Primitive democracy in Switzerland

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ANOTHER PLEASANT SURPRISE FOR OUR COMPATRIOTS.

We hear from Mr. Bingguely, Secretary of the City Swiss Club, that the Institut Français du Royaume-Uni are organising a Franco-Swiss evening on Tuesday, 31st January, at 9 p.m. at the Hyde Park Hotel, Knightsbridge, S.W.1.

Monsieur C. R. Paravicini will take the chair, and our well-known compatriot, Monsieur Robert de Traz, Homme de Lettres, will speak on "Les Ecrivains Etrangers de Langue Française."

The City Swiss Club is greatly indebted to the Institut Français for their kindness in offering a number of complimentary tickets to enable our compatriots (ladies and gentlemen) to attend this most interesting conference. It is hoped that the members of the Swiss Colony will take advantage of this unique opportunity of listening to M. de Traz.

In view of the great demand for seats that is anticipated, the Institut Français have asked Mr. Bingguely to let them know as soon as possible how many tickets are required. The number of seats naturally is limited, and will be allocated in rotation. Compatriots are therefore advised to apply for seats without delay to: Mr. Bingguely, at Bulle House, 187a, Tottenham Court Road, W.1. Tel: Museum 6336, not later than Wednesday, January 25th, after which date reservation cannot be guaranteed.

Evening dress is optional, but it is requested that applicants will kindly state whether they require Dress (white tie and tails) or Undress tickets.

The following few notes have been communicated to us concerning M. R. de Traz, and we are sure our readers will be particularly interested in them:

Né à Paris en 1884 d'un père Suisse et d'une mère Française, *Robert de Traz* fut l'élève des Lycées Carnot et Condorcet avant d'étudier à la Faculté de Droit et à l'Ecole des Hautes Etudes Commerciales. Il a fait de longs séjours en Angleterre et en Italie, a longtemps vécu en Suisse, puis est venu, voici dix ans, se fixer à Paris. L'Association Internationale des Ecrivains Etrangers de Langue Française l'a eu pour président, l'Université de Genève lui a decerné le grade de docteur honoris causa, et l'Académie Royale de Belgique l'a élu au nombre de ses membres étrangers: de telles distinctions disent assez la place qu'occupe *Robert de Traz* dans les lettres contemporaines.

Il y fit ses débuts en fondant, peu après la guerre, la *Revue de Genève*, revue "internationale sans être internationaliste ... ennemie de la chimère et des confusions," mais travaillant "avec modestie et sincerité à une meilleure entente humaine." Entre 1920 et 1930, la *Revue de Genève* révéla au public de langue française de nombreux écrivains étrangers; lorsqu'elle succomba à la crise économique, elle avait bien œuvré à la tâche qu'elle s'était fixée.

Romancier, *Robert de Traz* s'est révélé délicat psychologue avec "*Fiançailles*," dans "*La Puritaine et l'Amour*," dans "*L'Ecorché*" il s'est fait l'analyste de consciences inquiètes, mais s'il a poussé jusqu'à une sorte de férocité la peinture des souffrances intimes, il n'en est pas moins resté fidèle à ce que M. Lalou appelle "la tradition de la confession voilée." "*A la poursuite du vent*" et "*Le Pouvoir des Fables*," ont confirmé ses dons romanesques.

Essayiste, il a évoqué ses voyages dans "*Dépaysements*" et "*Les Dépaysement Oriental;*" il a conté ses visites aux sanatoria d'altitude dans ses "*Heures de Silences*," qu'a traduites Dorothy Richardson. Dans "*L'Esprit de Genève*" et "*De l'Alliance des Rois à la Ligue des Peuples*," il a mêlé l'histoire à la politique contemporaine.

Critique enfin, *Robert de Traz* nous a donné un volume *d'Essais et Analyses* un *Vigny*, et, tout récemment, un livre sur *la Famille Brontë*. Il a en outre consacré une étude aux écrivains de la Suisse Romande, et nulle voix n'était plus autorisée que la sienne à parler des littératures étrangères de langue française.

QUESTIONNAIRE

sent out by the

Schweiz. Rundspruch Gesellschaft

(Swiss Broadcasting Corporation).

We beg to direct the attention of our readers to the enclosed Questionnaire by the "Schweiz. Rundspruch Gesellschaft" (Swiss Broadcasting Corporation) in Berne.

This Corporation is anxious to hear the opinion of listeners-in to Swiss Programmes, with a view to improve reception or the programmes.

We invite our readers to fill in the Questionnaire and to return same to the:

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PRIMITIVE DEMOCRACY IN SWITZERLAND.

By SIR ERNEST SIMON.

(In the Political Quarterly.)

Lötschental is a narrow and most lovely valley running east and west between two ranges of high snow mountains, impassable except to mountaineers. Till the last generation, the only access was up a steep path from the Rhône Valley. It is said that of old the whole of the imports for the thousand persons living in the valley were brought in on the back of one mule once a year!

Recently a railway has been built to Goppenstein (4,000 feet) at the west end of the valley, and a road has been made three miles eastwards along the valley.

During the last thirty years tourists have begun to frequent Lötschental, and a few small hotels have been built. Their money has helped somewhat to raise the standard of living of the peasants, but has so far not seriously affected the traditional ways of life.

The peasants have to contend with severe natural difficulties. For six months of the year the whole valley is under snow. During summer the weather is so dry that artificial irrigation is necessary for all the fields. There is very little level land, so that agriculture is carried on under great difficulties. But the most grievous harm is caused by avalanches. Bridges, dams, roads and fields are constantly damaged. There are so few spots which are not liable to avalanche that the villages have to be crowded closely together on the safe spots; so much so that only narrow spaces are allowed between the houses and farm buildings. The paths are dirty and often soaked in manure. The whole arrangement is most insanitary.

The residents belong to the Roman Catholic Church and the Catholic Conservative Party. The priest boasts that every single one of the 400 voters in Lötschental invariably votes for that party.

Everybody shares these faiths, everybody regards them as the only basis of a good life. Every leader, whether priest or teacher or politician inculcates them continually and automatically. All the varied ceremonies, drama, singing, processions, and the constant wearing on Sundays and holidays of the ancient local costume, tend to maintain and strengthen the old customs, traditions and beliefs. Disturbing ideas seem to be effectively excluded: the radio is hardly known; only rarely is a cinema shown; nearly everybody reads the local Catholic Conservative paper. Those who leave the valley and return seem to accept the local customs as fully as those who have never left it.

Economically, there seems to be no desire to change. Every peasant owns his own land, buildings and stock. There are no rich residents; the priest and schoolmaster are no better off than the "rich" peasant; and he only owns half a dozen cattle. There is no unemployment, little serious poverty, no exploitation; the peasants not only know, but themselves determine, exactly how their taxes shall be spent.

The peasants are poor, but live a varied and interesting and friendly life. They are proud of the beauties of their valley; proud of their independence. Every citizen is a self-respecting man living his life in security, his firm faith in his religion and in his political party untouched by modern doubts. "Nerves" are unknown; quarrels, of course, occur, but rarely last a fortnight. Progress is exceedingly slow. It is a conservative civilization and wishes to remain so. In spite of increasing tourist traffic, in spite of all the inventions of modern science, the valley is still almost as securely protected from disturbing thoughts as it was 500 years ago.

Blatten.

The valley is divided into four communes, Blatten being the largest, situated at the top end of the valley. The population of Blatten is about 340, including 110 men of twenty years or over, all of whom are Swiss citizens and voters.

The women play no public part in the valley. Their time is fully occupied looking after their houses and their children, helping on the land, spinning and weaving and making clothes both for themselves and the men. On holidays and on Sundays they still almost invariably wear the traditional costume, and the priest informed us that this would certainly not be changed so long as he was alive.

When we were passing through the village, just after Mass on a Sunday morning, we found most of the male population listening to a visiting band; there was not one single woman. When we asked the reason, we were told with an air of surprise at our question, that "naturally" every woman wanted not to amuse herself but to go home and cook the Sunday dinner.

The houses nearly all consist of two living-rooms, a kitchen and an attic. Each peasant has also a simple house on the grazing alp and various farm buildings, cow-sheds, hay-barns, food-stores, scattered about in the village, on the fields and in the alps. The amount of good land owned by each peasant varies from about one to four acres, and is said to be split up on the average into no less than 71 small plots! The peasants own, on the average, two-and-a-half cows, five sheep, two goats and half a pig. The great bulk of the land is under grass for hay or pasture, but in the tiny arable plots they grow their own potatoes and a good deal of rye.

The only way in which the peasants get money is by the sale of a cow or calf and a certain amount of butter; these sales have to pay for the whole of the imports into the valley.

The standard of living is, of course, exceedingly low, but it is a good deal better than it was thirty years ago. No fruit grows in the valley; last year there was considerable import of apples. Coffee is also now widely drunk, as against buttermilk, which was almost universally drunk thirty years ago. Practically nothing is spent on alcohol, because they have not the necessary money.

The only people who have salaries in the village are the postmaster, the priest (who gets 3,000 frs. a year and 60 kilos of butter), the teacher (who gets 2,000 frs. for six months' work and usually works on the land in the summer). There are three or four who live by trading, shopkeepers and inn-keeper (dependent on tourists); nine of the peasants are guides, and about seven own mules and live by transport.

Democracy.

The commune is governed by the Communal Assembly, which consists of all the male citizens of twenty and over, of whom there are 110. The assembly elects an executive of five persons, including a President and a Vice-President, for periods of four years. The executive is responsible for all routine administration and calls the assembly together whenever it considers it necessary. The assembly usually meets after Mass at eleven o'clock on Sunday mornings. All matters involving an expenditure of over 1,000 frs. must be submitted to the assembly; in practice, everything of any importance is put before them, so that every voter in the village has an opportunity of hearing about and helping to take a decision on all matters of any importance.

The executive nominates a considerable number of committees, each consisting normally of a president and two other members. The principal work carried out by the executive and the committees consists of finance, justice, fire prevention, poor relief, public works, health and education. Much of the work is interesting, but there is no space to describe it here, except to mention one point.

The biggest problem at present before the commune is the question of extending the existing road by about three miles from the lower part of the valley up to Blatten.

The Canton and the Bund have now offered each to pay grants of 45 per cent. to extend the road to Blatten. There has been an interesting controversy in the matter. In the first place, the lower villages, who already have the road, are now by no means anxious to pay their share towards extending the road up the valley. They think this will take the tourist traffic past them and actually damage them. There is further opposition from the seven Blatten residents who make their living by mule transport and who would be ruined if motor-cars were allowed up to Blatten. On the other hand, the average resident of Blatten expects benefits owing to the reduced cost of transport, and the hotel-keepers in Blatten would naturally benefit most of all.

Blatten has, therefore, its "pressure groups," the rich hotel-keepers wanting the road, the muleteers opposing it. But the motives of each group are perfectly well known to every voter; the hotel-keepers would never think of using their money power, nor, in fact, would they be able to do so, owing to the honesty of the people and the fact that such transactions could

hardly be kept secret; so that the different interests are freely open to work for their own aims. There is no danger in Lötschental of the serious distortion of public opinion which is often done by rich pressure groups in large democracies like England or America.

Education is given in two schools, each consisting of a single room; 25 boys under a master in one, and 25 girls under a mistress in the other.

The school year consists of six months' continuous work during the winter and six months' holiday. It is an eight-year course from the age of seven to fifteen, followed by a compulsory continuation course of 120 hours a year for four years. This includes twenty hours of religion given by the priest; of the rest, given by the teacher, history, law and citizenship are major subjects.

The one teacher is thus responsible for teaching the children for twelve years. Each year he has about three new boys who stay with him from the age of about seven to nineteen. The priest told us that this system, which, of course, prevails only in remote rural areas, gave excellent results. The six months' work with the family, on the land and in the house, during the summer, gives them practical experiences, teaches them responsibility and is admirable from the health point of view. The six months' steady intellectual work during the winter prepares them for examinations so well that they can hold their own with the children from the towns. This must, of course, depend on the quality of the teacher. The teacher of Blatten, who has for the last ten years been President of the commune, is a man of high quality, and no doubt capable of carrying this very heavy responsibility effectively. When I asked him how many of the citizens of Blatten would be able to keep the somewhat elaborate accounts of the commune in order, he said that in his opinion the majority could certainly reach this pretty high standard successfully.

" Burger " Assembly (Bürgergemeinde).

Nearly all the forest land in the commune, as well as a little grazing land, belongs to the so-called " Burger " Assembly. Membership has to be gained by inheritance or by purchase. All the sons of a Burger are automatically qualified. Membership gives rights to timber, mainly for purposes of firewood, and involves duties to maintain the forests and other land. Every year, on Whit-Sunday, the Burgers meet together for a feast and merry-making; also they meet occasionally as a body to decide what is to be done about the forests. Every year the members spend about two days in large groups clearing the forest, cutting and carrying the hay — without remuneration.

The routine administration, which is not heavy, is carried out by a President and two other elected members; it is interesting to note that thel present President is only thirty-two years of age. He is a guide, a captain in the Swiss Army and an inn-keeper. He is a man of considerable qualities; for instance, he is perturbed that the forests have been going backward in recent years and is trying hard to develop a scheme of afforestation.

The Canton is offering a 50 per cent. grant towards an afforestation scheme. But the poverty of the citizens is such that they can only provide their share by unpaid labour, on which there will, of course, be no return for twenty years. Yet he hopes to get the scheme through. This indicates a fine public spirit. I wonder what the citizens of Manchester would say if they were asked to give two days a year of free labour towards the afforestation of their water works?

The Grazing Co-operative.

The various grazing alps on the hillside have from time immemorial been owned co-operatively by a number of peasants; every peasant belongs to one of these groups. The co-operative as a whole has grazing land for a certain number of cattle. Each individual peasant may have the right to graze anything from one-quarter of a cow up to, say, five cows. Each peasant has part or the whole of a simple house and cow-shed. The agricultural operations are rather complicated; but, broadly speaking, the cows are grazed for about two months in the summer and sometimes also in the autumn. During the summer the cows are milked and looked after generally by the women; often the women and children spend two pleasant months of what is practically a summer holiday on the alp.

The management of the alp is in the hands of the whole of the peasant owners, who meet early in June to discuss arrangements for the year and spend generally about two days as a group clearing up the winter damage and preparing the alp for its year's work — each peasant, rich or poor, spends the same amount of time in this common work; again without remuneration.

Relations with the Canton.

The Canton plays a considerable part in the life of the commune by way of supervision and subsidy. It pays three-quarters of the salaries of the teachers and inspects the education. It has a professional forester to advise the commune and strictly controls all cutting down of trees. It is prepared to subsidize a proper scheme of afforestation. The Canton and the Bund are offering a large subsidy for the new road, and the Canton occasionally offers grants for rebuilding after disasters due to avalanche. There are other small subsidies, as, for instance, one towards the expenses of a midwife. But, on the whole, it can fairly be said that as regards local self-government the bulk of the responsibility falls on the commune itself.

Cantonal or national politics play only a small part in the life of the commune. The members are such unanimous and wholehearted supporters of the Catholic Conservative Party that serious discussion of the larger aspects of politics seems to be rare, though on occasions there may be a good deal of discussion on some important referendum.

The Education of the Citizen.

Let us consider how far the education and experience of the citizen of Blatten enable him to judge wisely of measures and of men; for this is probably the best test of the efficient working of a democracy.

Practically every peasant is a member of three bodies:

The Communal Assembly.
The " Burger " Assembly.
A Grazing Co-operative.

The Communal Assembly is the governing body of the commune; all matters of any importance come before it. As a member, the peasant not only knows everything that is being done, how almost every franc raised by the taxes is being spent, but personally helps to take every decision.

The " Burger " Assembly and the various Grazing Co-operatives between them control the whole of the public forests and grazing lands. Each peasant takes part in their various meetings and decisions; and each peasant has to put in three or four days' free work in the year repairing the damage of the winter and doing the many jobs which are necessary to put the land into good working order.

Every peasant therefore spends a considerable amount of time on the ordinary business of democracy; discussing and making decisions on public affairs. Meetings of the whole of the citizens are held perhaps on twenty Sundays each year to vote on national or cantonal affairs, or to deal with the affairs of the commune. The attendance varies from 50 to 90 per cent. according to the importance of the agenda. In this way every citizen acquires the habits of discussion and persuasion, of reaching agreement ,of the good-humoured acceptance of the decision of the majority, which is so fundamental to the effective working of democracy.

Further, every citizen spends several days in the year actually doing work with his own hands for the public benefit. If that work is done less strenuously than the work on his own plot, if there is something of a holiday atmosphere in this public co-operative work, that is no bad thing. The work is done and done voluntarily by the whole of the peasants, equally by the rich and the poor, without any pay.

(To be continued.)

TO OUR READERS.

The Editor of the Swiss Observer would be greatly obliged if readers would supply him with addresses of likely subscribers, so that specimen copies could be posted to them.

If such addresses supplied should be already included on our mailing list, no extra copies would be sent.

FORTHCOMING EVENTS.

Friday, January 27th, at 8 o'clock, (Supper at 3/- to be served at 6.30 p.m. sharp) — Nouvelle Société Helvétique — Annual General Meeting — at Foyer Suisse, 15, Bedford Way, Russell Square, W.C.

Friday, January 27th, from 8.30 p.m.-2 a.m. — Swiss Accordion Club — Grand Social Evening and Dance — at the Helvetia Club, 1, Gerard Place, W.1. (Admission 2/-).

Wednesday, February 22nd — Unione Ticinese — Annual Banquet and Ball, at Pagani's Restaurant, Great Portland Street, W.

Saturday, February 25th — Nouvelle Société Helvétique — Film Show — at Kingsway Hall.

Saturday, March 11th, at 7 o'clock — City Swiss Club — Cinderella Dance — at the Mayfair Hotel, Berkeley Square, W.1.

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11h. Ecole du dimanche.

6h.30 Culte M. M. Pradervand.

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Sonntag, den 22. Januar.

11 Uhr morgens, Gottesdienst, Pfr. E. Bommeli

7 Uhr abends, Gottesdienst, Pfr. E. Bommeli.

Mittwoch Nachmittag: Schwyzerchränzli von 2.30 an, 15, Bedford Way (Zwanglose Zusammenkunft der jungen Schweizerinnen im Foyer Suisse, wozu alle Schweizerinnen freundlich eingeladen sind).

Sprechstunden des Gemeindepfarrer's:
Jeden Dienstag von 12-2 Uhr in der Kirche.
Jeden Mittwoch von 5-6 Uhr im Foyer Suisse, 15, Bedford Way, W.C.1.

Jeden Donnerstag abend 7 Uhr Versammlung Christlicher Verein junger Männer, 28-29, Bedford Place. W. Jedermann ist freundlich eingeladen.

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