Letter box

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SWITZERLAND DURING THE LAST WAR.

The following article appeared in the "Irish Press" (14.10.39) and is a translation of the Memoirs of M. Georges Wagnière who was for a long time our Minister in Rome. He deals with our economic difficulties during the last war and as history seems to repeat itself the exposé offers interesting and instructive reading at the present time.

The Swiss people rose with a single impulse to defend their frontiers. But the war went on and during those four years the people had to live — and they were accustomed to living well. They submitted with an ill grace to the rationing of every kind that was imposed on them. Never before had they suffered so many privations. The Franco-Prussian War of 1870 involved only two of our neighbours and lasted only a few months, now the conflagration reddened the whole horizon and seemed as if it would never end.

To obtain food and fuel, to keep her trains and factories going, Switzerland was obliged to apply in turn to all the belligerents, negotiate with them, withstand their pressure, and endure their snubs. But, on the other hand, the sufferings made one loth to talk of our need of food in days of so much sorrow and distress.

Switzerland, which exports throughout the world the produce of her rich industries is, at the same time, a country with meagre resources and is obliged to buy her food abroad. She lacks two essential products, indispensable to her life and work: wheat and coal.

Take wheat first of all. Her soil gives her only enough for three months. It was Russia and Roumania who had supplied her with most of it, but, day by day, the war began to stop not only the transport of corn but of other produce — sugar, rice, cattle, coal — which was supplied by our neighbours. In the case of wheat it was necessary to go to overseas States, and Switzerland, having no access to the sea, was forced again to rely on the goodwill of the belligerents who had enough worries of their own apart from supplying the Swiss people with food and fuel. Luckily, France had agreed shortly before the conflict to allow us the transport of cereals in time of war across her territory and the French authorities did their best to facilitate the landing in the Port of Cette and the transport to Geneva of American wheat. This amounted to a trifle of about 200 wagons a day. The first delivery arrived on the 21st August, the others followed irregularly with sudden stoppages and inevitable delays. The spectre of famine was, then, not far from our frontiers. The Government took all sorts of measures to deal with the menace. The famous bread cards were introduced, limiting the consumption of each inhabitant. These were the subject of innumerable discussions. Scrupulous people when they were asked out to dinner took their bread with them. For this purpose little sacks bearing the word "Bread" embroidered in red were put on the market. A Federal decree threatened with imprisonment and a fine of ten thousand francs all attempts at hoarding or increasing the prices of certain provisions — bread, sugar, alcohol, coal. The urban unemployed were sent to do agricultural work instead of the labourers who had been mobilised. Our soldiers helped to bring in the harvest.

Our wheat suppliers would only consent to sell it to the State. The Government was the only purchaser, but this did not suffice to allay the suspicions of the Allies. There were times when the situation became very dangerous. The State by distributing more corn than it imported exhausted its reserves. Ships were chartered for transport and, thereupon, Germany torpedoed the "Sardinero" which was bringing us two thousand nine hundred tons of grain. Germany had, in fact, notified us that from the 1st February, 1917, she would oppose "without further warning and by every possible means all navigation within a specified zone." Our Government replied to this measure with an energetic protest, saying that it infringed the rights accorded to neutrals under the principles of international law. It was soon to be seen what these precious principles were worth!

After wheat, coal is the next indispensable product. The whole life of the country, the railways, the work of the factories, the movement of our troops could be stopped any day if coal were lacking. Our principal supplier was Germany with whom we had a series of agreements. She observed them strictly but on condition that we gave her in exchange not only money but other produce which we bought abroad. The controversies which this crux aroused and the suspicions it created were amongst the most serious pre-occupations of our Government. Germany alone could supply us — she had sent us ten thousand tons a day regularly — and our need for this commodity threatened to embroil us with the whole world. Vain attempts were made to replace coal by wood and turf. Experiments were made with the object of exploiting the coal deposits of the Valais and the Jura. But this work began too late. The Swiss coal was found to be mixed with stones and did nothing to free us from our dangerous dependence on Germany. Germany then began to insist that war material — arms, munitions, explosives — made in Switzerland with however small a proportion of German iron and coal should not be exported to other States, even neutrals, without the sanction of a special commission.

(To be continued.)

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