The political structure of Switzerland

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THE POLITICAL STRUCTURE OF SWITZERLAND.

(The following is a short extract from an interesting contribution by Dr. Peter Meyer — translated by Mrs. Hottinger Mackie — to the September issue of the "Architectural Review" which, to encourage a visit to the present exhibition of Swiss architecture, has given this month's publication a particularly Swiss appearance. The many carefully selected photographs of Swiss old and modern buildings are superbly reproduced and engagingly described. If copies are still available (3/6 each) readers will find the issue a welcome addition to their library — in fact, keeping in mind the admonition of a prominent Swiss spokesman that "THE DUTY OF A SWISS ABROAD WAS THE CREATION AND DISSEMINATION OF A TRUE APPRECIATION OF OUR PECULIAR POSITION IN THE WORLD" it seems indicated that a wider circulation of this number sponsored by official quarters would further this desirable aspiration much better and quicker than individual efforts.)

The cultural diversity of Switzerland cannot be understood without reference to the geographical and historical conditions which are responsible for it. The political structure of our country, however, may present considerable difficulties to the English mind. It is true that the English nation is the result of the fusion of several races: firstly a prehistoric stratum, which created the megalithic monuments, then Scots, Picts, Celts, Angles, Saxons, Jutes, Norwegians, Danes, Norman French. All these have mingled, in varying proportions of course, so that we now find one type predominating, now another. All the same, the mixture is so thorough that no single component entirely dominates the whole anywhere, and thus merely by the gentle pressure of the island situation, and without political centralisation, a uniform culture has grown up in which regional shades of difference can only be detected on closer acquaintance.

In Switzerland, on the other hand, the various branches of the people do not mingle, but live side by side, the configuration of the country favouring their separation. Strangely enough it was the determination not to be encroached upon by the bigger surrounding countries — hence a negative factor — which caused them to form defensive alliances with their immediate neighbours. The splitting up of the mountain districts by their physical conformation trains the inhabitants in regional self-consciousness and compels them to unite in the struggle against the forces of nature. Parallel to this development, the cities of the lowlands achieved an almost sovereign independence in the course of the thirteenth and fourteenth centuries. This latter was no peculiarity of Switzerland, but a European development. The peculiarity of Switzerland was that the alliances between free cities and free valley communities survived the crisis of the sixteenth century, while in Italy, France and the Netherlands the freedom of the cities was suppressed by the new and growing power of the princes. In point of fact, Switzerland even to-day represents the medieval state, which was of a purely spiritual and legal order, and was not, nor wished to be, a national state. It grew almost passivyely into unity out of the instinct of self-preservation of its regional members. The cantons are not sections of a whole but original sovereign or semi-sovereign states which have grown closer together through centuries of history. The primary factor here is not the need of union among the parts of the country speaking German, French or Italian, but the need of Alemanic Switzerland to protect itself against the encroachment of the House of Habsburg; the aim of separation from the Holy Roman Empire did not exist from the outset. In the same way, Berne, Fribourg, Geneva and the Bishop of Sion had to ward off the Dukes of Burgundy and Savoy, while the Italian-speaking Ticinese were linked by common interests to the German-speaking inhabitants of Uri on the north side of the Gotthard Pass which united them. Thus there was created an intricate web of alliances and interdependences which gave birth in the course of centuries to a Swiss national feeling and the Switzerland of to-day. The history of Switzerland is not so idyllic as the benevolent foreigner is prone to assume. It has its share of horrors and lapses of all kinds. Not all parts of the country joined the Confederation of their own free will. There were members with superior and members with inferior privileges, "subject districts" which were administered by governing cantons. Yet even such districts were self-governing in local affairs; their inhabitants were armed and the ruling cantons had no standing army, a proof that they could rely not only on the loyalty of their own citizens, but on that of their subjects too. It was this state of affairs which filled foreign visitors with admiration. When the old subject relationships were abolished in 1815, not one of the subject districts thought of quitting the Confederation, not even the Ticino, which had been pretty harshly treated jus before. Only the Val Tellina was lost..

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Hence no uniform Swiss culture could arise, nor did anyone ever wish to create one. We might say that it is just the element of separation, of diversity, which acts here as the bond of union. It is the will to independence which is to be supported, not abolished, by union.

The fact that this extreme localisation is not geographical and material but spiritual in character is obvious if we consider that it is clearly mirrored in language, which is a more sensitive instrument than the formal world of architecture. It is for us a matter of course that the Alemanic part of the country would speak German, the French Swiss part French, the southern part Italian and the Rhaetian districts Romansch, that, for instance, the Grisons, which comprise districts speaking German, Italian and Romansch, should publish their decrees in all three languages, and the Federal Government its laws in all four, or again that Zurich units of the army should take their orders in German, Genevan in French and Ticinese in Italian. Yet we are no pedants — where languages meet, sometimes one takes the lead, sometimes another. There has never been any serious trouble about it. The beautiful idea that every Swiss speaks at least two of the national languages is, of course, a kindly illusion. A large number of Alemanic Swiss more or less understand French; a considerably smaller proportion of our French-speaking compatriots take the trouble to understand German, though the perpetual contact renders the feeling for language keener. The real peculiarity of the linguistic situation of Switzerland, however, has not yet been touched on — namely the dialects. We " German Swiss " read German books and write German books in the language of the Reich, but we speak an ancient dialect of the German language which the German of the Reich only begins to understand after long familiarity. Nor do we speak only one dialect; every city and every valley speaks its own, so that we can generally tell where a Swiss comes from by the first words he utters. The Swiss dialect has never settled into a written language like the German dialect of Holland. It has always remained the natural speech of all classes of society, while in the Reich, dialect is spoken only by the lower classes, the educated classes speaking the literary language. That is why there is in Switzerland no sharp line of demarcation between " educated " and " uneducated." In Switzerland, literary German was originally the language of the church and of literature exclusively. No Swiss has any difficulty in understanding it, but it is felt to be a foreign language and is seldom spoken without an accent.

In the French-speaking districts, on the other hand, the dialects have long been obsolete among educated people, while in the country they died out, save for scanty remnants, in the course of the last century. The Romansch of the Grisons is not an Italian dialect; it is an independent language of Romance origin..

We may say without exaggeration that no other country contains, in so small an area, so great a diversity not only of geographical features but also of culture. That is why we feel our country to be much bigger than it looks on the map, and regional variety comes out as clearly in artistic expression as it does in language.

It is perfectly natural that, looked at as a whole, German-speaking Switzerland should belong culturally to Upper Germany, French-speaking Switzerland to French Burgundy and Savoy, and Italian-speaking Ticino to Lombardy. It was not until the age of national states set in, i.e., no much more than a hundred years ago, that differences began to make themselves felt, for our conntry took no part in the extreme nationalism of its neighbours. This play of attraction and repulsion between the parts of our country among themselves, and between those parts and countries which are actually related, but felt to be alien, does much to stimulate intellectual and artistic life.

ALBERT FERBER (SWISS)



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