Thoughts on Switzerland revisited

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THOUGHTS ON SWITZERLAND REVISITED

DO YOU MEASURE LIFE BY QUANTITY ALONE?

Man does not live by bread Alone!

SWITZERLAND and Britain are almost two different worlds. This is the predominant impression which the resident in Britain is likely to get from a short trip to the most prosperous and smooth-running country in the world. For the first time in four years, I had the opportunity to go back there for a fortnight's holiday. Availing myself of the cheap flights regularly advertised in the *Swiss Observer,* I took a plane at Gatwick at the end of October. The weather in England was beautiful and the green countryside of Sussex glowed in all its refreshing beauty as the Dan-Air BAC 111 made for the sea, flying over Bournemouth.

The Continent was covered by a still sea of clouds and within an hour and ten minutes, I could see some of the higher summits of the alps emerge from this glistening white expanse. We were approaching Switzerland. The plane descended smoothly through the cloud base and, all of a sudden, there appeared the rolling wooded hills of Canton Schaffhausen.

We flew over the Rhine at Newhausen and I could distinctly see the Rhine Fall. The countryside was sprinkled with neat little white, box-like houses. Switzerland's spick and span trimness could already be appreciated from 6,000 feet! Within minutes of entry into Swiss air space, we were asked to fasten our seat belts.

At two in the afternoon, there were far fewer planes parked on Kloten's tarmac than at Gatwick. One or two Swissair DC9s and a Lufthansa Boeing 727. In the distance, a huge Swissair 747 stood alone in the afternoon drizzle. The weather that day was definitely nicer in Britain.

After having gone through rapid formalities and having hardly waited more than five minutes for my luggage, I boarded the silent bus, brilliant with its glass and aluminium that was to transport me to the Air Terminal at Zürich's main Railway Station for the cost of five francs.

The first hint of Switzerland's high standard of living could be had by admiring the huge new arrival and departure buildings at the Airport. The drive through the short Motorway to Oerlikon and the descent to the Lake through Schaffhauserplatz was over in about fifteen minutes.

From the Station, I walked along the Limmat to the Hotel that had been recommended by Chancery Travel. This was the Schaefli Hotel, an establishment on the Niederdorfstrasse standing above a "Kneipe" with music.

At 22 francs a night for a dingy single room, it is probably the cheapest in Zürich. I put up there for two nights before staying with friends.

That first evening, I went on a "pilgrimmage" in those areas where I had spent five years up to 1966 as a student at the "Eidgenossische Technische Hochschule". I walked to the end of the Niederdorf and the Oberdorfstrasse and took a first drink at the Odeon, the café where Lenin used to drink.

It had been preserved more or less the way it had been in those pre-revolutionary days until my time in Zürich. Now it has been modernised and trimmed in line with the spirit of prosperity. It used to be a Beerhall, now it is more of a coffee bar.

I then walked up the Ramistrasse, past Pfauen, where work is in full swing on the new Schauspielhaus which has temporarily been installed at Bellevueplatz. Continuing my walk up the Gloriastrasse, which winds up the Zürichberg, I found that the "Physicgebaude" where I had spent all these frustrating years was about to be demolished.

The ETH had moved to its new luxurious premises on the Hönggerberg. New large buildings had sprouted up in the area and the Cantonal Hospital had been considerably extended.

The old Student Restaurant had been closed down. In its place, absolutely superb installations have been built in front of the central domed building of the ETH. The dining hall seats at least a thousand people. Adjoining is a vast and comfortable lobby. There is an area for permanent art and cultural exhibitions. There are shops for newspapers and stationery.

Everything is brand new. Students from all over the world walk across those luxury premises built with Swiss taxpayer's money. At the entrance of the "mensa", the three menus and the "Kale Teller" were displayed physically in a glass cage. For each menu, there was an electronic till. With this system, there were no queues and the hundreds of students that come in the Mensa at every meal-time file by with their trays without any delay.

For three francs, students – who have to show their cards – can have an excellent meal. The same costs about four francs for ETH personnel and five francs fifty for "Gäste". This was what I naturally had to be. Although this meant £1.50 translated into Sterling, it was about the cheapest meal I had in those two weeks in Switzerland. A meal of similar content at a Migros restaurant cost me nearly seven francs.

The next day was also rife in impressions which really made me feel as though I was coming from a poor country. I took the Forchbahn at Stadelhofen Station to visit friends living in the Hinteregg area north-east of Zürich. The narrow-gauge train climbs up the residential areas spreading to the north of the lake. After passing through the cosy suburbs of Zollikon, it enters into another rich commune – Zumikon. At this point, the railway goes underground.

This extravagant two-mile tunnel built on the top of a hill was one of the many changes that Zürich has seen during these past four years. One has the impression of being in an underground. There are two stations inside the tunnel which was built, I was told, with funds from the Commune of Zumikon. As I didn't have the time to investigate the reasons why such vast investments had been committed on hiding a private railway winding on the brow of a hill, I can only report what I was told – and this was that the railway was put underground for the safety of the children of Zumikon. I admit that this explanation is not entirely satisfactory. I was also told that Zumikon had 135 swimming pools – 134 private and one public.

Another way to appreciate the standard of living in Switzerland is to go in people's houses. You will see that they are far larger and better built than houses belonging to people from similar walks of life in Britain. All the kitchens that I have been in had large refrigerators with a freezer, and washing machines. Bathrooms gleam with pink tiles and often have two wash basins. Swiss people have virtually new cars and think of putting them in the junk yard when they are three years old.

Supermarkets, too, have infinitely more to choose from than the average Sainsbury and Tesco equivalents in Britain. An easy way to "measure" this would be to count the different kinds of cheese sold in supermarkets in both countries.

Another innovation that I was to see a few days later, when I left for Berne, was the new coaches introduced by the Federal Railways. They are painted in a lively orange colour. Like the new coaches used on intercity lines in Britain, their windows cannot be opened and they are air conditioned. But in addition, they have piped music and doors between coaches open automatically.

It is obvious that one cannot just convert francs into Sterling to compare Swiss and British standards of living. A qualified lathe operator in a factory earns about 3,400 francs a month and a secondary school teacher earns 4,500 francs. Translated into Sterling, this is approximately £800 and £1,100 a month, or the salaries of very high executives in Britain. One has to remember that every thing is two to three times more expensive in Switzerland. So if the take-home pay of a machine-tool operator is nominally three to four times

higher than that of his British counterpart, his standard of living will not be that much higher. In my view, it will be about twice as high in real terms and will show in the way he dresses his children, in the class of his car, in his ability to go on skiing weekends whenever he wishes and in his purchasing power abroad.

For the British tourist, life is hard in Switzerland. A ham roll on the train will cost him 5 francs 20 (£1.30, assuming the rate is 4 francs to the pound) and beer is roughly three times more expensive than in Britain. When I took the Forchbahn to return to Zürich, the ticket dispensing machine jammed – the first and only time that I saw a machine that didn't work properly in Switzerland! The fare was three francs. I had put in a five-franc piece and was expecting the device to give me my change. I tried to push the five-franc piece with aid of a 20 Rappen coin – which also jammed! It occurred to me that I had just lost £1.35. If such a thing had happened to me in Britain it would certainly have upset me because £1.35 appears to have more "weight" than a puny five franc coin. In other words, one's understanding of the value of money is modified when one goes to Switzerland, which, as I said at the beginning, has become a different world from Britain.

In the course of my stay, I saw only one car with a GB plate, and this was in Geneva. A Swiss in Britain who returns for a visit to the homeland will invariably be asked all sorts of questions about the "dreadful" conditions in Britain. He will be given a great deal of compassion from his compatriots who say that they just cannot "understand" what is happening to Britain. There is no doubt about it, Britain has an incredibly low economic reputation abroad. There is certainly a lot of goodwill, but many educated Swiss wonder whether the British have lost all sense of reality and responsibility. I told those that I spoke to that life in Britain is not that bad. I feel that it is only be experiencing the difference in standards of living that one can share the astonishment of the Swiss.

In Britain, it is only the executives that travel that can have an idea of the economic and technological gulf with a country like Switzerland. For the British masses, and particularly for working people who will never get a chance to visit Switzerland (and neither want to, probably) the insular instinct can keep its hold.

Being involved with a small factory specialising in power hydraulics, I could see for myself how an engineer saw Britain's performance in his particular field. The record was appalling. I was told of deliveries made 20 months behind schedule, of machined pieces that were faulty, that didn't match and were badly dimensioned. I was told about a delivery of a hundred machined pistons of which eighty had to be sent back. That these engineer friends of mine still deal with British companies is solely due to the fact that Britain is the only country in Europe that produces the items they require.

It has also the advantage of being cheap and a company accountant has a great time watching the pound decline and waiting for as long as he can to pay the bills sent out in Sterling!

Methods of conducting business also appear to differ greatly in the two countries. My friends recall a business trip to Newcastle (which one can reach by air from Zürich via Amsterdam). Most of the discussion with the managing director they met over there centred on what he would do on his retirement. Enough to make any Swiss man of business wonder whether he is dreaming.

In the same context, one sees few British manufactured goods in Switzerland. Cars, for example, are nearly all German, French and Japanese. Only occasionally does one see the odd Rover and Jaguar, or an old Mini driven by a youth. British cars have become a curiosity. But one is astonished to find that "Mars" and "Bounty" and "Malteesers" are prominently displayed in the newspaper stalls of the country of good chocolate!

Obviously, with the present rate of exchange, it is advantageous for Swiss people to fly to London to buy various items of clothing at ridiculously low prices. Quite a few do, but most are content to enjoy the charms of London while spending probably less than during a ski-ing weekend. For example, London Air Tours are advertising a four-day package holiday in London for 200 francs.

Everything is relative, and a person living in Switzerland would certainly not sound as enthusiastic about his country's prosperity. The fact is, Switzerland has



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been hard hit by the recession which spread across the western world after the 1973 oil embargo.

But, as far as I can judge, there are few points of comparison between a recession in Switzerland and a recession in Britain. In Switzerland, unemployment has never even reached one per cent during the past three years whereas it now stands at 5.8 per cent in Britain. This, of course, is partially due to the fact that Switzerland was able to send back a great many unwanted foreign workers when the order books were low.

Money is not everything, and I would not consider using it as the only yardstick to evaluate the quality of life. A short stay is quite insufficient to form an opinion on the quality of human relations in any country. But among the relatively young people that I have met, I found a sort of envy towards the British.

This was particularly apparent in Zürich, where I met people who not only have great memories of Britain, but who also believe that the British know better how to enjoy themselves together. An English girl married to a Swiss, and living in the Zürich suburb of Schlieren, found life definitely trying. She told me that it was very difficult to meet people and make friends in Zürich.

It was virtually impossible to establish the kind of relationship which allow a couple to just "pop-in" for coffee and a friendly "chit-chat" after dinner. Everything was terribly formal. There was also a great deal of distance and shyness between people of her particular social sphere.

One should not draw conclusions from this particular example – and there is no doubt that a Swiss girl married to an Englishman, and living in some distant suburb, is likely to find life just as hard – but there are many Swiss who apparently look at the British way of life, its casualness, humour and lack of formality with some envy.

LUCERNE "LANDSKNECHT" (PIKEMAN'S) DINNER

This is the title of a new winter attraction at the Château-Gütsch Hotel overlooking Lucerne. A meeting for aperitifs is held there in the armoury every Thursday evening at 7.30 p.m., which is followed by a six-course banquet in the castle cellar in traditional, medieval central Switzerland style. The stars at this gathering are the well-known Lucerne folk-singer and guitarist, Adrian Klapproth, and the chef, Josef Häfliger, who is no less proficient in the culinary arts.

WINTER TENNIS IN THE SWISS MOUNTAINS

Tennis in winter is becoming increasingly popular and several winter resorts in the Swiss mountains cater for tennis enthusiasts. Lenk, Bad Ragaz, and Zweisimmen have indoor tennis courts. Zweisimmen also offers special "Combined ski-ing and tennis" weeks.

SULZER HAS A LOT OF CONFIDENCE IN UK

In 1974 Sulzer U.K. turnover exceeded £31 million which compared with £13 million in 1966. Ten years ago the company was already out-growing its London premises and had to use extra office accommodation in other buildings. Because of this and the rising scale of London office rents, a search commenced in 1970 for new offices outside central London which could provide a permanent U.K. Headquarters.

For operational efficiency the offices had to be within easy reach by road and rail of Central London and of London Airport. The location had to provide attractive housing for our existing staff, educational facilities for their children and company trainees, and a good catchment area from which to recruit new staff. The scarcity of land in south-east England meant that these requirements were not all satisfied until the Farnborough site was found in early 1974.

Farnborough is 33 miles south-west of London, reached by the M3 motorway and frequent fast trains. It is about 35 minutes by car from London airport. Here Sulzer is now located in a commanding position in the new town centre adjacent to shops, central library, sports centre, swimming pool and community centre with pleasant landscaped areas immediately beside.

Not far away is the Royal Aircraft Establishment for which Farnborough is best known; it was here that Sulzer's successful contract for the Concorde test facility was executed. Historically Farnborough also has interesting links with Napoleon III and the Empress Eugenie of France who took refuge there after the debacle of 1870.

In May 1974 the foundations of the company's six-storey office block were laid and it was completed in September 1975 ready for fitting-out. The first staff moved in from London at the beginning of December 1975 and the total move was completed in stages by the end of February 1976.

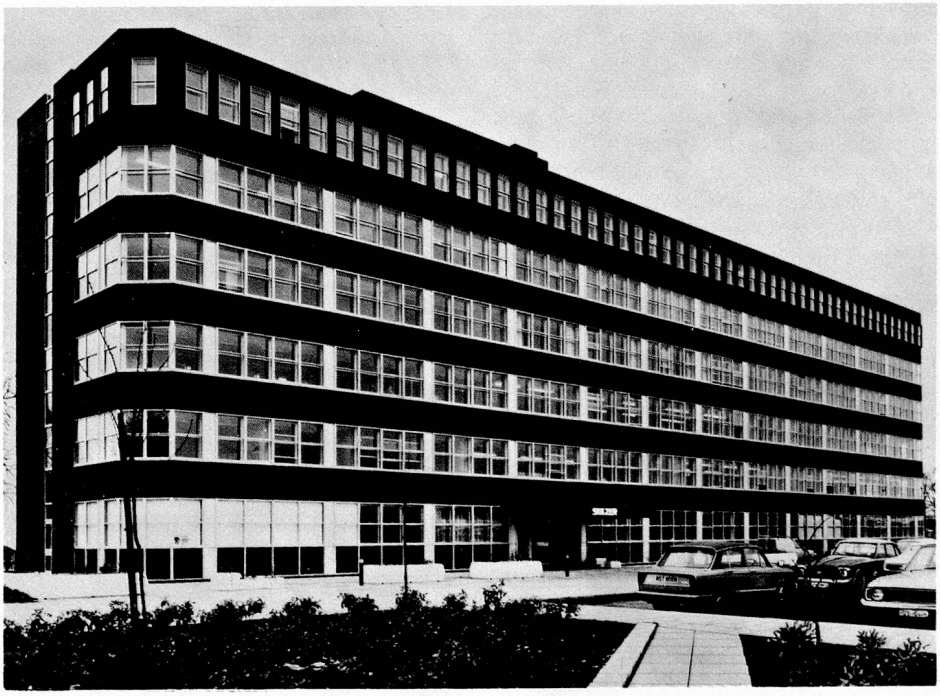
Nearly 100 of Sulzer's key staff moved their homes to the Farnborough area in order to continue working for Sulzer and 177 new staff were recruited.

The company has received a warm welcome from the local council and community and is regarded as a leading employer in the area.

The offices are a great improvement on the London premises with good natural light, double windows, modern partitioning and express lifts etc. Needless to say, the heating, ventilating, electrical and plumbing services were the responsibility of the company's own Heating and Ventilating Division.

A very important reason for the site selection was that a ten-year option was included to build on adjoining land if the growth of business demands it.

The move will be economical for the Company because, with a 125 year lease, it is protected against future rent increases; for the staff the new location offers a much better quality of life, since they are freed from lengthy, tiring and expensive commuting to central London.



Sulzer UK's new headquarters building at Farnborough represents a high degree of confidence by the company in its future in this country.