: a label or “vignette” on the windscreens for example, which would be easily purchasable and would provide proof that the special fee had been paid – comparable to the British Road Licence.

However, Mr. Chevallaz, the Federal Finance Minister, has finally decided to abandon any such plans. To begin with they would be against the letter of the Federal Constitution and would, moreover, call for complicated machinery and an increase in the number of officials to impose them. Finally it has been acknowledged that the motorist is already taxed heavily enough: 30 centimes per litre of petrol out of a total taxation of 57 centimes per litre going into the fund for motorway construction. The 30 extra centimes per litre brought in more than eleven hundred million francs last year. In other words: the motorists pay adequately for the ever-expanding network of motorways.

Pleasing the ladies

The following item is bound to be of special interest to the female readers of the *Swiss Observer*. A new law concerning marriage and the legal position between husband and wife has been in preparation for some time and if it becomes law in due course it will drastically change the husband's hitherto dominating status. The proposed law, if one day adopted, at last acknowledges that husband and wife should be equal with equal rights and duties. It will bring about a change away from the patriarchal system at present in force and replace it by one of partnership. No longer will the husband be the “boss”, as it were, who has the final word about how and where the couple or family live and no longer will he be able to do more or less as he pleases financially.

One very interesting novelty being proposed means that a young couple getting married will have the choice to live and become known under the husband's or the wife's surname, an innovation already introduced into law both in Austria and in the Federal Republic of Germany. If, to name but only one more of the many new features, the wife wants to work, in whatever

capacity, she no longer needs the husband's permission. Nor can the husband decide on his own to carry out major purchases (of furniture or a motor car, for example) without his partner's consent.

Leases of flats will in future under this proposed law have to be signed (or terminated) in full consent of both partners. The proposed changes are far, far too numerous to enumerate in a short paragraph like this one. Nevertheless it can be – or should be – stressed that the main idea of the proposed law is to totally end the discrimination of the female partner in marriage and this (like some years ago the introduction of the vote for women on a Federal level) is indeed a good thing.

It is, of course, possible that all this will be rejected by “the Sovereign” if and when it comes to a popular vote. In some regions of Switzerland progress comes along very slowly, as the recent decision of some 5,000 men of Appenzell Ausserrhoden to refuse their women the right to vote in cantonal and borough matters (although they can vote federally!) shows. Thus it is quite likely that several attempts may become necessary to bring these desirable and timely changes about.

Price watch doomed?

A third question which wants answering quite soon – at any rate before the year is out – is whether the Price Watching system, which is due to end on 31st December, should be prolonged or not. Some people are in two minds about this, but not Mr. Leo Schürmann, former Price Watcher and at present General Manager of the Swiss National Bank.

According to him the authorities would be well advised to continue the price-watching office in Berne for a further two years or so, because quite a number of indications point to the danger of inflation once again trying to rear its ugly head. Although the present rate of inflation of just over 1 per cent is the smallest in Europe (if not in the world), Mr. Schürmann recently pointed to an economic report of the European Commission in Brussels which expects an average cost inflation of some 12 per cent next year.

“Anything could happen on any of the various fronts”, concluded Mr. Schürmann, adding the warning that if there is going to be a marked revival in industry and the economy, this would be bound to influence prices. One of the most important functions of the Price Watcher's Office at present is to see to it that price-advantages on imported goods due to the high value of the Swiss franc are passed on to the customers. One might be tempted to ask: “If a continuation of the price-watching system for

another two years would be a good thing, why for another two years only?”

Join UN or not?

Should Switzerland after all join the United Nations or not? With the recent publication of a report, worked out by 50 eminent Swiss – the third such study within the last decade – this question has once again become somewhat topical. It is a well known fact that the Federal Council, led in this case by Foreign Minister Graber, is in favour of Switzerland joining, membership in its view being compatible with the traditional policy of neutrality.

It is also well known that a majority of the members of Parliament of both chambers share the Federal Council's view. But in Switzerland's direct democracy, final decisions in such matters do not rest with the authorities. They rest with the people, and the population would, it is almost certain, say NO if the question of joining UNO were submitted to a vote, as it would have to be.

Time, it seems, is working against the Federal Council and some recent developments inside the United Nations – the reception given to Yassir Arafat for example, or the failure to adopt a resolution to combat terrorism – do certainly not help to make membership appear particularly attractive. The Commission, which recently published its report (recommending an application by a majority of 46 against 4) was recruited from representatives of the Churches, the Army, Banking, Commerce, all political parties, the Trade Unions, the Industries, to name but a few of the many organisations which some three years ago received a mandate to study the problem and work out a report.

Meetings and hearings were held with Swiss Diplomats with UN experience (Messrs. Thalmann, Keller, Turrettini) and also with representatives of Sweden and Finland. The minutes taken at these meetings finally consisted of 320 pages. The story of how this Commission worked and how it came to its conclusions – with four prominent members finally dissenting – would fill several whole issues of the *Swiss Observer* and cannot, for obvious reasons, be told here in full, fascinating as it is.

What remains is the question of divergence between authority's and people's opinion. The Vote for Women was a similar case and would have been introduced much earlier but for public opinion. The same goes for the recently rejected “Space Planning Law” (Raumplanungsgesetz) and for several other measures.

In other words: experience shows that often proposals are finally adopted at the second or third attempt. Not, to be

honest, because the proposals have become much better after a lapse of time, but because *evolutionary thinking processes take time*. This is why some advocates of Swiss UNO membership think that a positive proposal to join the United Nations should be submitted to a nationwide vote as soon as possible. A second or third attempt later might then succeed. It is obviously not exactly easy to govern Switzerland.

Fashions change

The anti-authoritarian wave of the late 'sixties amongst Swiss juveniles is ebbing away. Protest marches, which had once been so popular, are badly attended nowadays and the psychological climate inside the younger generation is changing. The Rector of Berne University has recently stated that students seem to take their studies much more seriously once again — especially when examinations draw near, because examination marks are of greater importance in the present recessionary situation.

The number of trials of young males who refuse to do their compulsory military service is sinking and much of the aggressivity proudly demonstrated by juveniles not so long ago is disappearing. Even in juvenile everyday life, old values are suddenly remembered again, such as courtesy, pleasant manners, much more moderate hair styles. Old fashioned ballroom dances are coming back to life, because, as one youngster has put it, "we have enough of standing on the floor and wriggling".

The same trend is noticeable as regards clothes: those eyesores of yesterday seem to have had it and one hardly sees any more of those ugly hippy and flower-children outfits one saw a few years ago. The chairman of the Association of Swiss Fashion Houses speaks of a much more pleasant and far less "aggressive" style in readymades which youngsters and juveniles are asking for today. The youth's own publication, *Team*, with a circulation of some 50,000, has made the interesting remark that while formerly they were criticised from the Left they are nowadays criticised from the Right — without their having changed their editorial principles at all.

The new trend, according to Federal Councillor Hürlimann, who is in charge of the Department of the Interior (Home Office), is in part due to the recession. This, according to the above-mentioned magistrate, has suddenly demonstrated to the younger generation that wealth and well-being are not things which can simply be taken for granted.

Blessing in disguise?

Thus, a certain amount of economic uncertainty and unease — "will I get a job when I reach the age of earning my own living?" — have replaced the tendency to protest and rebellion.

Considering all this, the conclusion seems to be justified that the recession has, at least in some respects, come as a blessing in disguise.

SWITZERLAND IN BRITAIN

August 30 to September 4, and September 6, 7, 8, 10 — Royal Festival Hall — *Manola Asensio* dances with the London Festival Ballet in *Coppelia*, *Giselle*, *Noir et Blanc*, and *L'Eventail* (creation).

Wednesday, August 18 — Royal College of Art, 6.30 pm / Royal Albert Hall, 7.30 pm — The oboist *Heinz Holliger* gives a Pre-Prom talk before the concert by the London Sinfonietta, conducted by Gary Bertini, at which he is one of the soloists (Stravinsky, Berio, Dallapiccola programme).

August 22 to September 11 — Edinburgh Festival — Performances by the *Berne Mime Ensemble* (details from the Festival Fringe Society).

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