

Swiss agriculture faces challenge of change

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SWISS AGRICULTURE FACES CHALLENGE OF CHANGE

Switzerland still conjures the image of a country of pastures, cows, milk and cheese in abundance. While this image had some truth thirty years ago, when over a fifth of the active population were employed on the land, it is no longer true today. Switzerland has become a highly industrial country relying on sophisticated technology for its survival. Agriculture still plays an important role, but has become a minor sector of the economy. Those peasants that have remained on the land have managed to raise their standards of living by struggling against the peculiar difficulties besetting Swiss peasantry, such as a constant state of indebtedness, a fragmented ownership structure and a generally hilly farmland.

Only a quarter of Switzerland's land surface can be used as arable land. Another quarter is covered by forests, a quarter by alpine pastures and a quarter by unproductive rocks, snow fields and glaciers. Most of the country's useful land lies in low-lying areas whereas over half its total surface of 40,000 sq. km.



lies at heights of above 1,000 m. In fact, only 15 per cent of Switzerland's surface lies below 500 m., 7 per cent between 500 and 1000 m., 53 per cent between 1,000 and 2,000 m., and about 25 per cent above 2,000 m.

Switzerland manages to satisfy about 60 per cent of her overall home demand in farm products. This degree of self-sufficiency varies considerably with each product. It is a 100 per cent for milk, pork and potatoes, 80 per cent for

beef and veal, 50 per cent for eggs, poultry and wheat, and less than 25 per cent for sugar beet. The Swiss market must therefore buy foreign wheat, meat, fruits, vegetables and even goods in plentiful supply such as cheese and butter. Austria, Denmark and the Common Market are Switzerland's main suppliers. The EEC in turn buys Swiss milk products and livestock.

Swiss farmers have had to adapt to rapidly changing economic circumstances by increasing their output. Helped by official encouragement, they have made the increase of average farm acreages by moving towards the cities and merging their properties. There were still 162,000 agricultural holdings in 1965 (many of them run on a semi-professional basis). Fewer of them could claim more than 50 hectares (a hectare is about 2½ acres), and about 10,000 of them subsisted on between 20 and 50 hectares. Some 115,000 farms eked out a living or part-living on less than 10 hectares.

Switzerland has probably to contend with the smallest average agricultural units in the West. An immediate result is that land is heavily capitalised and Swiss farmers and peasants deeply in debt.

The percentage of the total population living off the land has dwindled from 19 per cent in 1944 to about 8 per cent today. On present trends, this proportion should fall to less than 4 per cent at the turn of the century. The ten years between 1955 and 1965 saw a 30 per cent drop in the number of persons active on the land, and a 21 per cent fall



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in the number of farmsteads. However, increased productivity has counter-balanced this exodus and actually resulted in higher overall outputs.

Agricultural production increased by 45 per cent from 1946 to 1966 while the Swiss population only grew by 31 per cent. During the second decade of these twenty years, productivity soared by 75 per cent and generally kept pace with the progress of industrial productivity. As a result, earnings parity with industry has been achieved for 95 per cent of agricultural workers on the plateau and other low-lying areas. Mountain peasants have found life more difficult and many of them have abandoned their traditional way of life.

The move away from the land is generally fostered by the more comfortable conditions offered by the valleys. Industry still offers better security and emigration would probably have been much higher in some inhospitable areas if the Government had not acted.

The economic crisis years of the thirties led, after the war, to the implementation of a law on agriculture defending the income of the farming population and the maintenance of a healthy peasantry. This 1951 Agriculture Act proved insufficient to deal with the problems resulting from the tremendous economic growth of the sixties. The Confederation took a set of measures to protect earnings of milk producers and guarantee a certain degree of national independence in respect of sugar production. The people were called to the polls a few years ago to approve a law determining the minimum acreage that should be devoted to sugar beet.

The Confederation's main concern today is to defend the welfare of Swiss peasants in the context of an increasingly integrated Europe. This has meant, in particular, federal backing of prices and

orientation of production. The Confederation is still eager to encourage the redrafting of the agricultural map to a more rational pattern. But the tremendous achievements of Swiss agriculture have in the first place been due to the efforts and foresight of Swiss farmers.

The problem of mountain agriculture remains to be fully solved. Whole communities are being eroded under economic pressures. On the one hand, peasants should leave their land when there is no chance for them to make a decent living, on the other hand, the authorities consider this emigration as regrettable both from an environmental and human angle. Fortunately, the most remote valleys are nowadays never far away from a winter sports resort. Instead of settling down in the cities, the new generations of mountain inhabitants can now enjoy opportunities undreamt of a few years ago in the hotel trade, sports activities and retail trade.

Thus the prosperity of the valleys and the plateau which had initially pulled the mountain peasant away from his land has gradually helped to foster new wealth in agriculturally poor areas. A new balance has been struck between the prosperity of the Alps and the plateau.

While Switzerland is above all an industrial country, its agricultural statistics still remain impressive. The turnover of Swiss agriculture reached 4,828 million francs in 1971, a 30 per cent increase on the figures recorded ten years earlier. Three-quarters of the agricultural turnover is due to the breeding of cattle and

pigs for milk products and meat. Only a quarter comes from crop farming. Over half of the income from animal husbandry comes from milk and its by-products; a quarter from poultry and pork, and a quarter from beef.

Wheat production per hectare has grown from 2.5 to over 3.7 tons while the output of potatoes has jumped from 16.3 to 29 tons per hectare.

As a result of various federal measures, Switzerland's cattle population has dropped significantly during recent years and levelled off at about 900,000 milk-producing cows and about as many calves and heifers. Swiss farms produced about 320,000 tons of milk in 1971, 260,000 tons of which were sold to dairy and cheese co-operatives. Every Swiss consumes 420 kg of milk a year—either in its original (pasteurised) form or as cheese, butter, yoghurt etc. This amounts to 20 per cent of the food budget of the average family. Swiss farmers are paid 65 centimes for every kg of milk they produce on which they must pay a price equalisation levy of 1–3 centimes per kg.

According to present trends, there will be at most 45,000 farms run on a full-time and professional basis by the turn of the century. To evolve towards that state will cost agriculture 900 million francs a year. Assuming the Federal State supplies a third of that sum, farmers will still have to raise 600 million francs a year in buying or renting surrendered land and modernising their equipment. Finding new capital will continue to be the Swiss farmer's main concern.

COMMENT

SHOULD WE CHANGE OUR NATIONAL ANTHEM?

The *Schweizer Illustrierte*, Switzerland's best-selling magazine, launched a debate with its readers on whether or not to change the National Anthem in its first issue of the year. In a recent "small question" to the Government, a left-wing national councillor from Berne, Mr. Rudolf Etter, wanted to know when the National Anthem was going to be changed.

"Trittst im Morgentot daber", the title of our present National Hymn, is nevertheless considered by many as one of the most moving and melodious in the world. It was chosen in 1961 by the Federal Council as the temporary successor to the former Hymn "Rufst du, mein Vaterland", which had the same score as the British National Anthem.

The present Swiss National Anthem is in our view of great majesty and pathos. Its tune is slow but moving. Although its words may be a little old-fashioned, they fittingly tell the glory of deep valleys and alpine peaks reflecting the glory of God and his goodness to the Motherland. It is a fine piece of music, lending itself admirably to the treatment

of a good *Männerchor*. But this is obviously not the opinion of Mr. Etter.

He claimed that the hymn was neither sung nor suffered by common people. Its melody is too ponderous, and impossible to sing or to play, he claimed. As a song, it never failed to yield a "pathetic" result, he added in a *Schweizer Illustrierter* interview. A National Anthem, he stressed, should have a "spiritual impact on the people and should inspire patriotic enthusiasm."

The great-grandson of the composer of the former Anthem considers that the present National Anthem is good enough and should not be replaced unless a definitely better one can be found. A comedian questioned by the *Illustrierter* said that national hymns should be renewed every five or six years and reflect the every-day concerns of ordinary people. Thus the 1973 version should have verses about inflation and the foreign-labour problem. Another young artist claimed that National Anthems should be banned as instruments of national glorification. "I am anti-patriotic inasmuch as Switzerland is not a better country than all the others", he said.

The ball which Mr. Etter has set rolling may yet be heard bouncing for a long time.