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# The Swiss Observer

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# Switzerland

*Is a small country condemned by its very smallness not to know greatness?*

C.-F. Ramuz: Besoin de grandeur

*Switzerland is situated at the heart of Europe*

Its climate is influenced by the ocean from the west, by the continental land mass from the east. Arctic air flows to it from the north, warm and moist air from the south. A typical wind is a dry, warm katabatic wind known as the *föhn*. It blows down the Alpine valleys from time to time, putting the Swiss out of humour.

There is no all-Swiss climate. The topographical relief of the country is too varied to permit of such a thing. There are three main divisions: the Alps, the Swiss Plateau, the Jura. The Alps are formed of masses of granite and gneiss, of crystalline massifs and limestone, the Swiss Plateau of molasse strata, the Jura of chalk. *«The Swiss are proud to have made such fine mountains»* says Ludwig Hohl, a writer living in Geneva.

*The Swiss work within narrow confines*

One quarter of the country consists of snow-covered mountains, ice, rock, scree. Only one half is arable, comprising the Swiss Plateau, parts of the Jura and the river valleys in the foothills. This is where Swiss everyday life chiefly takes place. Geology decides the economy. There are 153 inhabitants to each square kilometre (396 per square mile), so that the population is dense. Geographically speaking, Switzerland is a rather cramped country and is becoming more so as buildings

advance. Statisticians estimate that in the last few years 20 to 30 square metres of ground have been built upon every minute.

*Steppeland grasses grow in Switzerland*

Not everywhere, but in the dry Canton of the Valais, where the geographer would designate some areas as rocky steppe. Mosses and lichens found in polar regions also grow in Switzerland, and palms and mimosas from the Mediterranean. The forests consist of coniferous and deciduous trees, pines, firs, larches, beeches and chestnuts. The Arctic and the subtropics meet. In the Jura there are «lakes» of cold air at Siberian temperatures, in the southern Alpine valleys there are islands of very low rainfall. In a city such as Zurich the temperature rises to 30 degrees Celsius (86° F) in the shade on summer days, and in winter it has been known to drop to -25 degrees Celsius (-13° F). In winter the lowlands are full of cold air and a high mist shuts them off from the sky. Above this mist the weather is bright and warm and attracts Swiss and foreign holidaymakers. South of the Alps more rain falls than to the north, but it falls less frequently. The western plateau is on the dry side, as it lies in the rain shadow of the chains of the Jura. Here most grain is grown, but not enough for the country to live on.

*«Le Milieu du Monde»*

The continental watershed runs through Switzerland. It extends from north-east Russia to the Pyrenees. There were once plans to construct a waterway between the North Sea and the Mediterranean. All that has remained of

# Features

them is a millpond on the watershed in the Jura. Its water runs south to the Rhone and north to the Rhine. It is known as «Le Milieu du Monde», the middle of the world. From this we can gather that the Swiss think they live at the world's centre. The country's waters flow into the Rhine, the Rhone, the Po, the Danube and the Adige and thus into the North Sea, the Mediterranean, the Adriatic and the Black Sea. The only river Swiss ships ply on is the Rhine. But many people would like to make other waterways navigable. Landlocked countries have a weakness for water and oceans. Switzerland also has an ocean-going fleet consisting of freighters and tankers. The coastal vessels have been given the names of historic battles: Dornach, Grandson, Laupen and Murten. There are air connections over oceans and continents to the great cities of the world. The country's national airline, Swissair, owns numbers of large-capacity aircraft.

They take off and land at the inter-continental airports of Zurich, Geneva and Basle. They are very quickly over and out of a country that is hardly 41 000 square kilometres (15 900 square miles) in size.

## *Railways, bridges, palaces*

The Swiss built their railways early, driving tunnels through the Alps: in 1882 through the Gotthard, in 1906 through the Simplon. The railway network (5000 kilometres, or 3100 miles) is dense but, for topographical reasons, tortuous and complex. The engineering achievements are remarkable, the viaducts and bridges numerous. The railways are state-owned and electrified. The seventy private railways also run on time. The most accurate public clocks, it is claimed, are those on the stations, and the trains themselves are nearly as exact. Every third Swiss owns a motor vehicle. That calls for a modern highway system with further tun-

nels through the Alps, the Great St. Bernard, the San Bernardino and the St. Gotthard. But not everything that is planned has been carried out. It may well be that the Swiss build quicker for others than for themselves. They like to build things in the outside world.

Thus the Ticino is famous for its architects: Fontana, who completed the cupola of St. Peter's in Rome, Maderno who built palaces such as the Palazzo Barberini there, and Borromini, who did much the same. Trezzini even planned a whole city for the Russian Tsar Peter the Great - St. Petersburg. Fossati restored the Hagia Sophia in Constantinople. A bridgebuilder from Appenzell, Grubenmann, made an international name, building pierless wooden bridges in the eighteenth century. The George Washington Bridge, the Verrazano Narrows Bridge in New York and the Golden Gate Bridge in San Francisco - all enormous suspension

The rolling hills near Cerneux-Veusil

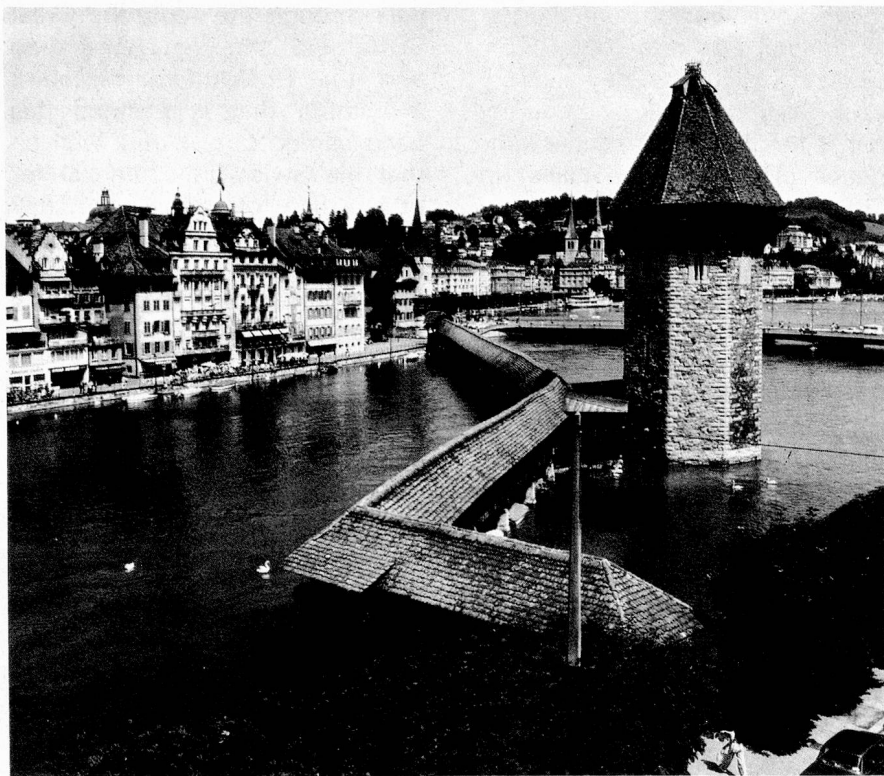


The Rhine harbour in Basle





# Features



Chapel-Bridge and old town of Lucern

bridges – were the work of the Swiss engineer Othmar Ammann. There has been a Swiss emigration across the centuries. Quite often it is an escape from the narrow bounds of the homeland. For here resolutions are slow to mature, and the step from concept to reality takes time. That is a matter of political structure.

## *«Unity, yes; uniformity, no»*

Switzerland was not originally a nation but a league of communities, a «Confederation» that wanted self-rule and in the course of its history shook off foreign yokes. Federative elements still characterize its political organization. The federal state of 1848 with its 22 cantons was the expression of a common will. The partners were republics, communities with their own history, of differing ethnic origin, with different languages and outlooks. «Unity, yes; uniformity, no.» The historian J. R. von

Salis reduces the character of the federal Helvetian state to this formula.

The name «Helvetian» derives from a Celtic tribe, the Helvetii, who had moved into the territory of modern Switzerland but were prevented by Julius Caesar from going on to Gaul. He settled them on their old lands and colonized

National Council in Berne

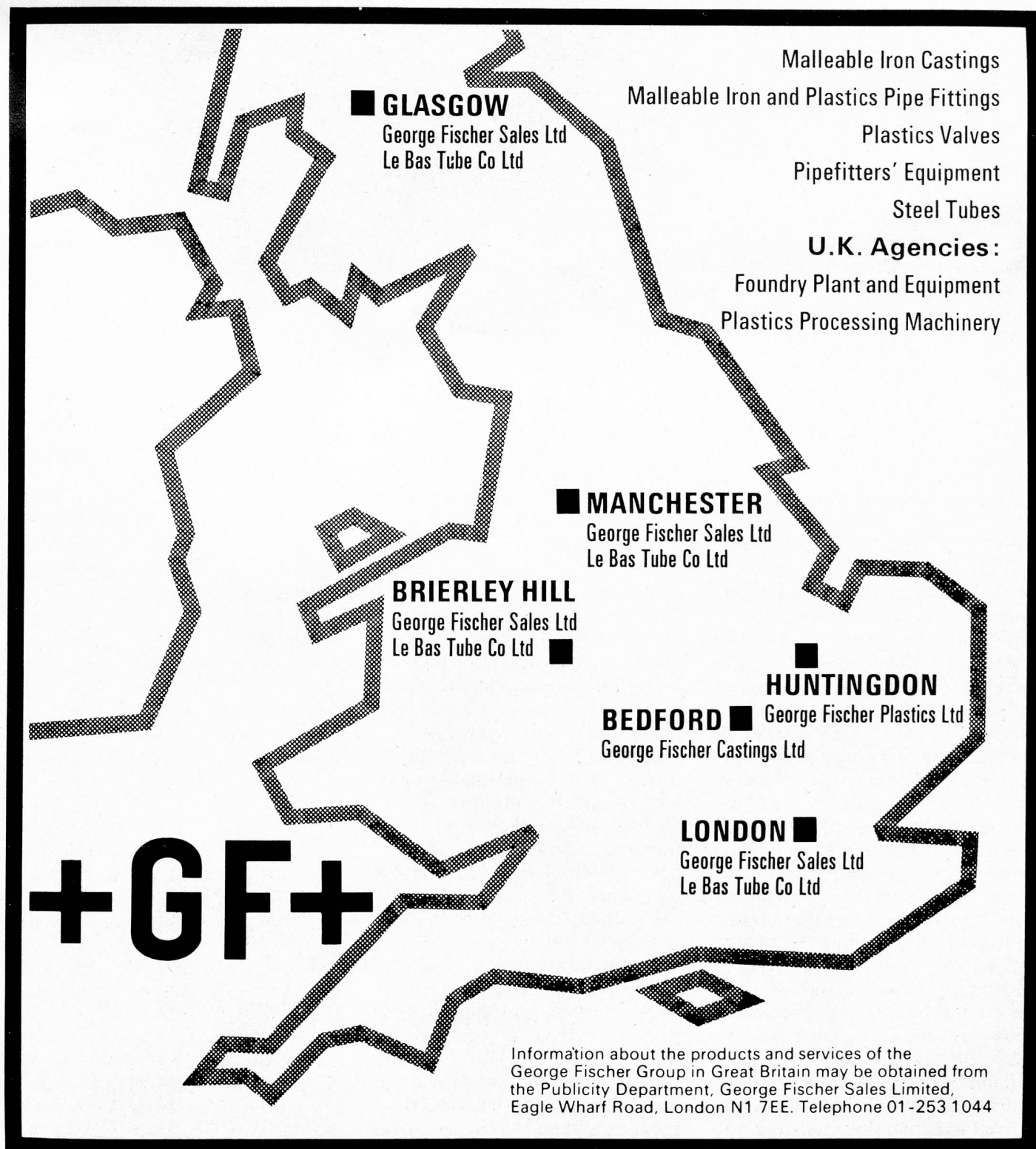


them. They began to speak Latin, but then they were overrun by Germanic tribes, the Burgundians and Alemanni. The Alemannic dialects are still spoken in German Switzerland today. They have a rich vocabulary, over 100 000 words have been collected. In the west of the country the Low Latin of the Burgundians has evolved into French. In southern Switzerland a Lombardic dialect is spoken, and in the Grisons Rhaeto-Romanic or Romansh. The official languages, German, French and Italian, are used for written texts and negotiations. Every Swiss can learn the languages of his countrymen in school, and he usually understands them even when he cannot speak them fluently. The fourth national language, Romansh, is endangered. It lacks a cultural centre. German-speaking Switzerland has its centres in Zurich, Basle and Berne. French-speaking Switzerland in Lausanne and Geneva, southern Switzerland in Lugano. The transmitting stations of radio and television are also located in these cities. All of them capitals of Switzerland, for Switzerland has no Paris! Berne is the official capital, or as the Swiss put it, the Federal city. It is the seat of government and administration, home of the diplomatic corps. Culturally and linguistically, however, Switzerland is a highly diversified entity. It is felt to be a unity only in the political sense.

## *Two per mille of the population of the earth*

Two per mille of the population of the earth – that's all the Swiss there are. Not exactly an overpowering muster. Yet the country is a small, varied world in which the trends and conditions of modern society are mirrored. Of the 6 330 000 inhabitants counted in 1976 around a million were foreigners. This proportion is too high in the eyes of many Swiss. But Switzerland needed foreign

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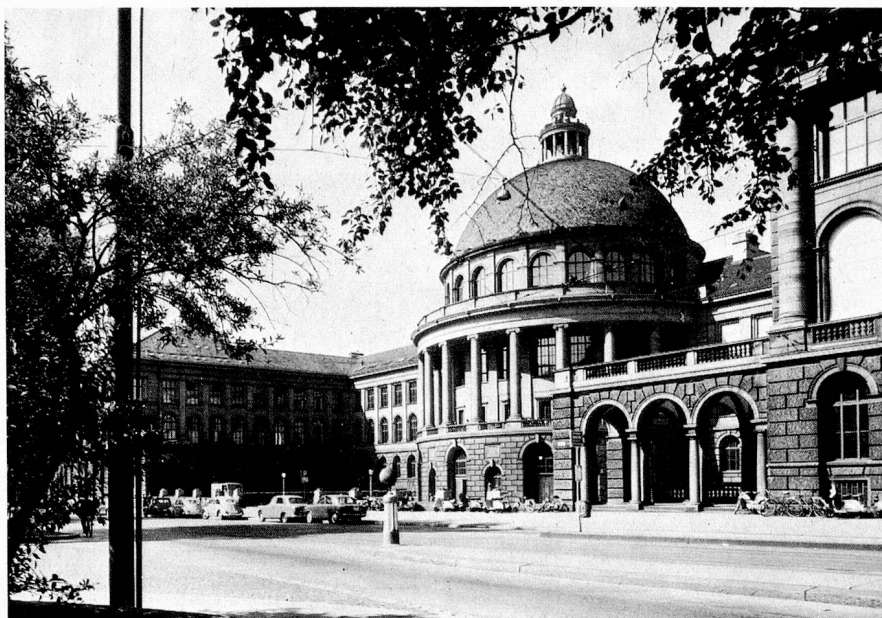
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# Features

workers even in the nineteenth century. The railway tunnels were mostly built by Italians, the Swiss providing the engineers. Italians, Yugoslavs, Greeks, Spaniards and Turks have been essential for the country's prosperity since the Second World War. Many of them have attained a higher standard of living here. They own cars, television sets, savings. Quite a few have been able to build houses in their home countries. In Switzerland most people live in flats. Land is expensive and building costs are high. The centres of the towns are suffering depopulation. Families with children prefer to move out into the country. Ways of living, however, are hardly different there today. The same cars are parked in front of farmhouses as of high-rise blocks in the cities. Almost every household has its refrigerator, its washing machine, its television set. People are well equipped with the status symbols of modern industrial society. Yet there is poverty even in this country, which ranks among the five richest on earth. A good third of the nation's total income goes to one tenth of the population. The national product, that little numerical fetish with the big aura, rose nominally from 19100 millions in 1950 to 144 600 millions in 1975. The foreigners who live in Switzerland are not only workers; there are also numerous intellectuals, students from all continents and refugees among them. In the nineteenth century, in particular, Switzerland offered many people a Republican sanctuary. From here they set the rest of the world in motion: Alexander Herzen, Russian philosopher; Bakunin, founder of anarchism; Garibaldi and Mazzini, Italian champions of freedom; Richard Wagner, political and musical revolutionary. Lenin lived in Zurich before returning to Russia and the October Revolution. James Joyce lies buried



The Zurich Federal Institute of Technology

there. In Berne they point to a small street where the theory of relativity is supposed to have occurred to the young Einstein. He was working at the time in the Swiss Patent Office.

## *Sport, leisure and other useful things*

The number of Swiss patents is impressive. There is one for every thousand inhabitants. The Swiss is by nature a great hobby lover. His inventions are made known to the world from time to time, as for instance the zip fastener, cellophane or the new ski-boot. He has also invented a few new sports, such as bob and skeleton. Usually he needs some British or American help in these cases. Since his mountains offer snow-covered slopes even in summer, he has introduced summer skiing. Mountaineering and mountain tours are also popular and are facilitated by excellent maps. Cartography is, so to speak, one of the oldest Swiss hobbies. General Dufour, who saved the country from a long civil war on the eve of the creation of the federal state (1848), made the first maps of the Swiss mountains, and they are exemplary. Today

Swiss surveying cameras are recognized as the world's best and the country's cartographers have a great reputation. Talking about hobbies, the Swiss enjoys working in his garden, supposing he has one, or motoring around the country. He collects stamps or, if he has a big enough bank balance, art.

Collections such as those of Oskar Reinhart in Winterthur or of the industrialist Bührle in Zurich are world-famous. The mountains can also be scaled without maps, in aerial cableways or on skilifts. There are 1500 of these in the country at large. The most renowned mountain lines, however, are not cableways but rack railways, the patent for the first rack railway having been applied for by a Swiss around the year 1860. An example of a rack railway is that of the Jungfrau, which climbs up into eternal snow and ice, from the Kleine Scheidegg to the Jungfraujoch at an altitude of 3454 metres or 11 330 ft. The Swiss are always keen to teach others what they can do themselves, such as skiing. And as nature has bestowed nearly as many lakes on them as they have bestowed aerial cableways on

# Features

nature, sailing and water skiing are much practised. Then there are gymnastic clubs in all parts of the land. For gymnastics has always been a Swiss speciality. More recently an open-air training circuit for all and sundry has been invented, the so-called Vita Parcours, a path through the woods with stations for prescribed exercises every few hundred yards. One of the oldest of Swiss sports is shooting. It must have started even before the national hero, William Tell, distinguished himself at it with a crossbow. Today marksmen's clubs have shooting ranges in almost every village, and shooting there is not just a pastime, but a duty. Every soldier has to keep his eye in, even when not in military service, and the marksmen's clubs help him to do so. They were instrumental, last century, in promoting the political unity of the land.

## *What does Switzerland want?*

The French novelist Chateaubriand wrote in Lucerne in 1832: *«What does Switzerland want? Freedom? She has enjoyed it for centuries. Equality? She has it. A republic? That is her constitution.*



*A reduction of dues? She pays hardly any taxes. What does she want, then? She wants change, that is the law of living things.»*

At that time Switzerland was in the midst of a revolution. But the country took its time, the revolution went on for fifty years. And it had an outcome, the new federal state. The old régime had been a mixture of oligarchies and republics. A system that lived on mercenary soldiering, among other things. Patricians hired out whole Swiss regiments to foreign kings. The Genevese Rousseau, an apostle of the Enlightenment, was one of the forerunners of the great change brought by the French Revolution. He saw a Republican community as the model for the state of the future. But contradiction is the salt of history. It was Swiss, and so-called Republicans, who defended the French king against Frenchmen who only wanted Republican liberties. The armies of the Revolution then entered Switzerland and seized the treasures of state; 24 million francs' worth in Berne alone. The carriage the riches were carried off in collapsed under the load. The French, to whom the Swiss had leased soldiers, now collected the interest. It was the end of the old system. But they also gave Switzerland a new constitution. Napoleon, emperor and dictator, left the cantons their sovereignty but united them under a central authority. The minority had from now on to accept the wishes of the majority. This was a preliminary exercise for the new federal state. The people did not want monolithic monotony, but political variety. The writer and poet Gottfried Keller phrases it like this in the speech of a young ensign at a shooting match: *«How refreshing it is that there isn't just one dull strain of Swiss, but that there are Zürcher and Berner, Unterwaldner and Neuchâtelois, Grisons and Basler, and even two kinds of*

*Basler! That Appenzell has its history and Geneva its history! This diversity in unity, which God preserve for us, is the right school of friendship, and only when political solidarity becomes the personal friendship of a whole people is the highest goal achieved!»*

## *Neutrality and solidarity*

At the Congress of Vienna in 1815 the European powers promised Switzerland «recognition and sanction of everlasting neutrality». Politically every Swiss thinks along his own lines, and in his outlook on life none need be neutral. Neutrality is a state policy; the country interferes in no foreign conflicts and enters into no pacts. In the eyes of many people this makes Switzerland a spectator beside the world's stage, while the individual Swiss is free to move where he wishes.

The Genevese Henri Dunant was a neutral businessman; he followed the French emperor to the theatre of war in Lombardy to secure a licence from him. «Il cherchait un empereur et il trouve une idée» (Denis de Rougemont): the Red Cross. To offer one's good offices, to be available to all – solidarity is, with neutrality, the first principle of Swiss foreign policy. Switzerland represents the interests of other states when diplomatic relations have been broken off. And is willing to play the role of host, particularly in Geneva. It collaborates in most international organizations concerned with aid to the developing nations. It also provides development aid in the form of finance and technology. It is now able to offer a volunteer corps to provide help in the wake of disasters. A neutrality reflex at present blocks entry to the UN. Switzerland is the only country in the world in which entry depends on a popular vote. And the Swiss people are cautious in all big political issues.



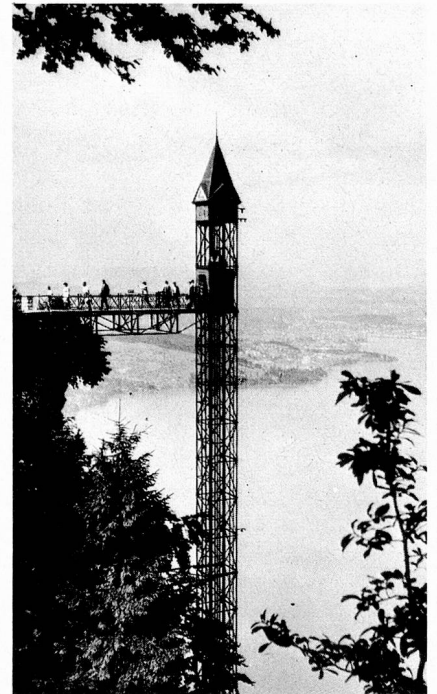
# Features

## *Democracy is a lengthy process*

Still, Switzerland has had experience of democracy for a few centuries. Its history shows *«that it was finally possible, after long disorders and acts of violence, to combine unity and multiplicity, the coherence of the whole and the independence of the constituent parts, within narrow confines»* (Herbert Lüthy). Is Switzerland, then, a model? An example of the fact that democracy is a lengthy process? The Federal Constitution of 1848, a parliamentary democracy, did not satisfy the nation, which was subsequently empowered not only to elect its representatives but to decide on changes to the constitution and to have recourse to initiatives and referendums. This means, in plain words, that a certain minimum number of voters can demand constitutional changes or plebiscites about new laws. The Swiss have repeatedly adapted their constitution to changing circumstances. At present work is in progress on a complete revision of it. Constitutions are often prepared here, nowadays for the nations of the Third World – the Swiss enjoy doing it. The civil code of the jurist Eugen Huber was praised all over the world and was taken as a model for the law codes of other countries. Contemporary Switzerland is a league of democracies, otherwise known as cantons. Federal Government, cantons, communes – these are the three levels of the state. The commune is autonomous, it has its own constitution, the communal statutes. But it is under the supervision of the canton. The canton is independent. It has its own constitution and a vote in certain governmental decisions. The Federal Government is the highest level of political rule. The Federal Assembly or Parliament consists of two chambers, the National Council comprising 200 representatives of the people

and the States Council comprising 44 delegates from the cantons. The supreme executive body is the Federal Council, the supreme judiciary body the Federal Court. It acts as the supreme civil and criminal court. It judges offences against the state and is responsible for seeing that the cantons observe the provisions of the constitution.

A Swiss passport bears the words «Swiss Confederation». It is made out by the Chancellery of the canton concerned on the basis of papers issued by the commune. This is the way in which the three entities – Federal Government, Canton and Commune – mesh in public affairs. The members of the various governing bodies – Communal Councillors, Municipal Councillors, (cantonal) Government Councillors, Federal Councillors – belong to different political parties. But they reach their decisions jointly, and each one represents these decisions to the outside. Government is thus pragmatic teamwork. If the Federal Council is defeated in Parliament, this is not regarded as a vote of no confidence. No government can be overthrown. It continues to



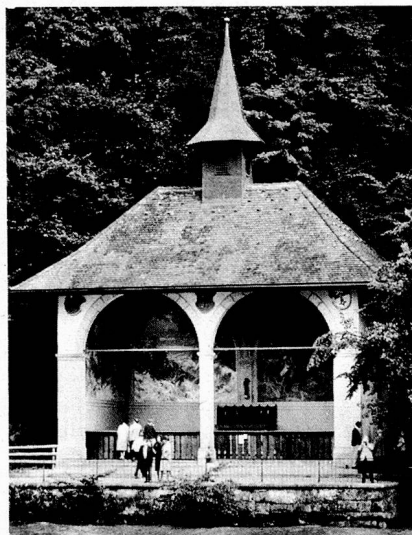
Lift which takes to the Hammentschwand on the Bürgenstock

rule, but it is re-elected periodically.

## *Societies, rights and parties*

All Swiss are equal before the law. There are no privileges. After a long delay, women now have equal rights with men. A stumbling-block of democracy has thus been cleared away; women can now vote and be elected. And they have more to say than women elsewhere; Swiss democracy gives the citizen the right to decide on practical issues. No school, no hospital, no theatre is built without the consent of the people. There are three principles that characterize the constitution: The power is in the hands of the people. The state is a confederation. The individual is assured of liberties that permit him to develop his abilities. There is freedom of creed and of conscience, there is freedom of trade. There is no

The chapel of Tell



*Continued on page 18.*