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BRITISH-SWISS RELATIONS THROUGH THE CENTURIES PART 2

Pioneers lead the way into an age of change

Nineteenth century

After 1815 the composition of the Swiss colony in Britain begins to change rapidly. The former relatively small private banks disappear from the London scene; the Swiss also seem to have lost their taste for military careers abroad, and travelling Swiss artists become rare in this post-Napoleonic period.

On the other hand the 19th century gives rise to new professions: the inventors and scientists, the hotel pioneers, the founders of world trading firms. They find in the United Kingdom, which is now the world's foremost industrial and commercial power, ample outlets for their ambitions. The United Kingdom is interested above all in a peaceful consolidation of the new political arrangements on the Continent, to which it seeks access for its trade.

Switzerland, as the neutral guardian of important Alpine passes and east-west crossroads, once more becomes a focal point for British foreign policy. Soon liberalism will be the dominant force in Swiss politics, and this awakens further sympathies in the similarly inclined Britons.

At the Congress of Vienna in 1815, Britain gives strong backing to the Swiss, who successfully press for defendable borders, a guarantee of the inviolability of their territory and international recognition of their neutrality.

Again Britain shows understanding for Swiss needs during the "Sonderbundskrieg" (civil war of 1847 against a group of Catholic-conservative cantons opposed to the transformation of the loose commonwealth of cantons into a modern confederation with centralised institutions), when she desists from intervening under the rules of the 1815 settlements.

Once more Britain helps the Swiss in their dispute (1848-1857) with Prussia over the Canton of Neuchâtel, which is at that time a Prussian principality. Repeated British interventions with the King of Prussia lead to the King's abandonment of his claims over Neuchâtel.

By contrast, Switzerland does not always act in accordance with British interests, notable during the Boer War, when the Swiss public opinion clearly sympathises with the embattled Dutch settlers. Britain thereafter seems to adopt a somewhat more reserved attitude to the Swiss, even suspecting them at times of having concluded secret deals with the central powers during World War One.

In 1868 Queen Victoria, who as a child had a Swiss governess, pays an unofficial visit to Lucerne. From now on Switzerland lures the British middle class, not as an awesome cathedral of the earth, as it had previously appeared to the poets, but as a place for relaxation and leisure.

The Swiss respond by creating proper facilities, introducing the "five o'clock tea", building tennis courts and golf links and naming many of their hotels "Victoria". The enterprising holidaymakers from across the Channel firmly establish a tourist trade in backward mountain regions of Switzerland.

Edward Whymper and his party conquer the epic Matterhorn in 1865, while a first Alpine Club is founded by his fellow countrymen as early as 1857.

Britons are also instrumental in the introduction and furtherance of winter sports: 1892 Sir Henry Lunn founds the Public Schools Alpine Club in Grindelwald; his son, Sir Arthur Lunn, is later to become the father of Alpine skiing competitions by laying down the rules for downhill and slalom racing in the 1920s. Thereafter races between British and Swiss MPs become a tradition.

In the winter of 1894 Sir Arthur Conan Doyle crosses an Alpine pass on skis; his imaginary creations, Sherlock Holmes and Professor Moriarty, also emerge as frequent guests of Switzerland, as does their modern colleague James Bond in the present century.

Britons introduce the game of curling, a Scottish invention, which is played on the Continent for the first time in St. Moritz in 1880.

Mr Charles Brown, co-founder of Brown-Boveri and Co.

Economically the end of Napoleon's continental blockade gives a boost to British-Swiss trade. Switzerland buys textile and other machinery, wool and yarn, and colonial produce, while Britain imports high quality fabrics and embroideries, watches, dairy products and chocolate, distributing many of these goods in the colonies as well.

The invention of milk chocolate in 1875 by a Monsieur Cailler is an immediate success with English chemists. British engineers are hired by Swiss firms anxious to try their luck at mechanical engineering. One of these Britons, Mr Charles Brown, is to become co-founder of the largest engineering firm in present-day Switzerland, Brown Boveri and Co., who are among the world leaders in power technology.

British engineers are also instrumental in the construction of the first Swiss railways. Their influence can still be seen in the fact that Swiss train traffic proceeds on the left, not on the right as is the general rule in Europe.

As the easily accessible Swiss lowland areas are already highly industrialised and trade is flourishing towards the middle of the 19th century, Britain becomes interested in the fact that Switzerland prospers without external tariffs. The Government therefore sends Dr John Bowring on a fact-finding mission (1835) to the Alpine republic. His favourable report contributes to the adoption of a similar policy by Westminster.

To do justice in this restricted context to the achievements of the many distinguished Swiss in Britain during the later decades of the 19th century is impossible. As an example one may mention César Ritz of Niederwald (Valais), whom the press calls "Hotelier of the Kings and King of the Hoteliers", or Sir John Gatti of Dongio (Canton Ticino), who becomes Mayor of the City of Westminster.

Towards the end of the century, the Swiss colony in Britain swells to more than 10,000 souls, which makes it imperative for the Swiss Government finally to open a diplomatic mission in London (1891).

The British monarchs have been represented in Switzerland — with intervals — since the 17th century, but for the staunchly republican Swiss, who had never known an institutionalised common foreign policy prior to the creation of their modern confederation in 1848, the sending of a resident envoy to a non-neighbouring monarchy proves to be politically delicate. Honorary consuls, however, have been appointed in London since 1817 and later in other cities as well.

To be continued