

Letter from Switzerland

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settlements that are its prefiguration, seems to satisfy those that have opted for this life. One American girl told me that she had never found the true life anywhere else. A bearded American said: "This is all I've got".

This appears to be the case of Gerard Cruz, who has never looked back on his choice. The tranquillity of Auroville has however been troubled lately by

visiting pressmen and television teams from the West. The most imbecile report to have ever been published on Auroville apparently appeared in *Paris Match*. The mass-circulation weekly portrayed the denizens of Auroville as feeble-minded dreamers and mystified escapists. But a completely truthful report could hardly be expected of a publication like *Paris Match*, which certainly doesn't cater for the readers of Sri Aurobindo.

LETTER FROM SWITZERLAND

Hectic start to the year

The Arabian Oil Sheiks have become very unpopular in Switzerland. Quite naturally the scarcity of oil and petrol prevailing throughout the western world is having its effect in Switzerland as everywhere else.

Stocks of these commodities are, according to Federal Councillor Brugger (Public Economy) high and should last for six months. But wisely enough the Federal Government looks on these as a kind of strategic reserve and has, consequently, been compelled to introduce a number of economy measures. As far as oil — for factories as well as for heating purposes — is concerned, the big companies have been asked to introduce an allocating system to their customers. Oil tanks for domestic heating which are still one third full should not be refilled at all at present. People all over the country have been asked to help economising fuel oil by turning down their domestic heating from anything above to not more than 20 degrees centigrade. And in many cases only those rooms in large houses and flats are being heated at present which are constantly in use. More could, however, be done on those lines — and may, possibly, have to be done soon — in public offices, in banks and in a good many shops which, on entering them from outside, still seem overheated.

As regards petrol for motoring a number of restrictive measures have had to be imposed as well. At first it was thought that appeals from the authorities would be sufficient, but this proved to be an illusion. Thus it has been thought necessary to impose a speed limit of 100 kilometers per hour on the motorways, since it is a well-known fact that the faster one drives, the more thirsty one's engine becomes. Moreover it is now strictly prohibited to hoard petrol by having jerry-cans filled and this, frankly, is a good thing, because many people have, apparently, started hoarding petrol on a large scale. At one stage, when neighbouring Austria had an acute petrol shortage (which is no longer the case) the Austrians came over to Switzerland in large masses, not only to fill the tanks of their vehicles, but also to fill up their jerry-cans. On top of all this a total ban

on private cars has been imposed on three consecutive Sundays. This ban, will, however, be lifted for the Christmas season because its continued imposition could — and probably would — hit the winter sports hotels and the catering trade altogether too hard. On the Sundays with a ban on pleasure motoring certain exceptions have, of course, been granted: for doctors and nurses, the fire fighting services, people with a doctor's certificate, also representatives of the mass media, and some more categories.

How did the population react to this ban on pleasure motoring on a Sunday? On the whole the discipline was excellent. The threatened penalties of up to 40,000 Francs (approx. £5,000) or imprisonment from 3 months to 3 years had their effect. Most people looked on a day without cars as great fun and many got out their old, long forgotten bicycles. Others went about in horse-drawn coaches and yet others crowded the railways, trams and buses. In Lucerne a man went for a drive through town in his Volkswagen — and when the police stopped and checked him, he laughingly pointed to the electric batteries and engine which propelled his vehicle.

Unfortunately there was a negative side to the whole exercise too. Because neighbouring France had, as yet, no ban on pleasure driving on a Sunday, apparently several hundred Swiss citizens, who were not ready to do without their motorcars for a day, drove across the border into the Alsace just before the Swiss ban came into force and came back just after it ended. And worse still: in and around Geneva a number of motorists who had permission to use their cars, had their vehicles stoned and were shouted at and molested by gangs of young hooligans. Moreover some 30 cars of diplomats — accredited to the United Nations Geneva branch — cars incidentally, which were not used but parked, had their tyres slashed. Fortunately the police caught these idiots. These are but some of the occurrences during the first car-free Sunday. The ban on pleasure-motoring on 3 Sundays has, without doubt, been imposed for psychological reasons, because Germany, Holland, Austria,

Liechtenstein, Italy, Denmark and some other European countries have done it. Whether it will be re-imposed in the New Year nobody knows yet. But still on the psychological level it is feared that a re-imposition of the ban could stimulate further aggressiveness: either on the part of some who absolutely want to use their cars, or against those who have permissions and have to go about in cars. But this remains to be seen.

The Oil Sheiks have, as I said, become very unpopular. So unpopular that many voices have been raised which demand that their deposits in Swiss banks should at once be blocked and frozen. But, of course, this is not practical politics and would, presumably, have anyway no effect whatever.

The beginning of 1974 was marked in Switzerland by a television and radio talk given by the new President of the Confederation, Federal Councillor Brugger. It was a talk which was worthy not only of the highest Magistrate in the land, but also of his official function as Chief of the Department of Public Economy. It contained a lot of food for thought concerning the economic situation of the country, which is overshadowed today by a price inflation running at more than 10% per annum. Up to October it was, according to official figures, running at just over 7%, but the sudden and steep increase in oil prices pushed the average annual rate up to between 10 and 11 per cent.

The outlook for 1974 is undoubtedly not too bright. The share market is heavily depressed, and as I write this letter the radio has just announced that all tariffs of public transport — railways, postal coaches, steamers — will be raised from February 1st by an average of 12.9 per cent. This is, obviously, going to hit regular commuters hard. There is the uncertainty about the oil and petrol situation and there is also a definite increase in criminality. Some two days ago two Swiss Customs Officers at the Austrian-Swiss frontier were machine-gunned to death by two gangsters who had previously robbed a bank in Buchs of some 200,000 Swiss francs and some foreign currency.

National Councillor James Schwarzenbach — who is sometimes referred to as Switzerland's Enoch Powell — plans to launch, yet again, an initiative, asking the authorities to reduce the number of foreign workers in the country to a maximum of 500,000. Last time a similar proposal was defeated in a nationwide plebiscite, but not very heavily. Whether next time it will be defeated again is, at least, questionable.

Federal Councillor Chevallaz, the new Finance Minister, has taken over at a critical juncture, since it is an open secret that the federal finances have recently deteriorated rapidly. The budget for 1973 foresaw a deficit of around 200 million francs, but now it is estimated that when final figures are available, the deficit will amount to about 500 million francs.

Gottfried Keller