Zeitschrift: The Swiss observer : the journal of the Federation of Swiss Societies in the UK

Herausgeber: Federation of Swiss Societies in the United Kingdom

Band: - (1980)

Heft: 1772

Rubrik: Readers' Letters

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Man who took up the challenge

I WAS most interested in the article entitled "Routes that Span the Centuries," which appeared in the November issue of the Swiss Observer.

However what the article failed to mention was the name of the man who actually was responsible for the pass road. He was in fact a great uncle of mine, Francesco Meschini – an engineer, architect and Landamano, from the canton of Ticino.

This remarkable man seems to have faded into obscurity, despite his many achievements. Not only did he design and construct the St. Gotthard Pass but he was also responsible for the continuation of the road down to Fluelen, other major works in Lucerne, as well as being concerned with the facia of La Scala in Milan, and many other projects.

I recall my father telling me that Francesco was the only architect who accepted the challenge of designing the St. Gotthard Pass, which hitherto had been thought impossible, and turned down by many other distinguished architects.

As a result of his accomplishment, and to commemorate the linking of the Cantons of Ticino and Uri, he was presented with a magnificent clock – still in the possession of my family, in Magadino, and a photograph of which I enclose.

You may also be interested to know that my family house in Magadino was once the "Albergo della Posta", owned and operated by my great grandfather, Antonio Meschini. The albergo was as far as travellers from Italy and beyond could go by lake steamer – long before trains reached those parts.

Here the weary travellers would spend the night, and next day travelled on over the San Gottardo Pass in the comfort of my great grandfather's horse-drawn coaches – which also carried the post.

Some of the entries in the original visitor's book make most interesting reading – and it is remarkable how many British people were numbered among his guests. Since only the rich and the educated were more likely to travel in those far off days, they were mostly either from the nobility, or the church.

– Ilde Boehringer-Meschini, Golders Green, London.

●

THE article by Derek Meakin on Sri-Lanka in your September issue was so distorted and inaccurate one wonders if it was written with an ulterior motive.

I am Anglo-Swiss and after many visits now have a home and live for two to three months each year in Sri-Lanka. I have visited almost every part of this paradise island and enjoy the ready smiles and friendliness of its highly intelligent but rather lazy and easygoing people.

Statements such as "The abject poverty of the Sri-Lankans has to be experienced to be believed" and "The pitiful malnutrition faced by the majority of the people" also "one of the poorest countries in the world" are utter drivel. He cannot have travelled very far.

The "mud huts thatched with dried palm branches" at which he looks down his nose are extremely practical being cool and weatherproof and afford spartan but comfortable accommodation.

The least well off in the country receive in addition to a modest cash allowance a weekly allowance of 2 kilos of rice per person. This may be grim but it is not starvation.

The story of the driver being paid £3 per month is just not true and I challenge him to prove it. It would be well below the legal minimum of £8 per month. Perhaps this driver has free housing and all meals – this would make a difference.

I pay my caretakers £8 per month each but bear in mind you can buy 24 loaves of bread or 200 bananas for £1! When my wife and I went to tea at the home of one of my caretakers his salary enabled him to employ a full time servant.

What utter nonsense and how irresponsible to write "It may not be long before the whole country erupts into the most terrible violence." Violence and pitched battles with the police on the scale seen recently in Zurich have never occurred in Sri-Lanka, and I do not think Switzerland is about to erupt.

Many countries suffer from a "brain drain" and it is true much skilled artisan labour has been lost to the Middle East.

Britain has many professional men, especially doctors, from Sri-Lanka, but remember this is a country with the highest literacy rate in the East – 93 per cent – an excellent educational system. There is a great fund of able and skilled graduates to replace those who emigrate.

Rhetorical questions such as "Will the country's shaky political system be capable of coping with such a traumatic leap through time?" What is shaky about it? It is completely democratic.

The President is a politician of world stature. The government (slightly left of centre) is winning all bye-elections. All this augurs well for the future.

Sri-Lanka has a minority problem as did Switzerland in the Jura and Britain in Northern Ireland, but it is not very violent.

Due to its strategic position and the vast natural harbour at Trincomalee it has to endure some left wing subversion – she is not the only country to have this problem!

I was delighted to learn of the help being given to Sri-Lanka by Swiss Organisations and can only hope that the facts given are more accurate than the rest of the article, but Switzerland is way down in the "aid scale." Both Norway and Holland have been more generous.

In any case it taints the generosity given with one hand if fair Ceylon's name is besmirched with the other.

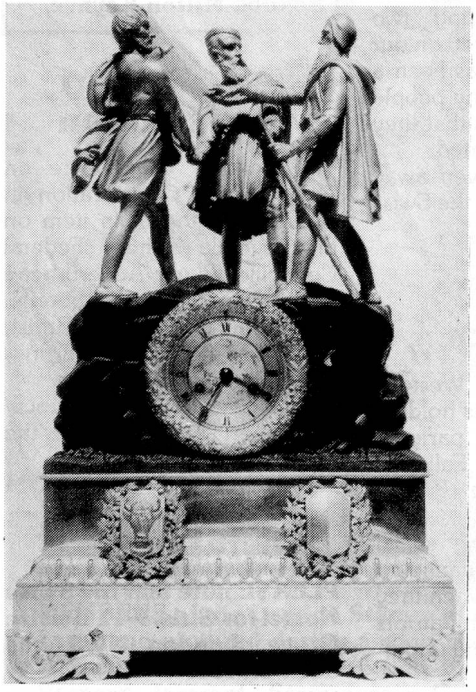
Many other countries, including Britain of course, have also been extremely generous.

What is my interest? I will tell you. I love Ceylon and its people and cannot bear to see her maligned by ill informed people. **– T.M. Hagenbach, Wroxham, Norwich.**

☐ *Derek Meakin replies: I have known Ceylon for the last 35 years and stand by every word in my article, which accurately reflects the views of many people living there who are concerned about its future.*

Regrettably Mr Hagenbach's letter reads like a page from Sri Lanka's muzzled, Government-controlled press – and that to me, as a former newspaper reporter working on the island, was another feature of present-day Sri Lanka which greatly saddened me on my last visit in August.

Incidentally, if Mr Hagenbach pays his caretaker £8 a month I wonder how much the caretaker pays his own servant?



The clock presented to Francesco Meschini, a distinguished architect, to commemorate his work on the St. Gotthard Pass.