

# An Englishman's observations on Swiss business life [to be continued]

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## AN ENGLISHMAN'S OBSERVATIONS ON SWISS BUSINESS LIFE.

By R. A. LANGFORD, Zurich.

(Member of the Efficiency Club Zurich)

We are all of us different characters. Each of us brings something different into his work, whatever it may be. And just as each individual differs, so does each business house differ. Some are old, respected, rich, have been built up by the personality of one man or the united personalities of a group of men. Others are just "carrying on," without any claim to distinction, perhaps even having a hard time owing to outside circumstances, over which they have no control.

Every criticism depends mainly on the critic's personal attitude and his personal experiences. If one generalises, it is easy to praise — and just as easy to find fault. And every one of us possesses a certain amount of personal vanity. When we have done something which we know is good, we expect praise. We would like just the good things to be acknowledged and the failings to be overlooked. It is not, however, of much interest to discuss the obvious things, the things we already know. Everybody needs encouragement as a stimulus to success, but criticism is even more necessary, for it is our failings that we must eliminate, since these are the things which are holding us back. Any Swiss business man would be in a far better position to comment on Swiss business life than the writer, whose only qualification is that he is a foreigner who has come into contact with many branches and many firms in the course of his work in Switzerland — with individual concerns and organised groups having a common purpose. And such a foreigner can look at things from outside the frontier, so to speak, uninfluenced by the traditional and national way of thinking and feeling which, however, much one avoids generalisation, must be acknowledged as a characteristic of every nation.

It is, for instance, characteristic of the Englishman that he is no good at paying compliments. In fact, it seems typical that the English expression is not "to make" a compliment, as in all other languages, but "to pay" a compliment, just as if it were a duty or obligation that has to be fulfilled, like paying a bill. An Englishman who is an adept at paying compliments is hardly ever trustworthy — he only wants something from his "victim." And to avoid giving this impression in my own case, I shall just pass over the many complimentary things that could be said about Swiss business life by reviewing them briefly.

First there is the *honesty* of the Swiss nation as a whole. Here it would be wrong to generalise, for there are exceptions everywhere, just as there are extravagant Scotsmen, but the fact remains. Another admirable factor: Swiss business men, and the Swiss buying public as well, have no use for rubbish. If we compare this country with England, we get surprising results. Like Switzerland, England is known for the high quality of her products. She prides herself on it. But on the British market there is also an astonishing amount of rubbish: England is one of the best markets for the contents of the world's dustbins. This could never be said of Switzerland. True, Switzerland is more expensive to live in than England. Why is that? — Because the Swiss demands *quality* in what he buys; he appreciates the *value* of money. The other obvious reason is, of course, that Switzerland has to import her raw materials. This comparative dearness is to be found in almost every department of life. Rents of apartments are higher in Switzerland, because the apartments are better. The Swiss is an individualist. He does not like mass production, as applied to himself. It goes against his nature, keen business man though he is. Most Swiss who have been to England will have complained about the quality of the food there. It is always a surprise to an Englishman to hear the important conversations held in this country on the topic of food — whether a certain restaurant cooks with pure butter or not, etc. The price does not matter, everything depends on the quality. Hard-working business men will go miles out of their way when motoring across country "for the firm," to dine at a "Beiz" of favour and repute.

That is just an example by the way — it is the same in every sphere of business. The typical Swiss husband hates his wife to go shopping to a "Warenhaus" or department store, because he has an instinctive distrust of anything that is turned over in large quantities. It does not matter if, in certain cases, the article one buys in a "Spezialgeschäft" is just the same as in the store, except that in the latter the price is lower — a cheaper *price* makes the Swiss suspicious: what is cheaper must be inferior. Whereas the Englishman, when he buys in a "Spezialgeschäft," only does so because it is more fashionable: it is not the quality, but the name of the business, that he looks at first. In my collaboration with numerous Swiss firms, particularly with importers, I have been struck again and

again by the remark, when it was a question of fixing the sales price of a foreign article in Switzerland: "The price you suggest would be too low for the Swiss public." It was not that the importer wanted to make more profit on the article, but that the public would be suspicious, would not appreciate the product, if they found it cost less than they thought it was worth, or than they were accustomed to paying for something similar.

Many examples of this attitude of the buying public might be cited in this connection, and it is obvious that it is an extremely important factor in all business life. After all, the chief aim of every business man is not to buy, but to sell, and in Switzerland the price is only the deciding factor when the article in question is a staple commodity.

The *technical organisation* of the average Swiss business is excellent. But *co-operation* is the *weak spot*. In spite of all the associations, federations, unions, the "Verbände" and "Vereine" for this and that, it is hard to find an industry or branch of business in Switzerland that really does work together as a whole. The reason for this deficiency is a national, a racial one — and this is the only case in which I feel justified in generalising. The Swiss is an individual first and foremost. In private life he gets on well with his neighbours, is friendly and sociable; but when it comes to business he is a different man. Admittedly, business is a continuous battle. If you do not help yourself, nobody will help you. In this country we have the unique phenomenon of three races living voluntarily side by side, forming one nation and sharing each other's difficulties and troubles, while all round in Europe the racial and national questions become more and more acute. The paradoxical part of it is that, although these three races work and live together in peace and unity, in perfect co-operation, there is but little unity among each of the three separate elements. The political aspect is most complicated: if one party suggests a definite policy or action, the other parties immediately combat it. Not because it is not good — perhaps it is extremely good — but just because it is not their own idea, it comes from the other party. It would be superfluous to give concrete examples, every Swiss could quote a dozen. But this does not only apply to political parties — it is also to be observed in the individual industries and trades, and even among individual business men. Mention might, however, be made of the famous Milk and Cheese Unions, of Duttweiler, of a hundred other instances.

Take your own person as an example. You are a business man. You spend your day in the office, shop or factory. You grumble because you cannot get the prices for your goods that you used to get. Prices are going down, profits are diminishing. — Then, you come home in the evening. Your wife has bought a new hat, or a carpet, or perhaps some special delicacy for your supper. You ask the price and immediately begin to grumble at the *high* cost of living. Unnecessary to elaborate on this theme — the same scene takes place in thousands of Swiss homes every evening. And it all comes to this: you, and the whole population of the country, do not know whether you want prices to rise or to fall. When you sell, you want them to rise; when you buy, you want them to fall. This does not only apply to the man in the street — it is also the great problem that is worrying the Government and the authorities who are responsible for the organising and promoting of the nation's trade. And it is the writer's belief that until Switzerland knows what she wants in this connection, she will not entirely overcome the so-called crisis.

The great difficulty is that the people themselves have too much to say in official quarters. The writer, like every Englishman, is a great believer in *democracy*. But democracy is based on the principle of every citizen doing his duty: first and foremost to the country, and only afterwards to his political party. In Switzerland there are conflicting interests, as everywhere else when it is a question of competition. But can it honestly be said, when it comes to business, that the Swiss puts his country first? Or even the interest of the community? I was in England when Great Britain left the gold standard; I was in this country when the Swiss Franc was depreciated. And the contrast disappointed me, for I had expected great things of Swiss patriotism, of which I had heard so much. The scenes which took place in all the towns in the country directly after the news of the depreciation confirmed still more my opinion that the great factor which is missing in Swiss business life is that of co-operation in a common, a national cause. There is no team spirit.

The Swiss business man is efficient enough in his methods and progressiveness, but where he fails is in co-operation. And in this connection the *Efficiency Club* could do a great deal of work to foster a better feeling of comradeship and mutual assistance among Swiss business men. If this Club corresponds to the first im-

pression it made on me, then I feel that it will fulfil a long-felt want: a sort of junior and less exclusive Rotary Club, I might call it — a Rotary Club not only for those who have already achieved something, but also for those who are seeking the way to achieve something.

During recent years I have been in close touch with Switzerland's tourist traffic. Here we have the various resorts banded together into districts, and the districts combined in a national organisation. Let us see how this organisation works in practice. — The hotel proprietors in the various resorts are generally in conflict with one another. These proprietors are members of the local "Verkehrsverein," and at the meetings of the latter each hotelier looks only to his own advantage, is jealous of his competitors, insists on claiming his every right. And the result is that the publicity work done by the Verkehrsverein must take into consideration the personal wishes of every single one of its members. This in turn absolutely prevents those responsible for the Verkehrsverein's publicity work to follow their own ideas and make the best and most effective form of propaganda for the whole district.

(To be continued.)

## SWISS BROADCASTING.

Monday, April 25th at 9.15 p.m. (Swiss time).

*Studio Geneva*: "Les Châteaux du Léman;" "Le Château de Chillon" évocation radiophonique de M. G. Hoffmann.

Monday, May 2nd at 9.15 p.m. (Swiss time).

*Studio Zurich*: "Heimat in den engen Grenzen," Musik Lied und Wort aus der deutschen Schweiz.

Monday, May 9th at 9.15 p.m. (Swiss time).

*Studio Lugano*: "Svizzeri armatissimi e liberissimi," Motivi guerreschi dell'epoca di Marignano.

Monday, May 16th at 9.15 p.m. (Swiss time).

*Studio Basel*: "Vo Land und Lüt deheim."

Monday, May 23rd at 9.15 p.m. (Swiss time).

*Studio Lausanne*: "Elle et Lui," scènes de la vie conjugale, de Jacques-Dalcroze, avec la collaboration de l'Orchestre Radio Suisse Romande, de Mlle. Madeleine Dubuis et de M. Paul Sandoz.

Les émissions commencent avec un *exposé* de 15 minutes des principaux événements suisses: en français sur Sottens, en italien sur le Monte Ceneri et en allemand sur Beromünster. — A 21.30h, programme commun pour les trois émetteurs.

## COFFEE PREPARATION

Ah, there's the rub! How many expensive machines are supposed to capture that magic coffee aroma! Some are quite good — but they are unnecessary. We suggest the Steeping method of preparation — as used by the best coffee testing experts: — the warmed earthenware jug, which avoids contact with metals; the stirring of the coffee in freshly boiling water, and allowing the time needed for the grounds to settle. Then, of course, we think TENOR PURE COFFEE should be used. Sample packet of 1 lb. sent post free for 2/3.

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