

Letter from Switzerland

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LETTER FROM SWITZERLAND

by Gottfried Keller

A new Canton in the making

To refresh the memories of *Swiss Observer* readers, it may be useful to recall that, after decades of agitation by two powerful groups of separatists, a plebiscite was held in the seven official districts of the Jura Bernois on 23rd June 1974, in which a majority decided in favour of the formation of a *new Canton Jura*, or secession from the Canton of Berne.

But as three out of seven districts, namely La Neuveville, Courtelary and Moutier had, in that plebiscite, obtained majorities in favour of remaining parts of Berne, they were given a new opportunity to determine their fate. A new plebiscite was held on 16th March 1975, in these three districts only. As expected, they have, with decisive majorities, but nevertheless with the exception of nine boroughs in the district of Moutier, clearly determined their continued allegiance to the Canton of Berne.

Nevertheless the frontiers of the new Canton Jura – (to be) are still not settled. First of all there is yet to be another plebiscite in the district of Lauffon (Laufen), provided that the necessary signatures are obtained.

This, it is thought, can take place by September, at the earliest. On top of this the nine boroughs in the district of Moutier, which on 16th March did not vote in favour of Berne, will most probably also have a new – the third and

final – plebiscite, possibly by early autumn.

All this is carrying democratic procedure very far. And once all these plebiscites are over and done with, the frontiers of the new Canton Jura begin to show. But now it can be stated – roughly, of necessity – the north will go its own way and the south will remain with Berne. The south being predominantly Protestant, and the north mainly Catholic, the picture of a new *pre-eminently catholic* Canton Jura is thus emerging.

Once all the voting is done, the cantonal parliament of Berne will have to declare all the obtained results as valid. Thereafter a constitutional council of 50 members will have to be elected and on the fourth Monday after this election the new Council can meet for the first time.

If everything goes according to the wishes of the separatist Jurassiens, this Council could start its work on the new Constitution by April or May, 1976. These deliberations could, according to some rather optimistic estimates in the Jura, be terminated by the end of 1976, so that the population of the provisional Canton Jura could vote on its constitution early in 1977.

The next step would be that the new constitution, after due acceptance by a majority of Jurassiens, would be submitted to the two chambers of the Federal Parliament in Berne.

Once this hurdle is passed, a Federal Plebiscite will have to be held in which not only a majority of the whole Swiss population, but also a majority of the existing Cantons will have to approve the appropriate changes in the Federal Constitution. Experts in constitutional procedure think that the new Canton Jura could actually come into being during 1978.

Its birth, however, is bound to raise the problem of viability. Like all the other existing cantons the new creation will have the right to impose taxation. But this will only bring in cash after some delay. It is, therefore, thought possible that the Canton of Berne, or the Confederation, or both, may provide some starting capital.

Alternatively, Canton Jura may issue a public loan. But one day the Jura's part of the Bernese cantonal assets will have to be sorted out and separated, which may yet become a lengthy and controversial process after birth. In other words: even when the new semi-sovereign state exists, the conflict is likely to continue.

It goes without saying that the secessionists are now deeply disappointed about the outcome of the latest plebiscite. Three districts out of seven have refused to join them, which means that the Jura is now irrevocably split into two parts.



ST. MORITZ

View from the Hahnensee over the Alpine Ski World Championships village of St. Moritz in the Upper Engadine.

(SNT0)